

Low-cost handheld targets elementary students

Chicago nonprofit calls its \$50 'teachermate' an affordable way to give every kid a computer

From eSchool News staff reports

Primary Topic Channel: [Handheld technologies](#)



The teachermate features a 2.5-inch screen, 512 MB of memory, and costs only \$50.

Elementary schools in at least seven cities are piloting an innovative handheld computer that costs only \$50 and can be used to help teach reading and math. The nonprofit organization that developed the device, Chicago-based [Innovations for Learning](#), bills it as “the world’s most affordable solution” for giving a computer to every student.

The “teachermate” handheld computer, as the device is called, features a 2.5-inch color screen, 512 megabytes of internal memory, an SD slot for expandability, a built-in microphone and speaker, and a battery life of four hours. An innovative case that holds 30 of the devices can charge them all at the same time using one AC outlet and synch all of the student performance data to a teacher’s personal computer using a single USB cable.

The teachermate includes reading and math software programs also developed by Innovations for Learning, which says it created the software first but was looking for an affordable, scalable way to deliver the software to every student.

“Our organization has been stymied over the years by the same roadblock faced by all educational software makers—the inadequacy of personal computers in K-2 classrooms,” said Seth Weinberger, executive director of the nonprofit. “There are too few computers in the classroom, too many of them are broken, and too many of them are hand-me-downs. Public schools do not have the funds to provide sufficient computer resources to the young students who need them most.”

The problem inspired the group to develop an inexpensive solution that would be intuitive for young students to use.

The teachermate is lightweight and portable, yet the images on its screen are highly visible. All you have to do is switch on the power button and it's ready to go. A row of three colored buttons on the top, a circle of arrows to the right, and a big blue "enter" button on the left make up all the controls. The software's learning games are simple and have fun noises and actions for kids to look at. There's also a dog character named Max who dances and plays instruments for students when they complete a game successfully. The device comes with lightweight earphones and has places for a USB cable and an AC cord.

Innovations for Learning is rolling out its "teachermate" handheld computers to all 500 Chicago elementary schools over a two-year period. With the help of funding from JP Morgan Chase, the nonprofit will provide teachermates for every student within one classroom in each of the city's elementary schools; schools will be able to purchase handhelds for additional classrooms at cost. Software for the handhelds includes a complete K-2 reading and math program that aligns with the Chicago Public Schools' reading and math initiatives.

"The teachermate handheld computer is one of the most promising new educational tools I have seen. Not only is the cost of each unit low enough to be affordable for every student in a classroom, but the device is easy to use, easy to train, and easy to maintain. This is a big step forward in providing a high-quality education to an increasingly technological generation," said Sharnell Jackson, chief eLearning officer for the [Chicago Public Schools](#).

In addition to the rollout in Chicago, schools in New York City, Detroit, New Orleans, San Antonio, Phoenix, and the Denver area are piloting the device.

Innovations for Learning's software has been proven effective by independent research funded by the Spencer Foundation. The Spencer Foundation is currently funding research by the University of Illinois at Chicago on the effectiveness of the teachermate handheld computers.

All of the programs are in Spanish as well as English, and teachers can select how much Spanish support to provide for each student.

"The teachermate system definitely enhances students' reading skills," said Martha Arriaga, a first grade teacher at Jungman Elementary School in Chicago. "If the students could use these devices all day long, they would. It gets them focused on what they should be learning, but they think they are just playing games."

"The teachermate is really a bridge from the digital world to a first grader," Weinberger concluded. "Teachers see the kids laugh, learn, and do their own voice recordings when using the reading software. It really gets them going—it energizes them in their teaching."