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GHHS grad develops special app

BY MARIE HAVENGA ON SEP 06, 2012 - 01:00 PM

Drew McKinney's latest app invention may turn out to be pretty special for some special-needs students.

McKinney, a 2001 Grand Haven High School graduate, designed SpeechHero to help children with communication barriers express themselves in an understandable way.

“My goal was to make a better app for kids with autism, Down syndrome and aphasia to

communicate," said McKinney, who works as an app developer in Bloomington, Ind.

Apple launched the alternative communication tool on Tuesday.

Within the application, children may tap on any of more than 6,000 tiles to express themselves in text-to-speech fashion.

"When they tap on a tile, it says a word," McKinney explained. "They can form sentences based on the previous tile."

Users may customize the tiles for their own needs. In some cases, a symbol may represent a whole sentence — such as, "I want to go to the bathroom."

The app is designed to be intuitive, with predictive powers to anticipate the next word in a sequence.

McKinney said his mom and her special-education students were the inspiration for his design. Robynn McKinney is a retired teacher in the Forest Hills school district in Grand Rapids.

"At Christmas, she said there weren't any good apps for special education," said McKinney, who holds a master's degree in human computer interaction from Indiana University.

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