When people first get their hands on Michael Eiseman’s new creation, Algebra By Hand™ a web application (www.algebrabyhand.com) designed to make students better and faster at algebra, they often ask why this resource was not available when they were in school. Algebra By Hand is the first commercial product that allows students to solve algebraic equations using drag and drop gestures on the web. Eiseman says “people are reacting enthusiastically to the excitement of a new tactile web experience.”

It was this type of encouragement that convinced Eiseman, an R&D chemical engineer for 30 years, to turn his hobby of developing educational software into a viable full-time business. Self-funded with limited resources and no business training, Eiseman turned to his own community for help. He began by attending PA State Representative Leanne Krueger-Braneky’s Small Business Growth & Development Breakfast in the summer of 2016.

The event is where Michael made a connection with Peter Hornberger, Assistant Director of the Widener University SBDC. When reflecting on this first meeting, Hornberger said that “within minutes of meeting him, I could tell that Michael possesses the critical combination of passion, intention, and the willingness to implement his plan that makes a business successful”. With assistance from the SBDC, Eiseman could work on his business model to identify target markets and develop a compelling value proposition that illustrates how customers benefit by using his application. The SBDC also serves as a sounding board for the continued development of the Algebra By Hand website and marketing strategies. “Peter is sort of like my fairy godmother,” cracks Eiseman. “He gently pushes me towards more fruitful pathways and away from dangerous territory to make up for my lack of business experience. Peter is an especially good fit for me because he has worked in the education space for several years, knows the market, and has contacts I need for my education-related venture. I always feel a little more pumped after coming out of an SBDC meeting.” In December 2016, the Widener SBDC recognized Eiseman as one of its most outstanding clients at their SBDC annual Success Celebration.

The SBDC was also instrumental in arranging for Eiseman to receive assistance creating his strategic marketing plan from Widener University’s School of Business Administration. Dr. Michael Rosko accepted Eiseman as a client for his senior management capstone class in entrepreneurship based on Hornberger’s recommendation. Eiseman met weekly with six students who developed a comprehensive report and presentation to help guide the launch of Algebra By Hand.

“Working with the young Widener team was a rare learning experience,” the 55-year-old Eiseman remarked. “They were driven, and I was impressed with their leadership skills. I simply shared my values and vision for my product, and we figured out how to make it a reality together with the help of Widener faculty.

The local work is beginning to pay national dividends. Algebra By Hand received an Innovation Award For Excellence in Distance Learning from the United States Distance Learning Association on May 1, 2017 at their National Conference in Indianapolis, IN. The recognition has enabled Eiseman to connect with educators and students throughout the US. Although the business is still in its early stages of development, these awards show that Eiseman’s innovative idea is well on its way to supporting math educators, and students.