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Grant Expands New Mexico Education Success

By Monica Abeita, Regional Development Corporation for Northern New Mexico Connect

When Taos-based Imagine Education received a Next Generation Learning Challenge Grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates and William and Flora Hewlett Foundations this summer, the award was not just a triumph for middle-school students struggling to learn math. It also marked an achievement for the New Mexico programs that grow the state's economy by helping small New Mexico businesses.

Imagine Education's founders credit economic development initiatives with helping them win the grant, one of nineteen awarded nationwide for innovations in teaching literacy and mathematics. The grant will allow Imagine Education to pilot its educational math game, Ko's Journey, in ten middle schools nationwide.

A Business Built on Needs

In 2002 when Imagine Education co-founder Scott Laidlaw began teaching at Roots and Wings Charter School in Questa, students were testing in the 28th percentile for math. Laidlaw, a former Appalachian State University professor, joined other teachers in experimenting with story-based curriculum. To teach ratios, handmade boats were placed on an oversized map that modeled the spice trade of the early 1600's. "The kids loved it and wanted more," said Laidlaw. "When test scores doubled, we knew we were on to something."

A series of math games set in different historical eras followed. Math proficiency increased eighty percent over four years, but success was more immediately apparent when students continually asked "do we get to play the game today?"

In 2009, Laidlaw partnered with CPA Jennifer Harris to develop and market Ko's Journey, one of the more popular games played by Laidlaw's students.

Putting Math in Context

Laidlaw and Harris believe children have trouble learning math when concepts are taught in abstract terms with no relevance to daily life. "We take a fundamentally different approach by using stories—one of the very oldest architectures of human learning and teaching," Laidlaw said.

Ko, the female protagonist, reaches children of both genders but is exceptional at reaching girls who might not otherwise be interested in numbers. “Girls are often predisposed to dislike math,” said Harris, whose background is in corporate finance. “As a result we have less women in finance, science and engineering.” Ko’s Journey seeks to change that by tapping into girls’ verbal and emotional communication skills, enabling them to engage with the story and retain mathematical principles.

A Game Where Everyone Wins

The success of companies such as Imagine Education demonstrates that New Mexico’s business-building resources can help turn ideas into viable businesses that benefit the state. Imagine Education received market research and coaching from Northern New Mexico Connect, the principle economic development outreach arm of the public-private partnership that operates Los Alamos National Lab. Imagine Education was also awarded \$100,000 from the lab’s Venture Acceleration Fund to expand its user base. Economic development programs such as these are designed to help businesses reach critical levels where they can expand their markets or attract additional investments.

For Imagine Education, capital arrived in the form of the out-of-state grant, which will allow the business to grow, more students to learn, and the state to build a wider platform for tax revenue and jobs. “Having LANL stand behind our product has made a huge difference in finding funding to get Ko’s Journey into schools, where it belongs,” said Laidlaw.

New Mexico teachers and school administrators interested in piloting Ko’s Journey, which uses the ideals of the Common Core Standards Initiative adopted by the New Mexico Public Education Department, can find more information at www.imagineeducation.org. Visit www.nnmconnect.net to learn about the business development programs used by Imagine Education. For information about other New Mexico business resources, visit www.financenewmexico.org.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding-resources for their business or idea. To learn more, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

