

It's a massive undertaking! Rob Meissner says about GTCO CalComp's \$20M deal to put computers in Mexican schools.



Howard tech firm nabs \$20M deal with Mexican government

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A Columbia company is bringing digital age teaching tools to 125,000 school classrooms in Mexico in a deal worth up to \$20 million.

GTCO CalComp, a 30-year-old company that traces its roots to computer-aided design and other engineering technologies, landed the contract with Mexico's Ministry of Education last month. The company, through a Mexican distributor, is providing what it calls an electronic "whiteboard," that common office accessory this time designed

to make teachers' lessons more interactive. GTCO CalComp will install in about eight months in Mexico as many systems as it installs in the United States in a year, said Rob Meissner, GTCO CalComp's vice president of marketing.

"It's a massive undertaking," Meissner said.

The effort is part of a 10-year, \$1 billion initiative in Mexico, known as Enciclomedia, to bring computers with educational software to every primary school classroom. Mexican government officials have called it the largest investment in education in the country's history. GTCO CalComp's whiteboard system costs about \$1,400 per classroom.

The whiteboard works by connecting a computer to an LCD (liquid crystal display) projector, the modern equivalent of the overhead projector. An image is displayed on the screen — a slide from a lesson plan, for example, or a Web page. A digitizing pen — a writing instrument patented by the company that works much like a computer mouse — enables the teacher to work at the screen, in the front of the class, not on a computer off to the side.

GTCO CalComp extends the interactivity push further with a wireless tablet computer of sorts that it calls a SchoolPad. It's designed to enable the teacher or a student to highlight computer images on the screen with the digitizing pen from anywhere in the classroom.

"It allows you to capture students' attention regardless of the way they learn," Meissner said.

Educators agree. GTCO CalComp and other companies are hoping to capitalize on the push to integrate technology into the classrooms, and they're finding a receptive marketplace. The thinking is that students of today are too savvy with technology — not to mention deluged with media — to be motivated to learn by chalk on blackboard.

Companies are marketing wireless personal response systems — commonly known as clickers — for teachers to use to take attendance and spring multiple-choice quizzes on students. Kids enter their answers and teachers can see if they're following along.

The cost of implementing wireless technology is coming down, educators and industry observers say. At the same time, provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act and local measures place mandates on schools to teach students to be proficient with technology, so the pressure is on to demonstrate results.

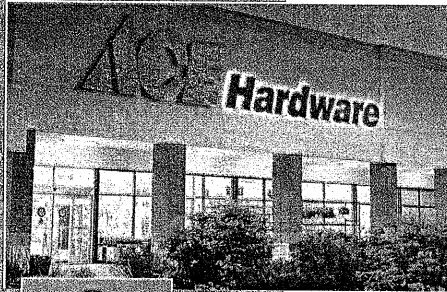
GTCO CalComp says it has anecdotal evidence showing the technology improves student performance. And some teachers say these kinds of tools not only help keep kids engaged, but they gain credibility with their students by being proficient with the technology.

"They think all teachers are old, so it's, how did you do that?" said Ann Meckel, a science teacher at Loch Raven Academy who has been teaching for 31 years. "You put something like a computer in their hands and you've got them for the class. The technology has made science teaching really come alive."

The Baltimore County Public School System has several pilot projects under way using technology in the classrooms, including systems supplied by GTCO CalComp.

Thea Jones, supervisor of the system's Office of Instructional Technology, said staffers are tracking preliminary data and will study closely to what extent the technology impacts learning.

"We have to be able to say that all of our stakeholders know we are using the technology effectively," she said.



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