



Laptop scheme rolls-out to Marshall Islands students

The One Laptop Per Child program is gaining momentum in the Pacific, with Marshall Islands the latest nation to adopt the educational scheme. The OLPC attempts to supply every child in less developed areas of the world with a high-tech laptop suitable for each country's climate. The laptops have already been piloted in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Niue, Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

Presenter: Elizabeth Parkinson

Speaker: Ian Thomson, Secretariat of the Pacific Community; Michael Hutak, Regional director of OLPC Oceania; Rangan Srikhanta, OLPC Australia executive director,

PARKINSON: The XO Laptop has been specially designed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for children in developing countries, living in some of the most remote environments. It's about the size of a small book with a built-in wireless connection, extremely durable and energy efficient.

The Marshall Islands agreed to trial the laptop after they were approached by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Ian Thomson.

THOMSON: I've been travelling through the northern islands going through Palau, FSM and Marshall Islands, talking to them about the program and the Marshalls showed considerable interest in that and we're now working with the Ministry of Education there to see how we could implement a project.

PARKINSON: Ian Thomson manages the Pacific Rural Internet Connectivity System and OLPC Oceania projects. The Marshall Islands has joined twelve other countries in the OLPC project. The laptop will run on approximately 95 per cent less watts than a normal laptop and has been made suitable for the environment.

THOMSON: It also doesn't have a fan built into it and one of the issues in the atolls of the Marshall Islands will be salty air so salty air can't get inside the laptop to cause rusting and corrosion.

PARKINSON: Michael Hutak, Regional director of OLPC Oceania, says the local communities have met the program with great enthusiasm.

HUTAK: Initially when you bring these laptops into a community there is just elation that they finally have access to such technology.

PARKINSON: Research conducted by the OLPC shows that the laptops increase school attendance as the community level demand is strong. OLPC Australia executive director, Rangan Srikhanta, says that the rewards are multi-faceted.

SRIKHANTA: Kids are extremely engaged in the process of learning but what we are also seeing is that through additional work we have done, especially here in Australia, teachers are becoming engaged and that is what is really heart-warming.

PARKINSON: Niue already has a laptop for every child, but Michael Hutak emphasises it is not just about the technology.

HUTAK: It's all about actually, providing a catalyst and a focus for governments and educators to improve the quality of basic education in the Pacific.

PARKINSON: Countries are adopting different teaching methods with Nauru focusing on a task based system of advancement instead of the traditional year-level system.

Ian Thomson stresses that the laptops are merely tools.

THOMSON: What we are trying to do is to give them modern learning skills, so we are trying to move away from the teacher-centric, learn-by-rote model into a student-centric, enquiry-based model so that they are developing skills to find resources and evaluate resources. So we hope that those skills will make them better suited to move up into the next levels of secondary and tertiary education.