

## Some Kenyan parents oppose laptop offer to kids (Update)

July 4 2013, by Tom Odula

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An ambitious plan by Kenya's government to give laptops to schoolchildren has been opposed by parents who say the money for the computers should instead go toward raising teachers' salaries and feeding children.

The program is bound to fail in a country that lacks enough teachers and where others strike regularly for better pay, Musau Ndunda of the Kenya National Association of Parents said Thursday.

Kenya currently has a shortfall of 40,000 teachers, and more than 200,000 teachers in public schools across the country are currently striking over unpaid housing, transport and hardship allowances promised 16 years ago.

Ndunda said Kenya also needs 42,000 classrooms. He said the money used for the laptops needs to be used to increase the number of children in the country's school feeding program, meant to help children from poor backgrounds to stay in school and improve their health and nutrition.

Currently teachers do not have the capacity to implement the laptop project because they have not been trained and the government has not developed a curriculum for the project, said Ndunda. He said there are worries that the laptops would be lost or stolen, citing the recent scandal in which 70 million textbooks in a free primary-school education program went missing.

"If they are able to lose such an amount of textbooks then with the laptops it might be worse," he said.

He wondered how the laptops will be safe in households among the country's poor, saying "you cannot keep such a gadget in your house if you don't have something to eat."

Stephen Mutoro, of the Consumer Federation of Kenya, said the though noble the laptop project was "not well thought out and was politicized beyond redemption."

President Uhuru Kenyatta proposed while campaigning that his government would give laptops to 1.2 million children who start school every year, part of a wider plan to make the East African country an Internet hub. Details of the program, which will cost the government \$615 million in three years, have not been made public. It is set to start later this year.

Microsoft, through the Partners in Learning Schools program, in last five years had trained 32,600 teachers, whose impact was being felt by more than 1.8 million children, Louis Otieno of Microsoft Africa Initiatives said in a statement Thursday. He said the government has not reached a final agreement with Microsoft, which will implement the project.

Muthui Kariuki, the government spokesman, defended the laptop project, saying it was crucial to Kenya's goal of training a digital-savvy workforce.

"Anybody criticizing the idea is somebody who does not care about the future," he said. "We are in a digital age and from the young people we will train we will get the next managers of the 'silicon valley' spurring growth and creating jobs. Technology is the only remaining frontier."

Kenya's cabinet has approved the implementation of laptop program in schools, a statement from the Presidents Press Service said late Thursday.

The statement said the program will also see construction of storage facilities for computers in all schools, while the Ministry of Education will immediately embark on training teachers who will be responsible for teaching students how to use the computers.

The government will develop a curriculum for digital content in readiness for the roll out of the program in January, 2014 and Ministry of Energy and Petroleum will connect schools to electricity for the computer program.

The government will install solar energy panels to charge the laptops where there is no electricity, according to the statement.

The cost of the project was initially expected to cost \$174 million (Kenya shillings 15 billion) in the first phase, the statement said and each laptop is expected to cost to \$100.

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