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Asia: India struggles with IT in schools

By Amy Kazmin



Access for all: a class in Delhi run by charity group No Child In Trash

The computer room at New Delhi's Lady Irwin primary school – a state-run establishment with 1,400 students – contains 14 desktop computers used to familiarise pupils aged between nine and 11 with digital technology.

The questions “What is an operating system?”, “What is a desktop?” and “What is an icon?” are written neatly on a chalkboard above the machines, which are not connected to the internet. Students practise using [Microsoft](#) Excel and Word, and graphics programs. “The kids love to draw and paint on the computer – and play games such as *Angry Birds*,” says Radhika Bist, a computer teacher.

Lady Irwin's lessons reflect India's fumbling but eager embrace of digital technology in education, as schools grapple with how to integrate computers into the curriculum and try to bridge the country's vast digital divide.

“Earlier, the question was ‘Should computers be brought into the schools?’,” says Ashutosh Chadha, head of corporate affairs for south Asia at [Intel](#), the technology company. “Now we know that computers should be brought into schools, but for what, and how? What we still need to crack is the ‘how’?”

Access to computers and digital learning materials in the classroom – and the way these are used – depend heavily on students’ economic status, and the type of school they attend.

Many private schools are investing in advanced digital education systems to enliven classes with interactive learning materials. Technopak Advisors, a consultancy, estimates that between 80,000 and 100,000 of India’s 260,000 private schools have invested in some form of classroom technology.

Companies such as Educomp, NIIT, Core Education & Technologies and [Pearson](#), which owns the Financial Times, are promoting digital education systems. Wiring up a single class can cost about Rs200,000 (\$3,300), but companies are often willing to bear the initial installation costs, then charge monthly user fees per student.

Technopak estimates India’s market for digital learning systems at about \$500m a year, although the competition for orders is fierce, and private schools in smaller cities are among some of the biggest customers.

“Second and third-tier cities are where there is a lot of action,” says Enayet Kabir, the head of Technopak’s education division. “Parents there realise their children will not have a location advantage, compared with children who live in the bigger cities, but there is a desire to give them a high-quality education.”

State governments are also trying to promote the use of computers in their schools, but efforts vary widely, from teaching basic computer literacy to using digital technology to enhance learning in every subject. Many such initiatives are still in development, leaving hundreds of millions of students with no access at all.

Haryana, in northern India, has computer labs in more than 2,600 secondary schools to teach basic computing, and has a \$50m project to give five schools full digital learning systems.

In the southwest, in Karnataka, whose capital Bangalore is a hub of India’s information technology industry, state authorities are trying to establish computer-aided learning centres in every state school: with five computers and CDs with educational material in local languages. So far, about 20 per cent have been received their equipment.

The many obstacles include the lack of internet connections, trained teachers and even people to set up the machines. In some state schools, administrators are so terrified that the computers will be damaged, they are never taken out of their boxes.

In 2011, the Indian government announced what was supposed to be a groundbreaking scheme to provide highly subsidised, education-focused tablet computers to university students. The [Aakash](#), produced by Datawind, was touted as the world’s cheapest tablet, selling at just \$35. But so far, the government has ordered just 100,000 and the devices have been plagued by quality issues.

Meanwhile, the government of [Uttar Pradesh has begun handing out free notebook computers](#) to those graduating from state high schools and enrolling in higher education, fulfilling a campaign promise of Akhilesh Yadav, the chief minister. [Hewlett-Packard](#) has won a \$515m order to supply 1.5m computers for the giveaway over a seven-month period.

But Intel's Mr Chadha says policy makers need to move beyond just giving out devices. "It's not just about providing devices in a classroom or in the hands of students," he says. "Are you providing connectivity? Do you have local content available to them? And are the teachers trained? All of these are important to help bridge the digital divide."