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Laptop for every pupil in Uruguay

By Verónica Psetizki
Montevideo, Uruguay

Uruguay has become the first country to provide a laptop for every child attending state primary school.

President Tabaré Vázquez presented the final XO model laptops to pupils at a school in Montevideo on 13 October.

Over the last two years 362,000 pupils and 18,000 teachers have been involved in the scheme.

The "Plan Ceibal" (Education Connect) project has allowed many families access to the world of computers and the internet for the first time.

Uruguay is part of the One Laptop Per Child scheme, an organisation set up by internet pioneer Nicholas Negroponte. His original vision was to provide laptops at \$100 (£61) but they proved more expensive.

The Uruguay programme has cost the state \$260 (£159) per child, including maintenance costs, equipment repairs, training for the teachers and internet connection.

The total figure represents less than 5% of the country's education budget.

Around 70% of the XO model laptops handed out by the government were given to children who did not have computers at home.

"This is not simply the handing out of laptops or an education programme. It is a programme which seeks to reduce the gap between the digital world and the world of knowledge," explained Miguel Brechner, director of the Technological Laboratory of Uruguay and in charge of Plan Ceibal.

"A revolution"

In the run up to Uruguay's general election on 25 October, the project is being promoted as an achievement of the Tabaré Vázquez government.

"It's been a revolution, which has helped us enormously, but it hasn't been easy," explained Lourdes Bardino, head teacher of School 173 in Las Piedras.

Ms Bardino said that some teachers were originally opposed to the introduction of the XO laptops.

"We have a lady who's been teaching for 30 years and when they gave us the computers and the training, she asked for leave because she didn't want to have anything to do with the programme. Later



362,000 pupils in Uruguay now have the distinctive laptops.

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she changed her mind and now computers have changed the way she teaches."

All the teachers have been given training, but the extent to which they use the laptops in the classroom is up to them.

Research carried out recently by the State Education authorities revealed that some teachers have chosen not to include computer-related work in their lesson plans.

Costs and criticisms

The laptops have an open source Linux operating system with a user interface called Sugar. It has attracted some criticism from detractors for not being mainstream.

However Mr Brechner believes that children should learn computer skills regardless of the software available. Blind children were being taught on a Microsoft Windows operating system, he said.

The annual cost of maintaining the programme, including an information portal for pupils and teachers, will be US\$21 (£13) per child.

The future

Now that all the schoolchildren have their computers, the authorities say that they will endeavour keep the schools connected, particularly those in rural areas, where many still do not have internet access.

“ Its a culture shock scenario - many countries are simply too scared to put it into practice ”
Miguell Brechner, head of Plan Ceibal

There are plans to extend the scheme to secondary schools and pre-school children next year.

Organisers of the Plan Ceibal have set up a consultancy in order to advise other countries wishing to replicate the Uruguayan experience.

Mr Brechner said that Rwanda, Haiti, El Salvador, Paraguay, some provinces in Argentina and Colombia have been in touch although they have not yet decided to contract their services.

"We would help them with tenders, planning, evaluation, which software to use, how to spread the word, training, all the "know how" we have developed. We don't have a manual. It's a culture shock scenario - many countries are simply too scared to put it into practice."

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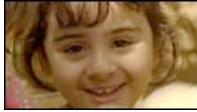
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