



How Hatch Technology Keeps Special Education Students Engaged

in El Campo, Texas

"At All Different Levels of Ability, It's Working"

All about diversity

It started as a railroad camp called Prairie Switch, but the Mexican cowboys who brought their herds through the town renamed it El Campo. Located about 80 miles southwest of Houston and about 50 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, El Campo still reveres its rural roots, with events such as Prairie Days featuring tractor pulls, a livestock show and rodeo, and line dancing to country music. In addition to its Hispanic roots, the community boasts a significant and long-standing Czech community that produced its own Czech-language newspaper in the 1930s.

El Campo's school system, like the town itself, is diverse in just about every way. Its school system, however, is embracing the future as it gears up with Hatch technology.



Taking special needs seriously

The El Campo community of 12,000 takes the education of its diverse school population very seriously. The El Campo Independent School District encompasses 445 square miles and serves approximately 3,600 children from pre-K through 12th grade. In 2011, the district made the decision to invest in Hatch technology for its Special Education programs.

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"We first saw the TeachSmart system at the TCASE (Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education) conference in Fort Worth," Cheryl Roitsch, special education coordinator for the district said.

"What struck me about it was the use of a whiteboard." Her teachers had been asking for this educational tool in their classrooms, but she said the "they didn't know what to do with it once they got it."



For Roitsch, Hatch's TeachSmart system, with its extensive pre-loaded content, made sense. "When I saw the Hatch's programs and the way the students can interact with the whiteboard, I realized it's a good teaching tool, plus a good way to incorporate technology into the classroom," Roitsch said.

Engagement also was a key consideration. "With TeachSmart, everyone's involved in the instruction, instead of just sitting and listening," she said.

After only one semester, the special education teachers are having a hard time imagining teaching without it. "We have gotten a lot of thank-you from teachers," Roitsch said. "They say it has made a big difference in their teaching and given them the opportunity to interact more with the kids and actually see what the students can do, from pre-K level all the way up to high school life skills classes." Cheryl said, in addition, it has also proven to be a great intervention tool for RtI.



Keeping children with special needs engaged

The El Campo school district committed to its children with special needs, and Hatch's technology is making a difference for children with a huge range of disabilities.

Terry Martin, who teaches children with special needs in the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades at Northside Elementary, said she is already reaping the benefits of the Hatch technology; there have been several breakthrough moments in which she has seen the children in her class reach entirely new levels of engagement. "The kids love it!" she said. "They fight over it!"

Children who had been relatively passive learners were hooked. "They're all just sitting waiting for their turn; they're highly engaged," Martin said.

Martin said one of the children in her class has autism, and is just one of the many children that has benefited from Hatch technology in the classroom. "Normally, he doesn't interact in class, but the TeachSmart system engages him," she said. "He'll stay up there for five or ten minutes."

Angela Wenglar, who teaches life skills at the high school in El Campo, has had similar success with the children in her class that have autism and Hatch's TeachSmart system. "They love it," she said. "They both volunteer to get up and use it, even when it's not their turn, which is rare."

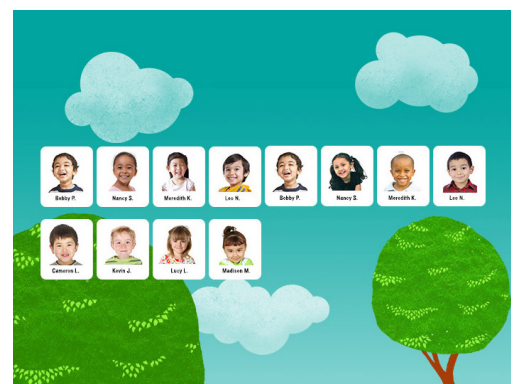
This level of engagement is new for these children. "Usually in group activities they're doing their own thing, not paying attention, but when we're using the Hatch TeachSmart system, they pay attention – they really like it," Wenglar said.

"Normally he doesn't do anything in class, but the TeachSmart system engages him. He'll stay up there for five or ten minutes, and stay focused and engaged."

Children with partial or total hearing loss in El Campo's school district have also benefited from Hatch technology. Monica Alamia, the district's Deaf Education teacher, said the technology has made her job much easier because the children get excited about learning: The iStartSmart system draws them in. A computer that utilizes a touchscreen instead of a mouse (a mouse can be difficult for some children to manipulate), iStartSmart offers the children positive encouragement as they work their way through various teaching games. These games are all designed – through extensive research – to develop needed skills and to be very engaging. "They love the little games, with the bright colors, it's very visual," she said.

Teaching to different levels

The two Hatch technologies – iStartSmart and TeachSmart – work together so that the El Campo teachers can make sure the children in their classes are focused on learning the skills they need. The iStartSmart system allows individual children to work on developing specific skills with an easy-to-use child login. To start playing games, the child simply touches his or her picture on the screen. This lets the computer track that specific child's progress and move him or her through the scaffolded learning levels. This way, the child is always learning new things, and not just repeating activities just because they are fun or easy. The iStartSmart computer also produces a comprehensive report that allows the teacher to see where each child is developmentally. The teacher can then target small-group activities on the TeachSmart system, (which also includes scaffolded activities for varying skill levels), toward those areas of development that will benefit the children the most.





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For Alamia, the Hatch technologies are greatly helpful; she has children that are on different cognitive levels in her classroom at the same time. "I have kids in pre-K, kindergarten and fifth grade, it definitely makes my job easier," she said.

She also likes how the systems are easy to use, for her and the children in her class. The children have independent access to the system. "If I have activities online, and I'm working with students independently or if I have two or three kids, I can put them on an activity and they know what to do," she said.

The technology is even accessible for the youngest child in her class. "I have a pre-K student who just turned 5 in October," she said. "He has no problem using the Hatch technology. It's worked fabulously."

"It's amazing seeing the kids sit and attend, go up to the TeachSmart board – they can use their hands, they can use tennis balls – their attention span is a lot longer," Roitsch said. "At all different levels of ability, it's working and the students are feeling the success."

Building social skills

One unexpected bonus for the teachers is the opportunity the Hatch systems present for the children in their class to learn social skills: The children learn to share and wait their turn.

"Only one kid can use the computer at a time," Martin said. "It kills them. But we just take turns, and they've learned to be patient."

The Hatch technology creates a game-like environment, and its visual and auditory aspects keep the children engaged. "I set a timer for 15 minutes. They don't want to stop," Martin said.

Wenglar said the Hatch technology helps enormously when she tries to get her high schoolers to work together. "It makes it much easier to do group activities with my kids; writing on a dry-erase board is just not effective with them," she said. "My kids are definitely more interested when we're working together than they were before."



Independent access builds self-esteem

Because the technology is so user-friendly, the El Campo teachers have found that even children with significant impairments can figure it out. "I have one little girl who knows how to log in by herself," said Terry Martin. "The kids are finding stuff I didn't even know was there." For these children, being able to show the teachers the way is a whole new experience.

"When we want to show people what the kids can do, even if they've finished their work for the day, the kids get all excited to go back and do it again and we all know that repetition is good for learning."

"They're teaching the adults," marvels Monica Alamia. When substitute teachers come in, the roles are reversed. "We have subs in here every once in a while, the kids teach them how to use it."

"I can see connections being made in their brains."



"My pre-K student knows how to use it better than anybody. He can't read or write yet but he can use the TeachSmart board." One of her students, she said, is intellectually disabled, and her pre-K student helps him with the Hatch technology. "The little one has to remind him every time, but then he gets it right away, he'll figure out by looking at the machine what to do."

Helping teachers with monitoring progress

Hatch technology has also helped El Campo's teachers to keep track of the progress of the children in their classes with special needs.

"It's working great," Alamia said. "I use the TeachSmart interactive whiteboard for everything. I use the calendar almost every day, the emerging math skills, emerging reading skills – we use those constantly. I use the math and the calendar; we do ABC writing, matching caps and lower-case letters – I use it every day."



Hatch's built-in progress monitoring and reporting system helps her monitor each child's efforts.

"The parents are in awe."

Perhaps the toughest judges of the technology's success are the parents, who naturally want the best possible outcomes for their children. For them, as with the teachers and administrators, TeachSmart has been a welcome addition to the classrooms. Sheila Harbor said parents often see the system being used as they drop off or pick up their children. "They're all always impressed with it," she said.

Tasha Barnett has had the same experience. "There were lots of times that parents would come in to pick up their children and I would be working on different activities with their child using the TeachSmart system," she said.

A new level of excitement about learning

For Roitsch and her teachers, the theme that emerges again and again is engagement. "It's fun to go in and watch the kids," Roitsch said.

She loves showing the technology to campus visitors. "When we want to show people what the kids can do, even if they've finished their work for the day, the kids get all excited to go back and do it again; and we all know that repetition is good for learning."



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