

NORTH LOGAN, UTAH - Spectrum Education Group, LLC announced today that it has received a “Small Business Innovation and Research” grant from the United States Department of Education. The \$850,000 grant from the Department’s Institute for Education Sciences will help SEG conduct research in Utah schools on new technology to support teacher training.

Spectrum Education Group will use the grant to develop a system that will allow teachers to invite distant observers into their classrooms. The system will integrate existing technologies like remote-controllable web cameras, Internet 2.0 web tools, and voice-over-IP (VoIP) communication to open a virtual window into a classroom.

“We envision a number of uses for the system,” said Dr. R. Shawn Edmondson, who will serve as the project’s Principle Investigator. “Of course, as educators, we’re most interested in school applications. College professors who supervise dozens of student teachers will be able to observe many of them in one afternoon by dropping into their classrooms through the system. Principals and district teacher-leaders will be able to observe teachers as part of a coaching or mentoring program. Researchers will be able to watch teachers at work and develop new ways of improving teaching practices. No time will be wasted in travel.”

Spectrum will use its SBIR grant to build on its own past research into using technology to enable new, more effective ways for teachers to learn their craft. “We believe that teaching is a clinical profession, like medicine,” Edmondson said. “Like most adults, teachers learn best when they can work one-on-one with someone who has mastered the skill-set they are trying to learn.”

According to Edmondson, an “apprenticeship” approach to teacher professional development has always been seen as ideal, but impractical because of the expense and burden of travel. “Time and distance considerations have always been the deal-breakers,” he said.

Edmondson indicates that the system SEG will develop will allow observers to not only watch a teacher at work, but also to talk to them through an earpiece. “Past studies have shown that so-called ‘bug-in-the-ear’ communication between a teacher and an observer is helpful to both,” he said. “Observers can make comments and suggestions in context. Teachers can make adjustments on the fly.”

The Department of Education’s “Small Business Innovation and Research” program is extremely competitive. The recent Phase I / Phase II competition received 80 applications for just four awards. “We hope that our work will help teachers across the United States,” said Dr. Tom Shuster, CEO of Spectrum Education Group. “We are excited to work with the Department of Education to develop tools that focus on schools’ greatest resources: teachers.”

Both Edmondson and Shuster stress that the technology they plan to develop should not be seen as the point of the project. “At the end of the day,” said Shuster, “it’s all about how the system will be used.”

Shuster cites his own experience to explain why SEG’s system will work. “I was a teacher and a teacher-trainer for many years,” he said. “Teachers have seen lots of hot new classroom technology come and go. If technology isn’t used well in schools, it’s just an expensive waste of time. Teachers always have been and always will be the most important factor in the quality of students’ learning experiences. We’re designing our technology to fit a specific use and purpose we have envisioned—not the other way around. The whole point is to support teachers, not replace them.”

Spectrum Education Group's earlier research efforts were funded by a \$500,000 Congressionally-directed grant secured for Weber School District in Ogden, Utah, by United States Senator Orrin Hatch.

According to Shuster, SEG will pilot an early prototype of the system at Weber School District's Pioneer Elementary School in late Fall, 2007.

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