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Laptop 'magic' lures young back to school

Debbie Guest | April 27, 2009

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CHILDREN from remote communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are being introduced to the digital world with their very own laptops as part of an international program aimed at boosting school attendance.

Last week, students at Shepherdson College on Elcho Island, 640km northeast of Darwin, were among 400 children from three schools to receive a computer, thanks to not-for-profit organisation One Laptop per Child.

Principal Bryan Hughes said the program - originally designed to help children in developing countries - would instil responsibility.

"This is a bit of magic for kids, this is their own computer," he told *The Australian*.

"I'm 53 years of age and still don't have a computer ... These kids at 10, 11 and 12 own a computer and the likelihood of them owning one outside of this program is very little."

Mr Hughes said the computers, worth about \$300 each, were child friendly and gave teachers another learning tool.

"It's a way of hooking kids into learning ... It's \$90,000 worth of equipment that we wouldn't be able to afford and it's come into the school and the community which is just awesome."

School council chairman Marcus Lacey said the laptops combined traditional and western cultures because they had been tailored to include fonts of local language Yolgnu Matha.

The laptops would also bring benefits to the wider community because children would teach their parents about technology.

Mr Lacey was hopeful the laptops would increase the current attendance rate of about 360 students regularly attending out of 500.

"We want to use it as an incentive, come to school. And no computer if you don't come, simple as that." At Rawa Community School, near the Great Sandy Desert 600km southeast of Port Hedland in Western Australia, the laptops will mean learning can be better adapted to each student.

"We will be able to push the students who are advanced and help the students who are behind and also cater for the different age groups," principal Lorraine Sligar said.

Newcastle Waters School in the Northern Territory is also part of the program and One Laptop Australia spokesman Rangan Srikhanta said they hoped more schools would follow. One Laptop per Child was established in 2002 by American Nicholas Negroponte. Since then almost 1.5 million children have been given laptops in more than 30 countries.

News Limited, publisher of *The Australian*, is a partner of the program in Australia and globally through its parent company News Corporation.

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