



One Laptop per Child Program to increase connectivity in Canadian aboriginal communities

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By: Jonathan Migneault

In September the Belinda Stronach Foundation, working with aboriginal groups and potentially businesses and the federal government, will bring the One Laptop per Child Program to Canada's aboriginal communities, expanding Internet access in many remote First Nations areas.

A project overview [1] on the One Laptop per Child website says potential partners include the federal government, and private and non-profit sector organizations.

The Belinda Stronach Foundation is leading the project, but partner organizations include Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Métis National Council.

Non-profit partners contacted Monday said they did not know whether the federal government would help fund the project.

Timothy Powers, a consultant lobbyist with Summa Strategies in Ottawa, has been lobbying for the project.

According to the federal Registry of Lobbyists, Powers registered on behalf of the Belinda Stronach Foundation to communicate with the federal government to find "ways of improving communication and connectedness with Canada's aboriginal youth through the use of computers and specialized software."

Powers was registered to lobby for the organization between May 2009 and January of this year. Neither Powers nor the Belinda Stronach Foundation would comment on the project Monday.

One Laptop per Child program provides affordable laptops to children in developing countries and poor communities around the world.

The program is active in 40 countries and has distributed about one million laptops.

The pilot project, which will begin in September, will aim to provide laptops to up to 5,000 children in 10 aboriginal communities, says the project overview.



“Particularly for some remote communities, technology is key for education, for health, and for building economic opportunities,” said Clint Davis, president and CEO of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, and a board member with the Belinda Stronach Foundation.

Davis said the laptops, which are equipped with educational software and integrated wireless cards, would open opportunities for learning through added connectivity with the outside world.

The laptops will also be equipped to connect with one another wirelessly on their own local networks.

According to a 2008 survey by Ekos Research, only 46 per cent of Canadian aboriginals had access to the Internet at home.

Of those in the aboriginal communities surveyed, 85 per cent said they had access to the Internet in their communities.

At a cost of \$250 per child, the program will provide specially made, free laptops to children between the ages of six and 12.

“When our president was informed of the program and the age range, her interest was there because of our priorities,” said Belinda Webb, the director of social, cultural and economic development with Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

The organization got involved with the project in July 2009 when the Belinda Stronach Foundation presented an overview.

The laptops are equipped with webcams, which would allow elders to record stories and help preserve their culture for future generations.

The devices used in aboriginal communities will come loaded with programs to promote literacy, financial literacy, physical health and mental health.

Following the pilot project, the program will enter a second phase to raise awareness and invite additional aboriginal communities to participate.

A third phase is planned for October 2011, in which stakeholders will evaluate the outcomes from the pilot project and consider expanding it.

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[1] http://www.tbsf.ca/pdf/OLPC_Presentation_GENERAL_deck.pdf