

# Success story or tech turkey?

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** After eight years, 88 smart schools and hundreds of millions of ringgit, are our schoolchildren prepared for the Information Age?

Most Malaysians do not think so, and a majority of them are clueless on the smart schools project and what it actually entails.

With a major international conference on smart schools starting here today, parents and teachers are hoping for answers as to where the smart schools initiative is heading, and how it has fared over the years.

Parent Lydia Wong, who keeps track of educational issues, said she had heard of the smart schools concept since it started in 1999 but did not know of its progress or whether the RM300 million invested in it had been well spent.

"It was a lot of money, I think, to buy hardware for schools but if the objective is to cultivate a culture of Information and Communication Technology and innovative teaching for our students, has it worked?" she asked.

And while most people agreed that the younger generation was more ICT-savvy, they said it was through the knowledge obtained and disseminated through other sources like the television, cyber cafes or their personal computers at home, and not through schools.

Many were also worried about the gap between urban and rural or remote schools, "where many students have even less chance of using a computer", another parent S. Nathan said.

The smart schools project was formed to prepare school leavers for the Information Age, to bring about a systemic change in education from an examination-dominated culture to a thinking and creative knowledge culture, and to equip students with IT competence, among others.

The blueprint for the project, published in 1997, defines the smart school as "a learning institution that has been systemically reinvented in terms of teaching-learning practices and school management in order to prepare children for the Information Age".

At its start, 90 schools were selected for the pilot project. However, this number was later reduced. Problems arising from the economic crisis at the time resulted in some cut-backs and scaling down of the



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project. Years later, it was announced that the government had decided to abandon the building of smart schools from scratch. The schools were supposed to have been linked to the Internet and use web-enabled teaching methods.

As an alternative, the government said it would equip all 10,000 existing schools in the country with the latest ICT facilities and ensure they used web-enabled teaching and learning methods.

It was said then that it cost "at least 30 million ringgit to build the structure of a smart school and it would cost much less for a normal school to be equipped with ICT facilities that would make the school smart".

The move confused the public, already bombarded with frequent mention of labels such as smart schools, vision schools and, now, cluster schools.

To be fair though, there were only these three that were truly "branded" and plugged and they have very different concepts — with a heavy focus on ICT, integration and autonomy respectively.

But this was lost on most, and parents were still confused.

"I am a little confused, because they first said there would be 88 smart schools, and then the government said all schools would become 'smart'. Now the ministry is emphasising 'cluster schools', a lot of which are 'smart' as well, so what is happening?" asked parent Sofea Abdullah. She said she did not even see

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a marked difference between flagship smart schools, which had been highly touted, and other schools in the country.

"The fact that the school has a website does not count, really. But the thing is we don't know what is happening with these 88 schools, what more the rest. It's all a blur," Sofea said.

Even teachers bring up the fact that they may need more training when it comes to ICT. A teacher from Negri Sembilan, who declined to be named, said perhaps younger and urban teachers were exposed and familiar with ICT applications but many school teachers, who found that they had to use the computers, often needed help.

"A lot of schools do not have proper computer rooms or access centres, so teachers have to lug the equipment to classes to teach. And some don't know even how to set it up with the projectors. So we may be getting the hardware and software, but if teachers are not trained well then the whole 'learning with ICT' culture will not take off as it should," he said.

Other concerns are also often raised. Are the hardware in schools still up-to-date or are they obsolete? Does e-learning or teaching using ICT truly work or could money be better used elsewhere? Are contracts to supply the hardware to schools awarded based on merit?

The Education Ministry, which is using this whole month to focus on ICT and smart schools, said it was aware of public apprehensions about the issue and would like to provide more information.

Unfortunately, said a ministry official, ICT can be all about figures and unappealing tech information such as "bandwidth", "servers" or computer applications.

These may be unpalatable news deemed "boring" and

thus, brushed aside by the masses.

And the numbers — 97 per cent of the 10,000 schools already linked with 'Schoolnet' via broadband, 800 more computer labs this year, 2,100 more access centres to reduce the computer to student ratio — often go unnoticed.

There is now one computer to 40 students in the country (compared to Singapore 1:4, and England 1:6). Under the ministry's plan, it wants to better this to a 1:20 ratio by 2010. By then, it is hoped that all schools will be smart schools.

The ministry, also worried about whether teachers and students could "appreciate the equipment" provided, launched an ICT audit initiative in August last year that seeks to assess the effectiveness of ICT initiatives implemented by the ministry. It is scheduled to be completed in a few months.

Observers have noted that the crucial results should have been ready as input towards the formation of the National Education Blueprint and the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

The ministry has reiterated that its initiatives are not set in stone and the data obtained from the audit would definitely be used for further improvements.

The smart schools conference this week will, therefore, the ministry hopes, move towards determining the problems, successes and experiences of the schools' ICT utilisation.

And, hopefully, some of the public's questions can be answered.