SEC helps put educational online sports game in grade schools

By Ryan Young, USA TODAY

The Southeastern Conference is emphasizing success off the courts and playing fields and in the classroom.

The elementary school classroom, that is.

The SEC teamed with Learning Through Sports, an educational software company based in Birmingham, to distribute free interactive CD-ROMs combining college athletics with classroom curriculum to schools and public libraries across the conference's nine-state region. The software, called Kid's College, was sent to 13,000 schools for use this year.

As of last Friday, 1,609 schools, representing an estimated 884,000 students, registered the program online, says Brian Shulman, CEO and founder of Learning Through Sports. Shulman says he suspects that only a small percentage have taken the time to register the product and that many more schools are benefiting from the SEC's education initiative.

One of the primary vehicles to reinforce the academic skills is through men's and women's basketball players who make appearances at schools. The program is promoted on conference basketball telecasts. March is also the time in many southern states when schools begin standardized testing, for which the software is supposed to help prepare students.

SEC associate commissioner Mark Whitworth said the conference wants to reach 1,000,000 students. The SEC is the first collegiate conference to mass-distribute the Kid's College software.

"We've been the benefactors of a lot of support from people across the nine-state region," Whitworth says. "They've supported our institutions. We thought this is a way we could give back and touch a lot of the people that have supported us over the years."

Kid's College reinforces classroom lessons through the guise of a sports game. Students are motivated to correctly answer language and math questions with the reward being advancement in the game.

For instance, a student playing the football part of the game has a series of receivers to throw to, each with a number answer corresponding to the math question at the top of the screen. A correct answer results in a touchdown pass.

The program features more than 8,500 questions through vehicles such as basketball, baseball soccer, football and cheerleading. It uses real team names and logos from the 12 SEC schools and also includes a section featuring real video footage gameday traditions and school fight songs.

The material is correlated to national education standards and in the future will be correlated to state standards.

"The feedback has been terrific, Whitworth says. "These kids are all of a sudden being taught by 12 mascots rather than some real dry material."

"They really like it," says teacher Susan Miles of her fourth-grade class at Big Sandy School in Big Sandy, Tennessee. "It draws their attention because it has all the teams they enjoy. It just makes their activities a little more interesting."

Miles says Kid's College solves the problem of finding educational programs to apply to education of the lower grades. Her class uses the software daily.

"If we don't use it for tasks, they'll use it for free time. They like it that much," Miles says. "Whoever designed it, did a real good job."

The relationship between Kid's College and the SEC is a logical one. Shulman, who developed the idea for the program, captained the 1988 SEC champion Auburn football team.

He pitched the idea in January 2002 to former SEC commissioner Roy Kramer.

"Immediately, they were absolutely intrigued and excited about the concept," Shulman says. "Being a former student

athlete, I read everyday all the negative and bad issues that are out there. But it's really nice to see that when provided with the right vehicle, universities want to do the right thing for the community."

Shulman says the idea for Kid's College came to him three years ago when his son and daughter, now 7 and 5 years old respectively, were "bored stiff" playing a "very popular retail educational product."

"I thought we really were missing the opportunity if we didn't take the popularity of sports video games and integrate that with education," he says.

Thus, Kid's College was born - with a great deal of belief it would succeed.

Shulman left behind his job as Southeast region president for Eclipsys Corporation, a $400 million healthcare information technology corporation, to invest his time in the Kid's College idea.

"There was a lot of thought that went into it," Shulman says of the decision. "But in the end I really felt there was huge need for a motivational product in the classroom utilizing sports."

Before its release, Kid's College went through a series of reviews by elementary school teachers and students as well as education departments of several SEC schools.

"We held our breath with the teachers to see what their reaction would be," Shulman says. "We knew the kids would like it. Our concern was if it could hit the mark from an educational standpoint. That was the most pleasing part for me."

Shulman says the Mountain West Conference signed an agreement to release its version of the product next Fall. He says Kid's College, in discussion with four to five other large conferences, expects to be in at least 35 states and about 50 colleges in the future.

As for the SEC, Whitworth says the conference already committed to continuing its support of the program with a web-based initiative in the works for next year.

"This isn't just a one-year program, it's something we've committed to," he says. "It's really made a difference in the lives of a lot of kids."