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Sunday, November 30, 2008

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Burr kindergarten class to receive educational game systems

BY MICHELLE MINKOFF
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Burr Elementary School kindergarten students won't get in trouble for playing games in class – starting next week they'll be required to.

The Bucktown school got its shipment of small game-like devices Thursday. The handheld computers, called TeacherMate, are intended to help early elementary students to master reading and math concepts.

"The kids are so excited to get started, they loved it when we brought them in to see the first-graders using it," said Burr kindergarten teacher Denise Knafelz.

The first-grade class at Burr has been using the handheld system for the past year, and the software long before that. "We've had the laptop version of the programs for the past 10 years," said Burr first-grade teacher Katie Dasso. "But students like this even more, because it feels like a game system, not what their parents use for work."

Seth Weinberger, who came up with the idea for the product, said, "I wanted to find a more effective way to teach kids to read. We need to motivate kids to engage with the material." Weinberger is the executive director of Chicago-based Innovations for Learning, a non-profit focused on producing these games and devices.

The kindergarten class at Burr will start using the devices next week, once they are set up and teachers discuss how to integrate them into lesson plans.



Courtesy of Innovations For Learning

Burr Elementary kindergarteners can play their way to success in basic reading and math skills with TeacherMate handheld computers, arriving today at the Bucktown school.

“It will make it easier to do group work, and I can spend more time helping each student,” said Knafelz.

The handheld devices cost \$50 each and every kindergartner will get one. The included software is a full suite of reading and math programs. Concepts include phonics, vocabulary, story comprehension and writing. Other games focus on simple math concepts and practical information such as how to read a clock or thermometer.

Some games involve using a microphone to read key words of a story aloud. Students can play back their own voices, or listen to an automated voice reading the same words.

For math, students can drag various blocks around using arrow key. The exercise is designed to help them visualize math concepts.

Other activities use more of a familiar game atmosphere. A vocabulary activity features a Pac-Man look-alike who the student directs to eat words spelled correctly.

Since March 2008, the handheld has been introduced at 250 Chicago elementary schools, and another 25 around the nation.

Weinberger developed the hardware with younger students in mind. “That’s what makes it better than a laptop. Laptops aren’t designed for young children. This is,” he said.

Students need only to learn to use three buttons and a set of directional arrows to operate the handheld computer. The durable design, both in the device’s shape and the type of disk it uses, caters to five- and six-year-olds who are likely to drop or hit it.

“It’s mind-blowing that we’ve gotten so many schools to participate so fast,” said Weinberger. “But schools know they need to try new things. It’s not acceptable for people to be leaving kindergarten and first-grade without having fundamental reading and math skills.”