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Abre Helps Get Tech 'Out of the Way' with Teaching Platform for Educators

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Photo Credit: Getty Images

By Courtney Gabrielson

March 14, 2018, 02:56pm EDT

It's been said that necessity is the mother of invention. It could also be said that necessity is, in a way, the mother of startups.

At least, that was the case for [Abre](#).

It's a "single online platform allowing you to spend less time jumping through hoops and more time teaching students," according to its website.

Abre CEO Damon Ragusa elaborated. "One of the first questions you get is ... 'What are you guys?'" He said. "We don't really focus on the labels. [We're] building a product that the teachers we work with everyday say they need."

The software was initially developed by two technology administrators from the Hamilton School District, Chris Rose and Zach Vander Veen.

"I think like all great products, it came from a very, very specific, visceral need from two guys in the trenches doing it," Ragusa said.

Rose and Vander Veen, assistant director and director of technology for the district, respectively, were overseeing the purchase and integration of 10,000 new Chromebooks for Hamilton.

"Technology is important, but that's not what we do. We teach kids. Tech needs to get out of the way."

"It comes with an, 'Oh my God, what do we do now?' moment," Ragusa said. There was a need for increased web-based software for the tool's various new offerings, which, in turn, freaked out both users (students, their parents) and teachers.

For Rose and Vander Veen, the solution was to create a homepage, of sorts, where everything would live — like the new apps and programs that came with the new devices, a sort of learning managing system that had it all.

So they made one.

The next step was using Google Material Design as a guide to replace current in-class apps for [...] student data and more."

"[It] had the effect that it made it super easy for teachers to move from one app to the next to the next," Ragusa continued. "So they took away the requirement for professional development [while] cutting lose a lot of software you're paying for."

As a result of the newly developed software, there were many happy teachers, students, parents and those holding the district's pursestrings. Vander Veen and Rose decided to open-source the software, making it "free like puppies" for other educators who wanted to use the technology (but had the time and knowledge to customize the software for their needs).

While other districts were able to use the tool without issue, some wanted an easier solution. Administrators were asking, "'Who do we write the check to?'" Ragusa said. "That's when I essentially got involved, to sell the software as a service."

That's when Abre, which fittingly means "open" in Spanish, was debuted, giving the tool a second life as the cornerstone of one of Cincinnati's must buzzed-about startups.

Abre owns the open-source license now, and the Abre team, which still includes Rose, continues to champion the free software for those "districts that are comfortable managing it themselves knowing that they're going to save a lot of money," Ragusa said. However, Abre sells licenses to those educators who elect not to run the software themselves.

Abre was able to get to this point thanks to work bootstrapping, as well as investment from angel investors and other groups; it became a portfolio company of [CincyTech](#). And now, its software is in eight school districts, with 100 in the pipeline and interest growing outside of Ohio, Ragusa said.

"It's amazing to see people's reaction," he added. "You literally see visceral reactions from teachers. ... Our mission is being well-received no matter where we are."

At the end of the day, that's the point. Abre was created to make teachers' lives easier, and, as one superintendent-turned-customer said, "'technology is important, but that's not what we do. We teach kids. Tech needs to get out of the way!'"

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