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By ANN SCHWARTZ

When you listen to Sharon Eder's second graders read "out loud" these days, it is very quiet.

Usually, young readers have to read aloud to themselves and sound out words and it can get kind of noisy and disturbing to their neighbors. Now, they can hear themselves read by whispering into a WhisperPhone.

Maggi Fellerman, a student in the class, donated the WhisperPhone to the classroom. It is an invention of Maggi's mom's (BJ Fellerman's) cousin - Jeff Waffensmith and his brother-in-law Steve Swain.

WhisperPhone is an acoustical headset that enables learners to focus on individual sounds in words more clearly as they process language aloud. It enables the reader to hear his or her own voice more clearly and to block out external distractions. It raises phonemic awareness and boosts a student's self confidence when reading. WhisperPhone enables learners of all ages to focus and hear the sounds that make up words (phonemes) more clearly as they learn to read, spell, or process language aloud.

WhisperPhone is fun and easy to use, marketers say, and research has proven that users can hear phonemes 10 times more clearly when they're wearing the WhisperPhone. That means that they can hear themselves better over background noise, and they can focus better on what they're learning.

There was excitement in the Rippleside second grade classroom the day the "phones" arrived. They are just a simple plastic device that retails for \$7.95. Eder said that teachers, in the past, have used PVC pipe to the same effect.



Jeff Waffensmith with wife Katharine, daughter Nora and son Garrett.



Maggi Fellerman demonstrates reading with the phone attached to her head.



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Hands of second graders shot up when the reporter asked what they like about the phones.

"I checked the Box Car Children out from the library and brought it home and they yelled at me when I was reading," said a second grader. Others said that their sister or brother yelled at them to be quiet when they were reading, but the WhisperPhone solves that.

"Most second graders need to read aloud," emphasized Eder.

Other comments were "I don't have to hold it," "I don't annoy others when I'm working," "It warms up my ear," "It's easy to operate" and "It's adjustable."

Happily, the second graders opened their books and launched their minds into the ocean of the written word - but so quietly.

About Jeff Waffensmith

Jeff Waffensmith, 38, grew up in Golden Valley and majored in industrial design at University of Wisconsin, Stout.

He lives in the Twin Cities. His mother, Connie Bonneville Waffensmith, is from Aitkin. His dad, Walter Waffensmith, grew up in Deerwood. Grandma Mary Waffensmith was a teacher and cook at the old Deerwood school.

Steve Swain, Jeff's brother-in-law, came up with the idea for the WhisperPhone. Jeff and another engineer took the idea and made it possible. In college, Jeff learned how to apply the design process to any problem that came up.

The WhisperPhone was invented in 2002. The product is designed, assembled and distributed by Minnesotans and contains no lead.

It's assembled by a company called Rise, a private non-profit vocational rehabilitation agency that provides career planning, vocational training, employment and job placement services to adults with disabilities or other barriers to employment.

They sell it directly to schools through the Internet or catalog sales and it is also available at Creative Kids Stuff for \$7.95.

They make numerous donations, including the one to Maggi Fellerman's classroom.

To date, they have sold 300,000 WhisperPhones which are now in all 50 states and numerous countries.

"That is a part-time job for me," said Jeff. "I also develop products for other people. Aside from work, I like to mountain bike and keep my kids out of trouble. I have a wife and two kids with another one on the way."

