Oquirrh Elementary's 'Whiz Kids'

Selling a spelling bee computer program for $500

By Jerry Johnston
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They call themselves the Whiz Kids. And it's no idle label. When four sixth graders program a computer with the 1983 Deseret News Spelling Bee words and sell that program for $500, you've got whiz kids on your hands.

Dr. June Berry, media coordinator at Oquirrh Hills Elementary, tells how it all came about.

"Last September we got computers here at the school," says Dr. Berry, "and I decided to let my library assistants have a go at them. I asked Sheryl Kempton to come in and teach them how to program. The kids went crazy. They were coming in before school, during lunch, after school. Most of the time they were working with flashing lights, different patterns. I suggested something more constructive. We decided to program the 1983 Deseret News spelling bee words."

After that it was Katy-bar-the-door. By Christmas Chris Ballard, Sheldon Foster, Jeff Roberts and Andy Sandoval were working like dynamos, coming in whenever the school was open during the holidays. They were plugging in definitions, clearing out the system, troubleshooting their own computer problems. They came up with three separate programs that covered the 500 words Deseret News spellers are expected to learn. The first program they peddled to other schools participating in the bee for $12. The second two went for $8 each. After 10 schools had picked up the programs, Granite School District decided to buy out the rights. The Whiz Kids had $500 and a budding business.

The program they devised is a clever little thing. It begins with a colorful graphic of the words "Spelling Bee" and a computer picture of a bee buzzing across the screen. Following are sets of words listed in alphabetical order. Students work their way through the lists, spelling words out as they go.

Needless to say the foursome's pleased as pie about it all. They light up like neon when they talk about it, their language already sliding into computer jargon.

"It was hard at first," says Sheldon. "We spent our time 'de-bugging' the system. Fixing errors is the tough part."

Jeff agrees, "But," he adds, "it sure feels great when you know people are going to buy the program."

Andy Sandoval, Chris Ballard, Sheldon Foster and Jeff Roberts (L to R), work with the computer program they made at Oquirrh Elementary School.

Now we've got the spelling bee programmed, others things will come easier."

One of the pluses of programming spelling words is the key punchers learn how to spell. Sheldon won his school's spelling bee this year because, so to speak, he wrote the book on it.

The object of the computer program, of course, was to help kids spell better, and judging by remarks from teachers around the county the computer program and the spelling bee itself have raised word awareness.

"The spelling bee has really been well-received this year," says Keith West, state spelling bee director. "Teachers, parents and youngsters all seem to agree on that. I was talking to Dr. Don Thomas, superintendent of the Salt Lake City schools and he claims that since the bee was instituted in schools, kids are spelling better, using language better. The past two years have really seen improvement."

April 15th marks the day state spellers will get together to crown a champ. This is the seventh year for the bee and, as in the past, the winner will head to Washington D.C. In June for the nationals. Last year's second place winner, Paul Voss, will be back trying to cop the top spot. Dr. Rex Campbell will be back as official word pronouncer. It ought to be a busy bee.

Once the bee's over, the Whiz Kids aren't about to let their budding business go belly-up. Already they're hard at work on a grammar program that they hope to sell around the district.

No one knows where to draw the line on genius. But the Whiz Kids must come close. All four are class standouts. They had to be to get into the computer business at all. Students who scored 90 percent on their SAT tests at Oquirrh Hills were allowed to work with computers under Steve Warner at Kennedy Junior High. The four grade-schoolers came away in love with the things. All of them plan to continue on in computer work. They figure they've got the jump on the rest of the world.

Perhaps they do.

"We figure if we can start in elementary school," says Chris, "we'll be ahead of others who are already adults when they begin to learn about computers."

Sixth grade, in fact, may be an old-fogey age to learn in the future. Already the Whiz Kids are working with kindergarten-age children, teaching them basic "basic" (computer language) and getting them to punch in programs of their own.

"I can't keep the kids out of here," says Dr. Berry. "Interest has gone wild."

"And I think that's good," adds

Chris. "A lot of people think computers are scary, that they're big powerful machines. They are, but once you get to know them you don't feel frightened at all."

"I agree," adds Andy. "Take video games. Playing video games doesn't interest me now. I'd rather make up new video games than play at the arcades."

No one-track mentality either, the Whiz Kids find time to play baseball, basketball. Three of them play piano, three play the trumpet and all of them read with the best."

"They are quite the students," says Dr. Berry.

As for that $500, the four aren't about to blow it on bubble gum. Already they've brought in Brian Zielinski, another 12-year-old, to help with finances and pitch in with the computer programs.

"We think our grammar program will be a big hit," says Brian with the aplomb of an ad-man. "We hope to make a lot of money."

The $500 has already been rationed out. Eight parts. One for Mrs. Kempton who got them going, another for the media center, one apiece for the four programers and two shares get invested in their up-and-coming company.

"It's been great," says Chris. "Thanks to the spelling bee program we've learned more about computers and more about each other."

More, in fact, than some folks get down in a lifetime.