

Schooling Technology

by **CLIFF WHITE**, Staff Writer

Steve Ramsey and Chris Keller are both tech people. Both had successful careers in IT and software development. Then they started thinking about unique ways to apply technology to schools. The result has been two new businesses and a whole lot less free time.

Ramsey, 35, and Keller, 34, co-founded LunchTime Software in 2007 and are in the process of launching another company, School Gate Guardian, in the coming months. Ramsey, from Tyrone, and Keller, a Lewistown native, met in a computer programming class at Penn State's Altoona campus. After graduation, Ramsey and Keller followed separate career paths, but their new friendship continued to blossom.

"We always talked about eventually going into business together," Ramsey said. "As it turned out, that happened quicker than we thought."

In 2000, Keller was in charge of a State College IT company's e-commerce division. He soon hired Ramsey as a senior software developer. The gig didn't last long – the company folded less than a year later. Undeterred, Keller and Ramsey saw their opportunity to found their own company out of the remains of their old employer.

"We decided basically to pick up the pieces left over from the bankruptcy," Ramsey said. "We started Focal Tech Inc. in 2001 to pick up

the business left behind from the old company, doing things like IT services, Web hosting and custom application development."

In 2005, they received a contract to develop a point of sales system for the cafeterias of a central Pennsylvania school district. The software allows parents to pay for their child's cafeteria purchases with a credit card over the Internet, thus streamlining the district's accounting methods and providing the added advantage of showing parents what their children are eating for lunch.

"The launch went so well that we decided to commercialize the software," Keller said. "It's grown so well that in 2007, we split it off into its own company – LunchTime Software."

LunchTime, which has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, has seen such significant growth that it is expected to outperform Focal Tech in sales in the next year or two. But the success hasn't drained Keller and Ramsey of their creative juices. Last year, Ramsey read an article about an illegally unregistered sex offender who was caught inside an Altoona middle school.

"The idea hit me – it is far too easy for people to just walk into a school district without having to validate their identity," Ramsey says.

Soon, the kernels of School Gate Guardian

were under development.

The software, a "Visitor Management System," gathers critical information from state issued IDs and notifies school district staff of potential threats, such as convicted felons or sex offenders. It also allows parents to make a customized list of people who are allowed to pick their children up from school.

"There are a lot of companies making something like LunchTime. But we're one of the only companies doing something like School Gate Guardian," Keller said. "We're already pre-selling in large numbers – there seems to be a really big buzz being generated through word-of-mouth about the software."

Both Keller and Ramsey are excited about the upcoming launch, even though success could mean even more hours of work.

"There's just huge potential," Keller said. "We think we've got a winner on our hands."



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