

Smart schools shaping up well

Nine years on and several batches of technologically savvy schoolchildren later, the challenges remain for Smart schools, writes CHOK SUAT LING

WITH the buzz surrounding the creation of cluster schools, their older yet more technologically sophisticated cousins, the Smart schools, appear to have faded from the lime-light.

But Smart schools are quietly shaping up to be an educational success story in their own right.

A survey conducted by the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) together with the Education Ministry at the end of last year showed that the majority of Smart schools fulfilled resource use, human capital, applications and technology infrastructure requirements.

Of the 88 Smart schools in the country, 47 have shown marked improvement compared with the baseline rating collected at the end of 2006. The remaining 41 will be given special emphasis this year.

"In the recent assessment, 25 schools achieved the maximum rating of five stars," reveals MDeC senior manager (smart school) Dr Norizzan Razali.



Five-star Smart school SK Seri Bintang Utara, Kuala Lumpur, sometimes gets visits from educators abroad.

This is a vast improvement. In an initial 2006 survey, most of the Smart schools had performed poorly, with some barely obtaining a star.

The five-star ranking is the highest under the Smart School Qualification Standards or SSQS, a monitoring tool developed by MDeC in 2006 to grade the 88 Smart schools.

SSQS came about after surveys showed that ICT standards in Smart schools were still below par more than eight years after the project was started in 1999.

Under SSQS, schools are graded on their ICT strength. They are given ratings from one to five stars.

Norizzan says the rating is merely an indicator of the progress and challenges faced by a school, "enabling all stakeholders to make the relevant decisions and (take the relevant) measures".

She is pleased that not only have 25 schools been awarded five stars but also none of the schools graded are in the one-star category.

The Smart school project may have finally taken off after several initial blips and glitches, but challenges remain. Some problems are related to school leadership, while others involve technical support and infrastructure.

These obstacles have to be cleared before the number of such schools is increased in accordance with the government's plan.

Experts stress that the most crucial ingredient to ensure the effectiveness of Smart schools is a review of the entire teaching and learning process, and the way students are assessed.

A team from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's School of Language Studies and Linguistics researched the efficacy of Smart schools in 2004.

The study, which was updated recently, found that while teachers and students in such schools have become more IT savvy, several areas need urgent attention and improvement.

One area was the courseware provided by the ministry. According to Associate Professor Dr Hazita Azman, who is now UKM Faculty of Social Science and Humanities deputy dean (postgraduate), the courseware was "too basic" and merely a digitised version of a textbook, rather than being interactive.

"Some students, especially the better ones, are bored with the courseware as the difficulty level is not up to their standard but teachers do not have the expertise to produce their own," explains the academic.

She proposes that teachers be sent for training so that they can develop their own teaching materials that are more suited to the individual capabilities of students.

The team also found problems with infrastructure. There were not

enough computers, even in highly rated Smart schools.

UKM senior lecturer Dr Nadzrah Abu Bakar says in one of the top Smart schools, the average number of times a class used the computer laboratory was twice in one term.

This was because there was a long queue for computers.

"Some of the computers are not working. Internet access is also often slow. In some of the other schools, when we asked students how many times they used the computers in a year, they said 'once'.

"Schools also have to maintain their own computers and sometimes they do not have the funds," she notes.

Corporations and multinationals, she suggests, should "adopt" schools and help them manage computer labs and set up wireless connectivity. "This is the only way to improve on infrastructure."

UKM lecturer Azizah Jaafar believes Smart schools should each have their own systems analyst.

"This position should be created immediately. The person appointed should not be a teacher but a person with instructional design knowledge, as teachers cannot afford to be further burdened," says Azizah.

"He or she can help troubleshoot and offer IT support and advice to teachers."

Most crucially, however, Smart

schools need to evolve from institutions that merely use a lot of IT to ones which adopt a "smart" way of teaching and learning.

And for that to happen, the entire education system needs to be reviewed to become one which is less focused on examinations and academic achievement.

UKM lecturer Nor Fariza Mohd Nor points out: "We need to look at the bigger picture. Smart schools are about letting go of the old ways of teaching and giving more autonomy to students.

"It's actually a new system of teaching, from teacher to learner-focused, and the computer is just a tool to achieve this."

Teachers, especially those for Form Four and Five, say they are happy to be facilitators but in the end, they have to go back to the traditional way of teaching as they need to finish the syllabus before examinations.

Nor Fariza, who was the study's team leader, laments that the objective of learning now is not so much about getting knowledge, but more to do with passing examinations.

"Teachers are worried about finishing the syllabus as in the end, they are answerable to their headmasters and principals."

She notes that some teachers are also unclear about the "Smart" teaching concept.

"They think it merely involves us-

ing IT to teach. These teachers need more exposure."

Some think they need to carry out "Smart" teaching only for Science, Mathematics, Bahasa Malaysia and English, she says.

"Smart teaching is, therefore, not used in the whole system and students become confused when they go from one class to another. In the end, they just do what needs to be done to pass examinations.

"Only the fundamental skills will be imparted to them and not the ability to synthesise, criticise and analyse."

On a positive note, Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein had said that his ministry hoped to move away from an examination-oriented system.

But educators say development in this regard is not moving speedily enough. MDeC's Norizzan acknowledges that administrators, teachers and students still have to get used to the automated way of administration and innovative ways of using ICT-based materials for teaching and learning:

"When the cultural shift has fully taken place, only then can these users enjoy the expediency and creativity that the system and teaching tools offer."

But she's optimistic, based on the impact so far.