

Taking the Initiative

EDCompass newsletter

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Granting Access to Classroom Technology

By Kim Hamill

When it comes to creating education initiatives that enhance teaching and learning, teachers and school leaders are rarely short on ideas. More likely, it's the funding that might fall short.

That's where federal funds such as the [Enhancing Education Through Technology](#) stimulus funds come in – helping schools and districts that are trying to create more dynamic learning environments through the use of classroom technology.

Pat Lusher, Director of Academic Computing at [Pinellas County Schools](#), Florida, says that two Title IID grants totaling over US\$135,000 have funded initiatives such as their math and social studies projects. The Title IID grants have given her the ability to put technology products into classrooms that otherwise might not have received them.

"Title IID funds provide an opportunity for us to pilot, or focus – such as the social studies initiative – on a particular content area. It helps get the technologies into those classrooms that may not otherwise have the resources allocated to them," she says.

That was the case with the social studies initiative. Lusher says that in Florida, social studies doesn't have mandated testing, and therefore, funds tend to be directed toward subjects such as math, reading and science that do have mandated testing.

So when Pinellas County Schools received their Title IID funds through the [American Recovery and Rejuvenation Act \(ARRA\)](#), Lusher saw it as an opportunity to put [SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards](#) into secondary-level social studies classrooms to create more interactive learning environments.

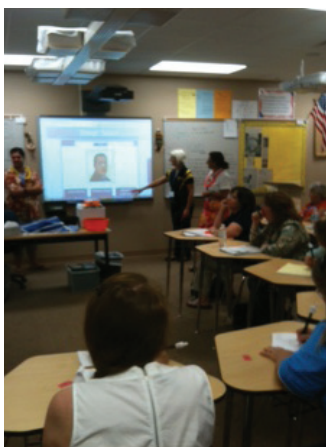
The district had already standardized on SMART products, including SMART Board interactive whiteboards, [SMART Response™ PE interactive response systems](#) and the [SMART Document Camera™](#), so for Lusher it was a natural course of action to spend the Title IID funds to acquire more SMART products.

Lusher worked with the district's social studies curriculum supervisor to identify 100 social studies teachers who would be interested in having an interactive whiteboard and willing to complete the required online professional development component to receive one.

Ninety-two teachers completed that professional development component and received their SMART Board interactive whiteboards in June 2010. Lusher says integrating the interactive whiteboards into social studies classrooms is having a positive impact on teachers and students.

"We're seeing teachers go out and get more resources for the students, rather than just textbook options. They are using multimedia on these SMART Boards in their lessons, downloading videos, podcasts and things like that," Lusher says. "We are seeing the students more engaged."

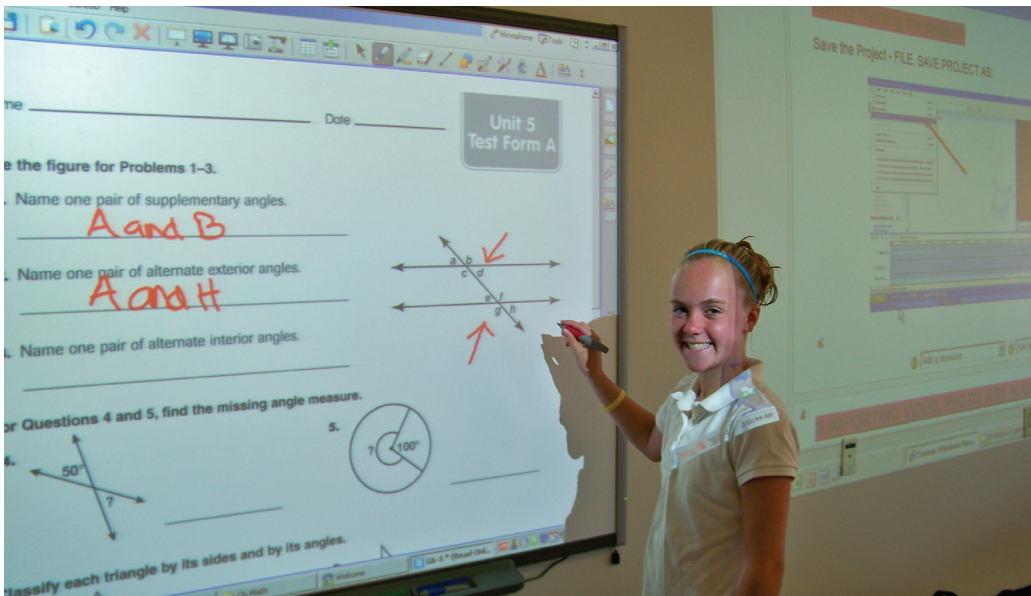
Lusher had funds remaining from the social studies initiative, after she set aside money for the private schools in Pinellas County to purchase products, including SMART Response interactive response systems. She decided to use those remaining funds to create an initiative for math teachers who already had SMART Board interactive whiteboards in their classrooms and provide them with [SMART Notebook™ Math Tools](#) software, an add-on to [SMART Notebook collaborative learning software](#).



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Director of Academic Computing
Pinellas County Schools
Largo, Florida



Like the social studies teachers, the math teachers had to complete their online professional development before receiving their SMART product. Through this initiative, 100 math teachers received licenses for the software.

Lusher says that both initiatives have “pushed our teachers toward developing and designing more engaging lessons in the classroom using SMART products.” And providing the professional development component before teachers receive the products has helped them see successes with their initiatives.

Because all ARRA funds, including Title IID stimulus funds, must be obligated by September 30, 2011, Lusher says that she used her remaining funds to purchase as many SMART Response interactive response systems and **SMART Slate™ wireless slates** as she could.

“And that’s what I would recommend other districts do – use their stimulus dollars to purchase the hardware and then do not give it to the teachers until they’ve had their professional development first.”

Although Lusher won’t be able to count on ARRA funds anymore, she says that in Pinellas County Schools, they are already planning to use any future federal or state grants they receive for the purchase of SMART products.

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Finding alternatives to ARRA

For school districts looking to purchase classroom technology after all the ARRA funds have been allocated, there is alternative grant money to be had, according to **Jon Bernstein**, an education, technology and telecommunications lobbyist in Washington, DC.

Bernstein has been working on education policy issues for the past 16 years and currently represents a variety of companies and associations, including the **Consortium for School Networking**, the **International Society for Technology in Education** and SMART.

He has seen how ARRA has helped districts acquire educational technology, create successful initiatives and put sustainable professional development strategies in place. But now that ARRA funding is ending, it doesn’t mean that schools won’t be able to continue to fund school initiatives or purchase technology products for their classrooms.

“One thing I’ve been telling people is that you need to look at other pockets of funds. The federal government has a number of different title programs that are focused on particular special populations. For instance, the Title I pot for disadvantaged students has an annual appropriation of between \$14 and \$15 billion, the **special education** pot receives somewhere around \$11–12 billion and the **afterschool** pot usually receives \$1 billion,” Bernstein says.

And while the funds can be used to create programs or hire staff, Bernstein says that by using these funds to purchase educational technology, districts will get a good return on their investment and benefit the surrounding community.

"I think there's a lot of benefit to the whole community of getting technology into classrooms. And if ARRA has helped ensure that there's a lot of technology available in schools, then I think it's helping everybody," he says.

Bernstein says that getting educational technology into classrooms was probably the biggest success of ARRA. Although there's still a long way to go before every student in the United States has access to technology products like interactive whiteboards, ARRA was helpful in ensuring the next generation of students can be globally competitive.

"I certainly believe if we invest in the right skills and tools, then we are making sure that these kids are poised to move to higher education and the workforce and are better able to compete," he says.

Avoiding the funding cliff

When it comes to applying for and receiving funding, Chris Zess, Instructional Technology Facilitator at [Sandusky City Schools](#) in Sandusky, Ohio, says that sustainability is the key to success.

In addition to a four-year community foundation grant, Sandusky City Schools has received five Title IID grants and three other ARRA grants. With these monies, the district has purchased a SMART Board interactive whiteboard for every classroom from preschool through adult education – over 200 interactive whiteboards.

They've also used grant money to purchase the SMART Document Camera, SMART Slate wireless slates and SMART Response interactive response systems.

"If you look around our classrooms, you would see that they are very well equipped. But other than the computers sitting in the room, everything else was purchased with grants," Zess says.

She says that grant writing is taken very seriously at Sandusky City, and they only apply for grants to purchase products or start initiatives that have long-term sustainability.

Every aspect of a purchase is accounted for – from considering the cost of future projector lamps to ensuring that the maintenance department has the capacity to install SMART Board interactive whiteboards throughout a school.

"Sustainability is a part of the grant. We don't implement things that we aren't going to sustain. We've walked away from grant opportunities because we felt that maybe the tech department was too overwhelmed, or maybe we were doing other initiatives that were technology-related, but those new initiatives, if they take too much of the teacher's time, we back off.

"The other big thing that we believe has helped us sustain everything is – we standardize. We've been very happy with SMART products since the time we started," Zess says. "We've got an investment in hardware, we've got investment in the software, as well as the training."

Zess says that standardizing on particular technology products not only helps with future grant applications but also saves the district time and money, because it's easier to support professional development, provide digital content and lesson resources and maintain the products.

Standardization also means that Sandusky City teachers are able to share the SMART Notebook lessons they've created and find additional resources on the [SMART Exchange™ website](#).

Zess says that creating this environment of sharing meets their goals as a district, and it fits with what ARRA was intended to do – change learning environments so that teachers learn to teach differently and students become more engaged in lessons.

"It's more than a technology grant. It's about changing the way you are instructing and trying to present authentic problems to children for them to solve," Zess says.

*ARRA funds must be obligated by September 30, 2011. For more information about using funds to purchase SMART products, visit our [Investing in the Future website](#). To find national, international and regional grants, visit the [grants section](#) of our website. **EC***



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