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Michigan EdTech Pitch Contest awards \$22,000 to five education innovators

LANSING, Mich. — Edtech innovators from Spelling Safari have been chosen as the winners of the second annual Michigan EdTech Innovation Pitch Contest, sharing \$22,000 in business startup grants and legal and creative startup assistance with four other finalists. The concepts developed from the final pitches will be used to improve Michigan classrooms through innovation, technology and firsthand educator experience.

“All of our groups did a great job and this wasn’t easy. Five minutes isn’t a long time to present and this was a difficult choice for our judges,” explained Matthew Okoneski, a contest judge from Red Cedar Ventures. “Startups are hard and I want to commend our participants for their decision to focus in this space to solve some of our communities’ biggest problems.”

The first-place prize went to Jonathan Marceau, a teacher at Monfort Elementary in the Utica Community School district, who will receive \$10,000 in business startup grant funding, plus branding and logo design support, and legal consultation for Spelling Safari. Spelling Safari is a spelling curriculum reinvention and software solution providing elementary students with fun and adaptive learning.

“Research shows mastery-based learning is linked with positive student attitudes and higher student achievement rates for all students,” said Marceau. “Data from the system in my classroom shows students at all levels more than tripled the number of words they were exposed to and more than doubled the number of new words learned.”

The second-place winner was Jessie Feliz from Detroit who created Spanish S.W.A.G., an on-demand language learning program designed to make language acquisition fun, interactive, and accessible to all. She will receive \$6,000 in business startup grant funding, plus logo design support and legal consultation.

“With Spanish S.W.A.G., we’re not just teaching Spanish, we’re igniting a passion for language, fostering cultural connections, and empowering students to become global citizens who can confidently communicate, connect and thrive in an ever-expanding world,” said Feliz.

The third-place winning team was Advait Paliwal and David Yu, students at Michigan State University,

IN THE NEWS

who presented YouLearn, an adaptive learning model that allows educators to upload curriculum for students to work with AI tutors. YouLearn will receive \$4,000 in business startup grant funding, plus logo design support and legal consultation.

“Students have told us how YouLearn has helped them to better understand lecture videos, and professors are interested in the transparency and the insight they can gain into students’ learning processes,” said Paliwal.

The finalist teams of eKinomy and BiPSE will each also receive start-up grants of \$1,000 for their final round pitches.

The Michigan EdTech Innovation Pitch Contest is the result of a partnership between Michigan Virtual, Michigan State’s Burgess Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Spartan Innovations, a subsidiary of MSU Research Foundation, and Michigan SBDC to bring educators’ ideas to life on ways to solve common classroom problems. Sponsorship is generously provided by Michigan Creative, Foster Swift, Consumers Energy, Meemic, Michigan Education Association, Case Credit Union, and LearningMate.

“For the second year in a row, the finalists in this contest continue to astound me. Michigan students and schools are incredibly fortunate to have innovative, forward-thinking leaders such as these winners in our classrooms,” said Jamey Fitzpatrick, President and CEO of Michigan Virtual and a pitch contest judge. “The winning pitches hold so much potential for education moving forward and I’m so hopeful for our future with their ideas leading the way.”

The 2023 contest was open from March 20 through May 14, and finalists were notified in late May. All contest participants and all other Michigan edtech innovators are eligible to attend a free Innovation Bootcamp the week of July 17. The Bootcamp is designed to help participants further explore and develop a business model around their idea while also introducing them to resources and supports that are available to entrepreneurs and innovators in Michigan, as well as opportunities to bring entrepreneurial and innovation lessons into schools and classrooms

To learn more about the contest, visit michiganvirtual.org/edtech-pitch-contest.