

Finding the best mix for smart schools

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A decade of smart school experience has qualified Malaysia to teach others — and to make its own schools more inclusive, YONG HUEY JIUN writes

WHEN smart schools burst on to the national education scene in 1999, they were met with great excitement from parents and teachers.

A decade later, Malaysia is generating a similar buzz in other Asean countries.

Last month, it bagged the United Nations' South-South Innovation Award for its Smart School Project in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The RM1.73 million capacity-building project under the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme was modelled after Malaysia's own Smart School Project to promote information and communication technology (ICT) growth and development in these countries.

Since 2002, 570 teachers have been trained and 15,500 students have benefited there from access to ICT facilities.

And while the UN recognised Malaysia's role in sharing its smart school experience, Dr Norrizan Razali, Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) smart school senior manager, is equally impressed by the rate with which knowledge was passed on from teachers who attended training in Malaysia to those who did not — both to their own colleagues and to other schools in their district.

"The skills transfer and knowledge-sharing happened very quickly and it was quite exemplary," she says.

In fact, Malaysia can now learn from how these four countries replicated the concept in rural areas.

Norrizan now hopes to achieve similar results with 50 rural schools in Malaysia which MDeC has been tasked to help the Ministry of Education with over the next two years.

And with the wisdom of hindsight, MDeC is setting the tone for its new mission by managing expectations.

Because these rural and underserved schools may not have the same ICT readiness or exposure to more innovative approaches as the 88 existing smart schools, "change management must happen first before we can start the training programmes", explains Norrizan.



Students at SK Putrajaya Presint 8 (1) use ICT in their classes to optimise learning. — Picture by MDeC



Dr Norrizan Razali says skills transfer was quite exemplary

In preparation, the 50 schools are being audited to ascertain the facilities they already have and what their problems are.

With 88 smart schools acting as the "nucleus" for 10,000 schools throughout the country, the question is whether we have grasped the lessons of the past decade for others to model themselves after.

The biggest lesson of them all, says Norrizan, is inclusion. "We realise that we probably didn't do enough of that with the 88 smart schools," she concedes.

Just as important as parental involvement is having champions advocating change at the school level.

At already high-performing

schools, say educationists, it's difficult to make a case for change when things are going well. But Norrizan says a mindset change is needed to equip teachers and students with "21st-century skills".

Maintenance of facilities poses another major challenge to the school administration. Teachers cannot focus on their main function — to teach — if they are bogged down with solving technical problems.

Recognising the need for continued and reliable technical support, MDeC set up the Centralised Service Desk, a one-stop centre that provides technical support, in each of the 88 smart schools.

But does ICT ratchet up students' performance in school?

In a study conducted by MDeC, smart school students were shown to possess greater ICT competency.

The study also found that the same group of students performed better using their cognitive skills, creativity and critical thinking skills.

SK Seri Bintang Utara has emerged as a nationally recognised model of a smart school that gets things right, a place that goes beyond textbooks to focus on developing a "thinking and creative knowledge culture".

SK Putrajaya Presint 8 (1) also demonstrates that learning can be fun. Maths teacher Lim Jing Jing employs the Data Accumulative Self-Assessment Kit (Dasak) as one of the peda-

gogical techniques in her Maths class.

"Students do their quiz by clicking their answers on a remote control. They appear to be more interested when teaching devices are used in class."

But not all topics should be taught with ICT. "Some topics are still best taught using the conventional 'chalk-and-talk' method," says Norrizan.

That explains why infrastructure is a mere 10 percentage points under the Smart School Qualification Standards (SSQS), a tool for monitoring teaching-learning practices using ICT.

"It's not just about using the facilities. If you have them and they are just white elephants, that's not going to make you a smart school. It's about what you do with them — how you innovate and optimise the facilities provided," says Norrizan.

At MDeC and the ministry's monthly action committee meeting, a myriad of issues are raised — ranging from infrastructure constraints to lack of skilled manpower — and ironed out.

Norrizan acknowledges that managing those issues are an ongoing challenge.

"You need one thing to be right," she declares.

"The right policy has to be in place because that will filter down to the budget, manpower and the rest."