



Kids go high-tech



STUDENTS on Elcho Island in the Northern Territory have become the first in Australia to benefit from the generosity of a new charity, which aims to help primary school children in remote areas to bridge 'the digital divide'.

Year Four, Five and Six children at Shepherdson College have received purpose-built laptop computers from One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) Australia, launched on Elcho Island last Wednesday at the beginning of National Reconciliation Week.

And the gift is reportedly already 'hooking kids into learning', improving attendance, building students' sense of responsibility and confidence, and giving teachers another weapon in the fight against the low literacy rates that plague the Territory education system.

The school's Yolngu chairperson, Marcus Lacey, said different students were now turning up to school each day to receive their laptops and the school would work with the OLPC team to develop its Yolngu Matha language into a program.

Principal Bryan Hughes said the laptops had provided a sense of magic for students, with ownership building responsibility.

"The likelihood of these kids

owning a computer outside of this program is very little," Mr Hughes said.

"This technology supports the school's other strategies to improve attendance and provides students with a strong incentive to learn about technology."

OLPC was established in the United States to give disadvantaged primary school children access to similar resources and information available to children in metropolitan areas in first-world countries.

Its rugged, low-cost and low-power XO laptops come pre-loaded with educational and entertaining programs and can be connected to the Internet. They have also been provided to Rawa Community School at Punmu in Western Australia and Newcastle Waters in the Territory's Barkly Tablelands.

OLPC Australia hopes the laptops will help the children preserve and sustain their local culture, language and way of life in the face of globalisation.

"Children in remote areas don't lack the capacity to learn, only the opportunity," said OLPC Executive Director Rangan Srikhanta.

Since March, executives and volunteers from OLPC Australia and project partner Commonwealth Bank (CBA) have been deploying the laptops to the

students, training teachers and installing servers to support the computers. The NT Government has provided fibre optic services and installed a broadband wireless network for the use of students and teachers.

Attending last week's launch were school and local community members, and representatives of the NT Department of Education and Training, CBA, and OLPC Australia.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd sent a goodwill message, saying the laptops would make 'a real difference' and help to fulfil a target of halving the gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and other Australians within a decade.

OLPC Australia plans to roll out another 5000 laptops during the next six months, and ultimately up to 400,000 to all the primary school-aged children living in remote Australia.

Mr Srikhanta said the program's success would depend on teachers who knew how to use the laptops and integrate them in to the curriculum, communities that wanted to help their children, and supportive governments.

He urged the Australian business community to contribute to the reconciliation process by offering the project strategic and financial support.



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Students of Elcho Island's Shepherdson College with their new laptops.