

Schools nationwide sign up for area IT outfit's teaching technology for autism students



By [CHUCK SODER](#)
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A year from now, Monarch Teaching Technologies Inc. could be turning a profit for a nonprofit, according to CEO Terry Murphy.

The company, which makes software that teachers use to create multimedia lessons for students with autism, has been pulling in big customers lately. Over the holidays, the main public school districts in Los Angeles and Philadelphia bought Monarch's flagship software, VizZle, for dozens of their special education teachers.

Eddie, a student at the Monarch Center for Autism in Shaker Heights, is able to learn more visually through VizZle, a software product created by Shaker Heights-based Monarch Teaching Technologies.

Photo credit: MARC GOLUB

those lessons via the web.

Those are just two of more than 70 districts that have struck paid contracts with Monarch, which is based in Shaker Heights. More than 200 others, including the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and the New York City Department of Education, are testing the software, which lets teachers build lessons with the help of photos, drawings, videos and voice recordings. Other users then can access

That momentum could translate into profits in as little as a year. The company's majority owner, however, is Wingspan Care Group. It's a nonprofit in Shaker Heights that provides administrative services to the Bellefaire Jewish Children's Bureau, which in turn runs Monarch Center for Autism, also in Shaker. Any money Wingspan earns would go to support the center, which is both a school and a hub for autism-related services, said Mr. Murphy, who did not release revenue figures for the company.

"The plan is, (profit from Monarch Teaching) will go back to fund operations and scholarships" for Monarch Center for Autism, he said.

An idea takes wing

Wingspan identified the need for a more efficient way to teach students with autism more than six years ago. Before long, the Monarch Center for Autism was working with Children's Hospital Boston/Harvard Medical School to develop VizZle, released in 2009.

Mr. Murphy, brought on board about five years ago, has helped start a few information technology companies. He was co-founder of Orion Consulting Inc. of Cleveland, which was sold to IMRglobal Corp. in 1999 for \$60 million in stock, and NextMed Systems Inc. of Independence, which raised \$7 million from outside investors before merging with a Cincinnati company owned by one of the investors. Both companies served the health care market.

That list of accomplishments, however, didn't give Wingspan all the relevant details about Mr. Murphy.

"What they didn't know was I had a brother with autism," he said.

People with the condition have a hard time learning by listening to someone talk, Mr. Murphy said.

They do better, however, with pictures. Hence, the walls of many special education classrooms are covered with images that represent different words. Teachers put them together to convey all sorts of concepts.

VizZle allows teachers to rely less on all those pictures by giving them access to images, audio clips, video clips and ready-made lessons other teachers already have created.

Now, instead of trying to follow a teacher describing Isaac Newton's first law of motion, students can see it in action, Mr. Murphy said, pulling up a video of a kid who falls off a skateboard and keeps moving.

"That's great stuff — that's inertia, kids," Mr. Murphy said with a laugh.

'Every teacher ... loves it'

Monarch Teaching Technologies has raised a total of \$3 million in venture capital from investors including Glengary LLC of Cleveland and RMS Management Inc. of Cleveland, which provides financial services for the families that founded real estate giant Forest City Enterprises Inc. The company today employs 16, up from 10 six months ago, and continues to expand, Mr. Murphy said.

Mr. Murphy's goal is to have VizZle in 1,000 school districts two years from now. The company so far has had little trouble keeping existing customers — all the school districts that have used the product for more than a year have renewed their licenses — or finding new ones, he said.

"Every time we go in front of a school, there is interest in buying," Mr. Murphy said.

Katie Deneke, who teaches special needs students at the elementary and high school levels for Brunswick City Schools, praised VizZle's ability to engage students as well as the amount of flexibility it gives teachers.

"You can really make a lesson very specific for a particular group of students," Ms. Deneke said.

Many other teachers like it, too, said Jennifer Heim, a state consultant who provides assistance to special education teachers and parents of children with disabilities in Lorain, Erie and Huron counties.

"Every teacher I have heard from loves it and wouldn't want to give it up," Ms. Heim said.