

Laptop project's local milestone

Ben Woodhead

Proponents of the international One Laptop Per Child program are hoping for an endorsement to roll the low-cost computers out to 1.7 million children in Oceania as regional leaders meet at this week's Pacific Islands Forum in Niue.

Children in remote Australian communities may also soon gain access to the device as Boston-based OLPC works to build on the success of the program in South America and Asia.

OLPC has donated 5000 of its \$US200 (\$254) fluorescent green XO laptops to an 18-month pilot program that takes in a number of Pacific nations including Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Palau, Samoa and the Federated States of Micronesia, among others.

But it is lobbying for broad support from Pacific leaders and aid agencies to extend the initiative to all children in the region aged between six and 12.

"This has tremendous potential to modernise education in the Pacific and it develops skills in children that are the skills that are needed by society today," Secretariat of the Pacific Community rural internet connectivity system regional director Ian Thomson said.

"We have a mandate to do trials. We've started the trials and now we're looking for an endorsement to carry this on further."

The mandate for OLPC trials in the Pacific was granted last year by Pacific Islands Forum members and the project's co-ordinators will report back this week when the leaders of the forum's 16 member nations meet in Niue.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd will attend the forum, which gets underway today. New Zealander and XO co-designer Barry Vercoe will also attend the meeting.

While it is unclear if a decision to expand OLPC in the Pacific will be made at the forum, Mr Thomson said he remained hopeful.

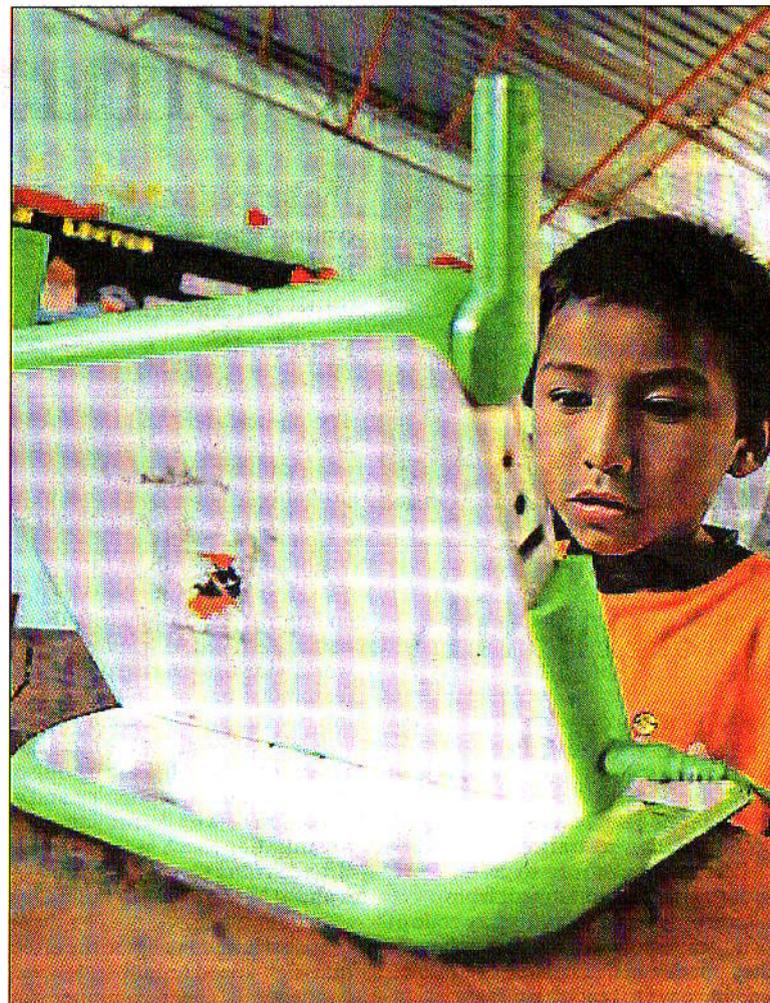
"So far there's been very strong political support for this," he said.

That support extended across schools in countries such as Niue that have been given access to the XO in recent weeks as part of trials, he added.

"We talk about early indicators and longer indicators. Longer term indicators of course are better education outcomes, but early indicators are things like acceptance by teachers, acceptance by the children, innovative use, searching out new resources and so on. Everywhere we've been it's been very enthusiastically received."

OLPC regional director for Oceania Michael Hutak said that the organisation hoped to provide XO laptops to 1.7 million children in the Pacific islands and PNG.

Around half of those children aren't in school and supporters of OLPC hope the device will allow leaders in the region to meet the



Some 650,000 Peruvian children have access to the XO laptop.

Photo: AP

objectives of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, including universal primary education.

Supporters of these goals include Mr Rudd, and countries outside the Pacific region that have already adopted the XO on a large scale include Peru, where 650,000 children have access to the device.

But Mr Hutak said support from

governments and donor organisations was needed to give as many children in the region access to the laptop computer.

"We're basically hoping to get major donors like AusAID, NZAID and the EU involved," he said.

OLPC also hopes to target Australian children in remote communities.

NZ banks consider IT merger

Australia and New Zealand Banking Group and National Bank in New Zealand are considering whether to merge their core banking systems, five years after their \$NZ5.7 billion merger.

Massey University banking expert David Tripe speculated the project could cost more than \$NZ100 million (\$81.6 million) and would remove an obstacle to dropping one of the two brands.

ANZ National spokeswoman Virginia Stracey-Clitherow would not comment on whether the move would result in job losses.

"I can confirm that ANZ National is investigating whether to move to a common core banking system across our New Zealand operations," she said.

"This would incorporate our two retail brands, ANZ and the National Bank. This project is still in the evaluative phase, and no decisions have been made."

Mr Tripe, who heads Massey University's Centre for Banking Studies, said the project could result in either the ANZ or National Bank brand being dropped but there was no suggestion this would happen.

The cost of the project would depend on how compatible the banks' systems were.

National Bank's system was made up of packages, similar to Microsoft Office with its various software components, and this could make it difficult to come up with a "pick 'n' mix" solution from the two systems.

A common IT system would mean customers of both banks could carry out their banking at one branch, and could foreshadow a consolidation of the branch networks.