

Report back on SchoolNet meeting with partners

21 February 2013

Current and potential partners of SchoolNet SA were invited to a meeting to raise issues around partnerships with the content and hardware vendor community.

SchoolNet's expressed the need to clarify its role in the light of a number of recent calls for tenders that included training and hardware provision. Janet Thomson further explained that in previous years SchoolNet had not often tendered for work but now the sector had needed to become more transparent with work no longer being awarded to sole providers.



The Chairperson of SchoolNet SA, Shafika Isaacs explained the history of SchoolNet SA; that while SchoolNet had always fulfilled the role of maintaining communities of teachers using ICT, in the early days it had also provided hardware and connectivity. Over the years SchoolNet's focus had shifted to training teachers and specifically to encouraging the integration of technology into teaching and learning.

In the context of the education crisis, SchoolNet was now reflecting on its role and questioning whether it was possible for an NGO to successfully partner with the private sector. To do this effectively, partnerships needed to be guided by the following principles:

- Non-exclusivity
- Transparency
- Building of trust
- Open and honest communication
- Awareness that this is an emergent process with new technology being introduced and other technologies evolving
- Accountability to partners, the mission of SchoolNet and to the teachers and learners who are recipients
- A need to prove conclusively that technology can bring about a systemic change in the education system
- Commitment to the broader goal of improving education – and that this being the core focus guiding all work that we do

Participants mentioned challenges faced by suppliers and service providers in this industry, these included:

- Too many products being available and the need to know who does the best job of offering what – this is also true in the case of training where it would be useful to have a catalogue of training offerings. This would help to compile proposals and tenders that include partners more easily.

- The lack of content and pedagogical knowledge amongst teachers. Teachers need to know how to engage learners using technology – not just how to use the technology as a tool.
- There is a lack of ability to demonstrate impact throughout Africa to show that technology has improved education.
- It can be frustrating for funders when there are no competitors as procurement processes require that quotations are sought from a range of sources.
- The open educational resources movement means there is a lot of content – but there is still a need to know which content is good and there is a need for locally relevant content.
- Many teachers are resistant to technology and many teachers are not passionate about their profession (with or without technology). For example, many teachers are interested in receiving a laptop through the Teacher Laptop Initiative not for classroom use but as a means to own a laptop.
- Some tendering processes automatically select the cheapest option without considering the value of the various offerings. When tendering there is a tension between wanting to propose a solution that will add value and lead to impact and keeping costs affordable.
- Some funders are more interested in the “photo opportunity” of delivering hardware than creating a meaningful impact in schools which takes time and commitment.

The potential of technology to enhance education was discussed but the need to record impact was even more important

- ICTs can close the gap between the pedagogical skills and content knowledge that a teacher has and what he or she needs to know.
- Technology can help to create communities of practice.
- Technology has the potential to leapfrog a teacher and allow for learning even with no teacher or a bad teacher. This is even more possible when mobile devices are used that place technology in the hands of learners.
- M&E that had been done in a Sangari project showed that there had been an improvement in Maths and Science results that received Sangari hardware and training.
- If one can have some success with the teachers who are willing to use technology – others follow or the ones that use it convince more colleagues to give it a try.
- Technology allows for blended and online learning models which can be more cost effective than face to face training– but sometimes this approach leads to high dropout rates and the “loneliness of the long distance learner” and has been proved not be as effective as a person encouraging you in person.

Way forward – delegates proposed the following:

- There is a need to find synergies – to “co-pete – cooperative competition”.
- There is a need to share results and successes to build a case for technology enhanced education.
- SchoolNet should produce a simple summary of the courses on offer as a catalogue for potential partners.
- There is a need for a summary of good, locally relevant content that is available.
- There is a need to get leadership buy in – both from principals and district officials.
- Training should form an important part of any hardware rollout – it is an essential part of completing the circle and for a relatively small portion of the overall budget it is the factor that helps ensure use of the technology.
- There has been value in taking DBE office based staff to see first-hand the value of technology in schools.
- There is a need for independent monitoring and evaluation, but there are also cheap and easy ways of measuring usage that can be automated and that at least provide statistical proof of use.

- There is a need to share findings. It would be useful if stakeholders could include an impact monitor on their websites indicating their targets and reach.
- Stakeholders should ensure that other parties are on their mailing lists for newsletters etc. and ideally these newsletters should be personalised drawing the attention to news that may be of interest.
- There is a need to raise the awareness of technology in education through public advocacy. This does not need to be anti-government or anti-establishment but should raise awareness through a “Lead SA” type of initiative.

The following organisations were represented: SchoolNet SA, Vodacom Foundation, Telkom Foundation, Sangari, Learn things, Fujitsu and Mustek. A volunteer organisation was being sought to host the next meeting.