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Uruguay: Innovative Plan Provides Computers To All Children

by LADB Staff

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Uruguay, the small South American country of just over 176,000 sq km and 3.4 million inhabitants, last year became the first country in the world to implement an information and computerized-technologies educational program in primary schools. The program provides all children and teachers in the public school system with their own free laptop computer. The results prompted the administration of former President Tabare Vazquez to expand the Conectividad Educativa de Informatica Basica para el Aprendizaje en Linea (Plan Ceibal) to secondary schools, with the expectation that, by the end of the 2010 school year, adolescents and their teachers will also be integrated into the wireless system that reaches large cities, small towns, and rural areas. The revolutionary experience has captured the interest of Latin American and African countries, which have asked Uruguayan authorities for advice, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which approved a loan that will permit the progressive Frente Amplio (FA) government to fulfill one of the central planks of its education platform: "That all children and adolescents not only be equal under the law but that they have the same possibilities in life." Uruguay builds on MIT-inspired program Plan Ceibal's inspiration is the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) program, developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) through the ingenuity of Nicholas Negroponte, a leader in the field of universal information technology (IT) and co-creator of MIT's Media Lab.

"However, the proposal to bring the new technologies to an entire society, starting with the children, was not part of the educational program in any country until here, in Uruguay. Our experts adapted, promoted, concretized, and executed Negroponte's idea, which the best international proponents of psychopedagogy and of cutting-edge IT define as a revolutionary plan that all countries should emulate," said Vazquez on Oct. 13, 2009, when the first phase of Plan Ceibal ended with the presentation of computer number 371,073 to Andrea, a young student at a Montevideo school. The computers are all alike small white and green cases that weigh just over 500 g, are 5 cm thick, and were built "to be childproof," able to withstand neglect and abuse explained Miguel Brechner, president of the Laboratorio Tecnologico del Uruguay (LATU), which did the final design of the laptop that Uruguayans would incorporate into their lives using the pet name "ceibalitas." For blind children, special software was developed that converts data into sounds. The computers can perform Internet searches and mathematical calculations, record videos, take photographs, send email, or be used to play skill and strategy games with endless variations or to read the works of 600 authors that are stored in their memory. In addition, parents can use the computer to receive information on childhood public-health programs (eye and dental exams) and cultural activities and to communicate with their children's teachers. "Seen from a cinematic perspective, Plan Ceibal is a comedy for children, a thriller for parents, and a drama for teachers, because there are teachers who still fear the powerful instrument that they have in their hands," said Brechner. Innovations for students, teachers A preliminary evaluation of the impact of "classroom computerization" found that, with the arrival of computers, children watch less television, they are more motivated, and their self-esteem improves. Teachers consulted by the Area de Evaluacion del Plan Ceibal said that, based on children's concerns, they have had to "adapt content and assume a role more of
coordinating learning than of driving the process." Sociologist Ana Laura Martinez, one of those conducting the survey, said, "Teachers admitted that many times it is the children who teach them how to use some applications on the laptops. Often the students dominate classroom time with their concerns and their searches, prompting teachers to modify programs and adapt to new needs. The youngsters picked up the technology very quickly, and that has caused adjustments in the role of the teacher." Martinez added that many parents "feel that they have been left out of the process and require more support, which is a challenge since 48% of the mothers admit that they have not been able to learn, for example, how to monitor what sites their children are visiting." Since the auspicious results of Plan Ceibal were announced, Uruguayan experts have received requests for advice from several Latin American and African countries. Paraguay sent a group of teachers and IT specialists, as did the Argentine provinces of Entre Rios, Tierra del Fuego, and Buenos Aires. Mexico and Colombia also requested consultations, although both were awaiting international funding to allow them to implement their respective plans. Libya, Angola, Nigeria, Algeria, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Ghana requested instruction manuals and a prototype of the laptop developed in Uruguay and built at an approximate cost of US$180 each. Miguel Mariatti, Plan Ceibal director for LATU, said, "Although not all the consultation requests have been made public, nearly 40 countries have asked for advice." While Uruguay has not yet established an exchange protocol with other countries, providing expertise about Ceibal does not preclude it from requesting some remuneration in the future, said a diplomatic source quoted by the daily La Republica. Program captures attention around the globe Paraguay's Vice President Federico Franco and Education Minister Luis Alberto Riart traveled to Montevideo three times to familiarize themselves with the plan's details. Riart said that, while the Fundacion Paraguay Educa touts the idea designed by the MIT technicians, "the support that Uruguay can give us is essential because clearly there is no successful technology without teachers who can put it into practice, and Uruguay has the experience." Paraguayan opposition daily ABC Color reported that President Fernando Lugo "wants to implement a plan like Ceibal here because education is the only path to progress." During the Africa-South America (ASA) summit in September 2009 on the Venezuelan island of Margarita (see NotiSur, 2009-10-30), South African President Jacob Zuma met with Vazquez to ask for Uruguayan pedagogical and IT assistance to implement a plan similar to Ceibal. "A unique, amazing image is evident anywhere in Uruguay today," read a story in the monthly magazine Africa 21, edited in Luanda, Angola. "Everywhere, on public-transportation vehicles, sitting on benches in the plazas or in the doorways of their houses, walking or on horseback, children are seen with their Plan Ceibal laptops. It's a revolutionary educational project that many African countries are hoping to import." Some 78% of Uruguayans support Plan Ceibal and say that the government should invest whatever is needed. An office employee quoted by the news agency ANSA said, "The plan made us proud to be Uruguayan again." But the highest praise came from Enrique Martinez, president of the Argentine state Instituto Nacional de Tecnologia Industrial (INTI). "What Uruguay set out to do is to prepare its poor children so that in the future they can compete as equals with those who have everything," he said. "The world ought to be intrigued and attentive; the same small country that at the end of the 19th century was the first to establish public, free, and compulsory education at all levels is today, at the beginning of the 21st century and at an international level, the first to discover that, by providing information technology to all of society, it has begun to write another great chapter in the history of education." The second stage of Plan Ceibal begins on March 8, when secondary students begin a new school year. Adolescents and their teachers will receive laptops with added functions. At the same time, Plan Cardales, complementary to Plan Ceibal, will be implemented. For a cost equivalent to one day's minimum wage, families will have the opportunity to join a plan providing
Internet access, basic telephone service, and access to eight cable-TV cultural channels. "We are embarking on another revolution: a society integrally computerized and interconnected," said the LATU director.

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