

# Learning & Leading with Technology

## GTCO CalComp InterWrite SchoolPad 400

By J.V. Bolkan

CalComp's InterWrite SchoolPad 400 is a combination of refined hardware and targeted software that should appeal to all educators, but especially those in K-8 classrooms.

Essentially a relatively simple digitizing tablet with a modest 6" x 8" active surface, the SchoolPad has a few enhancements that would be impressive were it just a digitizer. A slick rechargeable stylus with an ingenious charging bay built into the bezel of the tablet is a nice start. An estimated 40-hour battery cycle for the tablet itself is also impressive. The ability to have multiple pads active on the Bluetooth network is another cool thing.

Continuing on the hardware side, the tablet is built like a lightweight brick. The hard blue plastic body looks and feels solid and almost indestructible, but it is still light enough for even the youngest students to easily pass back and forth. The stylus is neither too thick for comfortable use nor so thin that youngsters will have trouble controlling it.

Despite the well-designed device, the hardware is not the star of this product. The value of the SchoolPad is its software, obviously designed with educational practitioner input. The depth of the feature set is almost overwhelming, but never difficult to understand or maneuver through.

Most first-time users will probably have way too much fun with the vari-

ous pen and line-drawing options. The SchoolPad enables you to draw directly on the desktop or in virtually any application, such as a presentation program. This is a great tool for pointing out and highlighting on-screen elements. By default, your scribbling, annotations, and other doodles aren't actually made "to" the desktop or application file, but rather to a seamlessly created copy of the screen. This enables you to freely mark up that laboriously created presentation during first period, then do the same thing all over again in the next period.

You can save the annotations, and many programs will allow you to directly modify the file itself. This is a common theme as you explore the rich software—options are deep and almost without exception default to the choice most teachers will use most often.

Drawing on the screen can be quite addictive. In addition to the various colored pen choices you'd expect, there are some nifty precreated pen effects and the ability to modify and create your own. I particularly liked the automatic outline pen with a bright lime green glow around the purple line color. Another feature sure to bring smiles to younger students is the image ink. This is a line type that is made up of a series of mini images; the yellow bananas are my favorite.

Although the various bright and fun drawing tools can liven up a classroom presentation, there is much more meat in the image library.

Perhaps the deepest area of the InterWrite software, the image library

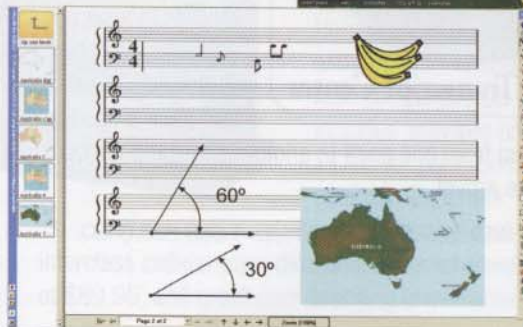


has such useful things as a version of the periodic table, hundreds and hundreds of maps, and a seemingly endless supply of useful icons/clip art. All images are easily resized and can be layered and remain moveable. In fact, you can write a word with the pen on top of a map, then move the letters of the word to a new location. As you might have come to expect, the library is fully customizable. You can create and import your own artwork or download extra images from CalComp or many other sources.

The SchoolPad is preloaded with a number of lessons that are almost ready to go, mostly for the lower and middle grades, but most of the features can easily be used with older students just as effectively—just don't expect them to be as easily amused by a smiley face stencil.

Although the SchoolPad is a fine device on its own, it really shines when combined with a whole-class display system such as a projector or interactive whiteboard. Of course, GTCO CalComp sells such a whiteboard, but the SchoolPad will work

You can proclaim your fondness for fruit directly onto the desktop or most applications with the fun and vibrant drawing tools.



Among the handy, resizable graphics included are complete musical scoring components, a huge selection of maps in many formats, math and science tools, and more bananas.

with other brands as well. Presentation features abound. The SchoolPad can be configured to show only a “spotlight” portion of the screen, and yes, the spotlight shape is customizable, and many common shapes are preconfigured. You can also use a “window shade” to reveal the screen in increments. There really are few things you can’t do either out of the box, or by creating your own effects.

Installing the InterWrite software itself was a breeze, as was setting up the SchoolPad. Unfortunately, I can’t say the same about the required TDK Bluetooth adapter. It may be the world’s most balky USB device, or I may have been tired when I first installed it. Regardless, it doesn’t install seamlessly under Windows XP. The main problem seems to be that the device drivers are unsigned—a fact that Windows told me four times during the install of what should be simple drivers. Once I convinced Windows to install the device anyway, it wouldn’t work. Rebooting didn’t help. You’ll need to manually reinstall the drivers from Windows’ device manager. The Bluetooth network worked fine after-

wards, but it was frustrating for me and potentially a problem for many classroom teachers. The adapter is discontinued by TDK. CalComp should find another, newer Bluetooth partner.

The SchoolPad is a bit on the expensive side. However, precious few devices seem to have been built so carefully and successfully with the educator in mind. You might save a little money trying to adapt a vanilla digitizer tablet to the uses already built into the SchoolPad, but you’d spend way too much time and never reach the sophistication and ease of use.

**Price (suggested retail):** \$585 (\$497 school discount)

**Requirements:** Windows or Macintosh, USB port (for the Bluetooth adapter).

**More Info:** GTCO CalComp, <http://www.gtccalcomp.com>



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