

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Laptops could spark educational revolution

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Several Latin American countries are about to make their most ambitious investment in education ever -- giving out millions of \$150 laptop computers to schoolchildren. But as the magic moment nears, critics are voicing concerns that the program will be a flop.

Before I tell you where I stand, let's look at the facts.

After years of research and negotiations with dozens of governments, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab is about to roll out its nonprofit "One Laptop Per Child" plan to sell millions of \$150 laptops to about a dozen countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Nigeria, Libya and perhaps Mexico. The laptops are scheduled to begin arriving in some of these countries as early as July.

Governments will give them out to schoolchildren, especially in poor urban neighborhoods and rural areas, so that they take them home and use them for school and entertainment. The idea is to close the digital gap that separates these children from their Internet-connected counterparts in wealthier neighborhoods at home and abroad.

Last week, I had a chance to see -- and use -- one of the first working prototypes of the new laptop while taping a television show on the project. The white-and-green plastic computer can connect to the Internet, exchange e-mail and has audio and video.

When an MIT Media Lab representative told me the laptop is waterproof, I decided to test it by dropping a glass full of water on its keyboard. By the end of the TV show nearly an hour later, it was still working as if nothing had happened. (Last time I checked, two days later, it was still working.)

In rural areas without electricity, children will be able to charge the laptop's batteries with a pedal, much like old sewing machines.

Argentine Minister of Education Daniel Filmus told me in a telephone interview that, if tests go well, Argentina will buy one million of these laptops. A first shipment of 200,000 laptops will be bought by the end of this year, and the remaining 800,000 early next year, he said.

"We cannot solve 19th century problems such as illiteracy with 19th century solutions," Filmus said. "This will revolutionize education not only in schools, but also in children's homes."

Mexico's Secretary of Education Josefina Vazquez Mota told me that Mexico is seriously considering purchasing these computers.

"In Mexico, only 0.5 percent of poor families have access to the Internet," Vazquez Mota said. "In the hope of closing the inequality gap, we are evaluating this proposal with a lot of enthusiasm."

But critics say the plan is bound to fail, because governments will soon find out their money would be better spent on teacher training, and because Latin American teachers will resist it. Some teachers will be scared by computers, while others will argue that children should first learn to read and write properly, they say.

"If you are going to spend this kind of money, you should start by training teachers," says Marten Brienens, a University of Miami specialist on Latin American education. "You are talking about countries where 30 to 40 percent of the teachers are substitutes who often are not fully certified."

Last week, in what could be a preview of problems to come, Mexico's education ministry canceled 14 contracts it had signed last November to expand Enciclomedia -- an ambitious video-education program that allows children to visualize what's written in their textbooks -- to nearly 43,000 high schools.

While Enciclomedia will remain in place in 120,000 Mexican classrooms of fifth and sixth grades, the high school portion was scrapped after a review by Harvard education experts found that teachers did not know how to use it, or sort out technical problems. Teachers said the 32-hour training course they received was far shorter than what they required.

"The training needs to be revised, absolutely," says Ilona Holland, the Harvard expert who conducted the study. "But the Enciclomedia program itself has great potential, and can substantially increase student achievement."

My opinion: Obviously, without proper teacher training and technical support, the "One Laptop Per Child" program could be a failure. Children would play with their laptops for a few days, and then leave them gathering dust at their first technical snag.

But that should not keep Latin American countries from buying the \$150 laptops. With the right combination of computers -- or video-learning tools such as Enciclomedia -- and more teacher training, the region could make a huge leap to modernity that would help narrow its educational gap with industrialized countries, China and India.

And if, on top of that, the new laptops force commercial computer companies to lower their prices, so much the better for the rest of us.