

African EduWeek to showcase groundbreaking classroom technology

"If I had had this technology when I was still in school, I would probably have become a heart surgeon."

An interesting point made by Kyle Williams, IT specialist at Edit Microsystems, who provides onsite support to the Athlone School for the Blind in Cape Town.



Williams is visually impaired and a former pupil of the school, and currently assists the learners and teachers of the school to use 44 new BrailleNote Apex computers.

He says, "What we are currently doing is revolutionising education and learning for those with visual impairments, making education and studying much easier. It is 99.9% similar to a laptop with a daily planner, access to email and internet. There is a media centre for radio, a scientific calculator and a built-in chat function." The BrailleNote Apex has a braille terminal and at the school is connected to a computer screen for the teachers to follow what the learners are doing. It can also be connected to a smart phone.

This technology will never replace braille

Principal Fletcher Fisher says, "We received a big donation from the Western Cape Education Department when we received 44 braille computers for our learners. The BrailleNote Apex is very expensive but it is going to change the face of education for the visually impaired in South Africa."

He explains that learners no longer have to carry around enormous braille books and the traditional, heavy Perkins braille typewriter. With the braille computer, all the work can be uploaded electronically. He adds, "Whatever the learner is typing the teacher can read on the computer monitor. This way the teacher can help the learner immediately during the lesson."

Fisher continues, "One thing that I must emphasise, this technology will never replace braille, you need to be braille literate. Braille will never be made redundant. This technology will simply enhance the braille skills." The school is currently using the technology for learners from Grade 4 up to Grade 12.

"You need a passionate principal to champion a project"

"We are very passionate about inclusive technology," says Pieter Labuschagne, MD of Edit Microsystems, leading supplier of educational and corporate technology solutions in Southern Africa. "We think every single person should be able to be included in areas that traditionally were not available to them, whether it is in school or in the work environment."

He continues, "Athlone School in particular is one of the schools that we work with that embraced this technology absolutely instantly and all credit should go to the staff and the principal in particular who drive that project. I think whatever project you tackle, whether it is low tech or high tech, you need a passionate principal, to champion a project like this."



Edit Microsystems will display their groundbreaking technology, which includes the BrailleNote Apex as well as a scanner that can convert printed text into braille, sound or electronic format, at the upcoming SABC Education African EduWeek, where they are a bronze sponsor. Labuschagne says, "African EduWeek gives us a great opportunity to not just showcase our products but it also helps us in our advocacy in areas that we are passionate about, to show the world that there are many solutions."

Breakthroughs in technology for inclusive education

The company will also present a workshop session at the event in July on 'Breakthroughs in technology for inclusive education'.

One of the workshop facilitators is Gerhard Erasmus, in charge of blindness and low vision sales and support at Edit Microsystems. Erasmus is blind and has been using the Brailnote devices for ten years. He says that "a device like the BrailleNote Apex and the scanner we sell really simplifies the way we make content available to learners - getting ebooks from publishers, essays and question papers onto memory sticks. You don't have to be part of a small world anymore, you can join the world."

The annual African EduWeek is expected to gather some 2,000 teachers and education professionals from 10-11 July at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg for an interactive conference and expo that will empower them through expert talks, introductions to classroom technology and interaction with their peers.

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