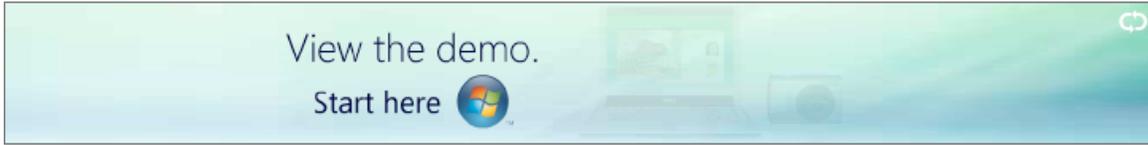**USA TODAY.**

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Free online materials could save schools billions

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

Since March, Dixon Deutsch and his students have been quietly experimenting with a little website that could one day rock the foundation of how schools do business.

A K-2 teacher at Achievement First Bushwick Elementary Charter School in Brooklyn, N.Y., Deutsch, 28, has been using Free-Reading.net, a reading instruction program that allows him to download, copy and share lessons with colleagues.

He can visit the website and comment on what works and what doesn't. He can modify lessons to suit his students' needs and post the modifications online: Think of a cross between a first-grade reading workbook and Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopedia written and edited by users.

If Deutsch wants to see a lesson taught by someone who already has mastered it, he clicks on a YouTube video linked to the site and sees a short demo. "I find it's more teacher-friendly than a textbook," he says.

Oh, and it's free.

Colleges for years have tapped open-source materials, with instructors designing and giving away material such as lecture notes and exams. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology boasts that virtually its entire catalog is available through " open courseware."

But the idea has been slow to make a mark in the less technologically savvy K-12 world.

That may soon change. Websites such as hippocampus.org offer free materials tied to high school textbooks, and several college-level open-source projects are trickling down to K-12 schools.

The California-based William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is funding K-12 open-source projects worldwide, including English-language training for native Chinese- and Spanish-speakers.

But perhaps the most significant development is at the most elementary level. Last fall, a Florida textbook adoption committee approved Free-Reading, a remediation program for primary-school children that's believed to be the first free, open-source reading program for K-12 public schools. It's awaiting approval by Eric Smith, the state's incoming education commissioner, who could approve it by mid-December.

Florida is one of the top five textbook markets in the USA, so its move could lead to the development of other free materials that might someday challenge the dominance of a handful of big educational publishers.

"This is an important and perhaps powerful initiative," says Adam Newman of Eduventures, an education research and consulting firm in Boston. "Those adoption lists are sort of hallowed ground, so to be approved for one of those is a breakthrough."

Could Free-Reading offer a glimpse of the future, when big, bulky — and expensive — textbooks go the way of the film strip?

Newman thinks so. "This is a shot across the bow for a lot of people," he says.

Schools spent $4.4 billion for textbooks in the 2006-07 school year, according to Eduventures. While that's only about 1% of total expenditures, the prospect of free, state-approved materials could profoundly influence how schools spend money — and what publishers offer, Newman says.

"If suddenly you don't have to spend $100 million every four years on textbooks, it's not found money, but certainly it's money that could be applied to other kinds of educational endeavors."

About three dozen teachers nationwide are piloting Free-Reading, and company officials say their teacher website has had 11,000 visitors since Oct. 1.

Designed by a New York-based educational start-up, Wireless Generation, the reading program for kindergartners and first-graders allows teachers to post their own lessons, comments and modifications in what the company says is a "wiki" application. The site even looks like Wikipedia.

Wireless Generation CEO Larry Berger, 39, says he hopes to make money from teacher training and technical support. "We probably will get involved in offering those services," he says.

Berger should know. Four years ago, he turned another free item, the DIBELS reading test, into a moneymaker by developing software that allows teachers to score the test on a handheld computer.

Berger won't say how much money the software has made — his company is privately held — but says it is used in virtually every large urban district and is "quite successful." He hopes "an industry will spring up around Free-Reading."

But for that to happen, he says, the materials have to be high-quality and useful, driving users and their colleagues to the site in a sort of "Google effect."

Darion Griffin, associate director of educational issues for the American Federation of Teachers, says that Free-Reading's advisory panel is impressive and that the material is promising and easy to understand. "It looks like it was pretty solid," Griffin says.
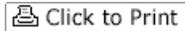
Deutsch, the Brooklyn teacher, says he has referred dozens of colleagues so far. "If there's curriculum that's free and high-quality, why not use it?" he says.

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