

COMPUTERS: Schools participating in the initiative have recorded an improvement in performance, especially in English grammar, owing to the use of the spellchecker

Nepad's e-learning project faces major obstacles

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Despite achieving a considerable degree of success, the New Partnership for Africa's Development's e-schools initiative faces many challenges that could reverse the gains made in the project.

Speaking at the recent second e-learning Africa Conference, Matthew Shetty of Advanced Micro Devices said that since most schools in Africa are already crowded, implementers come face to face with space constraints in their quest to establish computer labs.

"Besides space limitation, we have to grapple with lack of appropriate content on teacher training," said Mr Shetty.

Advanced Micro Devices is one of the six consortium members involved in the implementation of the project.

Echoing similar sentiments, Albert van Jaarsveld of Oracle said the main challenge lies with the first line technical support staff known as ICT champions. "It is also a big challenge convincing some governments of the viability of this project," he said.

But the key obstacle to the project is lack of infrastructure. In rural areas, for instance, there is no electricity, forcing participating schools to buy power generators.

The Nepad e-schools initiative was first mooted in 2003 at the Africa Economic Summit held in Durban, South Africa.

The main objective of the project was to ensure that young Africans in primary and secondary schools participate in the global information society and knowledge economy. The project's goal is to have 600,000 schools on the continent imparting ICT skills to their students within 10 years of implementation.

The project has already been implemented in 120 schools in 16 African countries — Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mauritius, Nigeria,

Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda, Mozambique, Egypt and Lesotho.

The pilot project, which is being implemented by the Nepad e-Africa Commission, in collaboration with a consortium of six members drawn from hardware and software providers, selected six schools from each country.

Kenya's President Mwai Kibaki launched the project in Kenya in September 2005 at Isiolo Girls' High School in Eastern province.

Other participating Kenyan schools are Maranda, Chavakali, Menengai, Mumbi and Wajir.

In Kenya, Kikambala Primary School e-learning initiative is sponsored by Microsoft and Sun 'N' Sand Beach Resort as part of their corporate social responsibility.

"The Nepad e-schools project will not only boost education in Africa, but also equip African youth to meet the challenges of a fast developing world," said Thoko Mokgosi-Mwantembe, chief executive officer of Hewlett Packard, South Africa.

Following the launch of the Nepad e-schools initiative, participating schools have recorded an improvement in performance, especially in English grammar, owing to the use of the spellchecker.

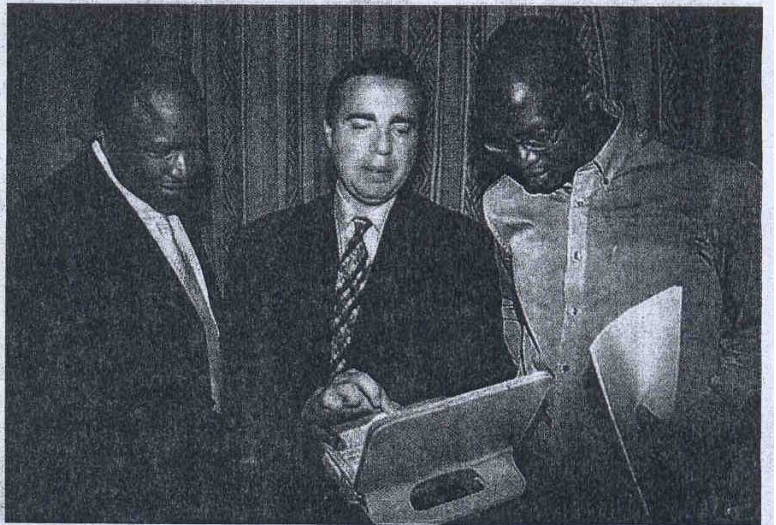
Improvements have also been registered in science subjects, with students finding it easier to understand digital diagrams as opposed to those drawn manually by teachers.

According to Microsoft country liaison person Mary Mmayi, students are also using the Internet to surf for e-health information, which has improved their knowledge of HIV/Aids and reproductive health.

Teachers have also benefited from the project, with a number of them enrolling for distance learning programmes.

Local community members also visit the participating schools to browse the Internet.

But challenges abound. Besides lack of Internet connectivity in the



Intel World Ahead Programme Vice-President John Davies, centre, demonstrates to journalists how the ClassMate PC works. Picture: Zachary Ochieng

project areas, bureaucracy in the clearance of imported equipment at airports causes delay in imple-

The lack of Internet connectivity in the project areas and bureaucracy in the clearance of imported equipment at airports delay implementation of the project

mentation, with equipment taking up to six months to clear in some countries.

"We have had some countries' schedules interrupted due to flight cancellations, or even lack of access roads for transporting the equipment," said Pontsho Lefenya, Microsoft project co-ordinator for East, West and Central Africa.

He said Microsoft would soon start training more local staff in systems maintenance instead of flying in expatriates whenever a technical hitch occurred.

"Government support is crucial for the success of this project, especially in rural areas where there is no electricity," noted Mr Lefenya.

According to Bill Souders of the

Cisco System consortium, lack of infrastructure remains a major challenge as does lack of physical security, teacher readiness and the difficulties involved in managing a consortium of private sector partners.

Since this is just a demonstration project, the issue of its sustainability after 10 years cannot be ignored.

According to Dr Henry Chasia, deputy executive chairperson at the Nepad e-Africa Commission, auditing firm Ernst and Young has been appointed to prepare a business plan, which will be presented at the end of June at a stakeholders' meeting in South Africa.

The project's sustainability, however, will require serious commitment from both the government and various stakeholders.