

Gauteng classrooms go digital

Instead of taking notes using the old pen and paper, learners at Boitumelong Secondary School will now use the new tablets provided in their classrooms.



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This paperless education system - a project branded the "Big Switch On" - enables learners to have access to learning material, workbooks and other learning paraphernalia in the palm of their hands.

Classrooms at Boitumelong have been transformed into digital learning spaces with top of the range Information Communications Technology, while the traditional chalkboard has become a thing of the past for teachers. Chalkboards have been replaced with big computer screens at the front of the classrooms.

Unlimited 4G data connectivity will ensure that learners can also do their work from home.

Speaking to SAnews at the launch of the Big Switch On, ecstatic learners at the school - most of whom have never owned a smartphone or a tablet - believed that the devices will help them match their counterparts in more affluent schools.

"I do not think I will ever miss a day of school again and I will never have a reason to fail science or maths ever," said Grade 10 learner Pearl Mokoena.

Boitumelong Secondary School is one of seven Gauteng township schools taking part in the pilot the project.

The Gauteng Education Department hopes to roll out the project to all Gauteng township and rural schools by the end of the 2017/18 financial year at an estimated cost of R17 billion.

All high school children will be provided with a tablet computer and grade seven pupils in primary schools will be trained to use the devices.

Permanent IT specialists will be on site at any given time to assist the learners and educators with the new system.

Apart from surveillance cameras, each school will have two armed security officers. The tablets have also been fitted with tracking devices.

The project was launched by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, Gauteng MEC for Education Panyaza Lesufi and Gauteng Premier David Makhura.

Speaking at the event, which coincided with the first day of inland schools opening, the deputy president said the project by the Gauteng Department of Education is in line with the plan to improve the quality of education in the country.

He said it demonstrates an appreciation of the opportunity that information technology provides for more efficient distribution of learning material and as a tool for more effective teaching.

"It enables educators and learners to access resources that exist beyond the walls of the classroom. Indeed, it enables them to access resources from the other side of the globe.

"It gives them access to the world. Importantly, it also gives them the skills that are needed to succeed in this world," said Deputy President Ramaphosa.

He hoped that the project will motivate learners and make it easier for them to bridge the divide between the world of learning and the world of work.

"This divide - between the skills we learn and the skills we need - continues to frustrate our efforts to tackle youth unemployment. That is why we need to support this programme and to expand it."

The deputy president said ultimately the R17-billion project will boost the country's economy.

"If our economy is to grow, if the lives of our people are to be improved, if business is to thrive, then we need more of this," he said appealing to the private sector, families, communities and teachers to continue playing an active role in the education the country's children.

Unlocking educational potential

Deputy President Ramaphosa also urged learners to embrace the opportunity given to them and commit to learning in order to succeed.

He said that he expects more than the 80.26% pass rate which the school received in 2014.

"Education will provide you with the tools and opportunities to overcome any obstacle that comes your way."

Minister Motshekga was confident that the project will make schooling more exciting for learners.

"If I were a teacher or a learner now, I would be excited about this project. We are basically taking the learners to their world, the digital world and they will be able to work independently," the minister told SAnews.

Although expensive, the investment on ICT will save about 30% of the budget which was used to buy books. The saving can be used to maintain and roll out ICT throughout the country, the minister said.

Premier Makhura said the launch of smart schools was a revolution in education and a game changing shift.

"We are witnessing a major transition, a revolution in education which is part of the transformation and modernisation in

Gauteng," he said.

Meanwhile, MEC Lesufi reiterated that they have taken special care with security arrangements around the project. He said there will be a coordinated effort between police and the community to safeguard the equipment.

"We have put the most sophisticated tracking devices in all the tools. The police are trying to put one in one of their systems as well. So if you take a tablet from a child, we will be in a position to track it back anywhere in the country."

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