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The World Today - Union applauds laptop donation, but laments public Education

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Reporter: Sarah Hawke

PETER CAVE: Children in a remote Northern Territory Aboriginal community are gaining access to the outside world thanks to an international charity which gives them free laptops

The One Laptop per Child organisation has delivered more than one-million computers to disadvantaged primary schools in Africa and South America. The computers are robust and have programs to improve literacy and numeracy.

While the delivery of laptops to children at Galiwinku on Elcho Island, 550 kilometres east of Darwin, has been widely applauded, the Australian Education Union says it's a sad indictment of the public education sector.

Sarah Hawke reports.

SARAH HAWKE: Shepherdson College at Galiwinku hasn't seen such strong attendance in a long time. Like some many remote Northern Territory communities it's hard to get the kids to school. But the arrival of new laptops has shone a new light on class.

TEACHER: If you know how to do it, do your saving now so you don't lose everything...

AMANDA: If you take photos you can play puzzle with it.

SARAH HAWKE: Amanda is a year five student. She's writing a story about the local mangroves on her new laptop.

AMANDA: This is our homepage and we have a lot of games and stuff and we can look up Google and stuff.

SARAH HAWKE: You can see this community on Google Earth?

AMANDA: Yes, it's right there.

SARAH HAWKE: The low-cost computers are durable and can handle the top end

humidity and rough handling.

Ranagan Srikharta is with One Laptop per Child Australia. He's overseen the launch of the program at three sites in the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

RANAGAN SRIKHARTA: Most of the people who are here today, it took them two days to get here. Just imagine how hard it is to deliver education, health and services. If we are able to reduce the cost and increase access, suddenly we start getting into territory we haven't been to before.

SARAH HAWKE: Shepherdson College principal Bryan Hughes says attendance has risen from 170 in September to about 400. He hopes the computers will help keep kids at school in the long term.

BRYAN HUGHES: I believe it's the magic of owning a laptop. For these young people this is an opportunity that otherwise they wouldn't get.

SARAH HAWKE: One of the biggest issues I guess facing the education system in the Territory is the numeracy and literacy levels. Is it going to go any way to helping as a tool there?

BRYAN HUGHES: Most definitely. We know at Shepherdson College we've got a long way to go in terms of lifting our literacy and numeracy levels and we see this as a brilliant tool in our kit bag to assist teachers in hooking kids into learning.

SARAH HAWKE: One Laptop per Child's literature talks of helping disadvantaged kids access information and resources available to children in the metropolitan areas of first world countries.

The Australian Education Union applauds the initiative but argues public education is failing children in remote areas and charities shouldn't need to step in given Australia is a first-world country.

The union's NT secretary Adam Lampe.

ADAM LAMPE: It's a sad indictment of the situation in remote public education delivery that a Government can't provide its students with basic resources.

SARAH HAWKE: Ultimately should it be the Government supplying robust laptops like this?

ADAM LAMPE: Yeah absolutely, yeah it should be the Government's responsibility, particularly when it's a Commonwealth push and that Kevin Rudd is suppose to be leading us into the new 21st century, information technology utopia.

And you know, we're nowhere near delivering it and that we've got a charity organisation doing it for Government, it's very embarrassing.

SARAH HAWKE: The Northern Territory has the worst numeracy and literacy rates in Australia. The CEO of the education department Gary Barnes says while the computers are no a silver bullet the Territory has nothing to lose by supporting the project.

GARY BARNES: If we can partner with people, if we can test things and prove things and if they make a difference in terms of improving students' literacy and numeracy outcomes, then we're all for it.

PETER CAVE: The CEO of the Northern Territory education department, Gary Barnes ending that report by Sarah Hawke.