

# SchoolNet South Africa: Accessing a World of Learning



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*Sheila Riordon*

Sizwe Ngcobo is a 17-year old special-needs student attending a school for the mentally disabled in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. He is Zulu-speaking and, until just over a year ago, had never seen a computer. Last year, Sizwe gained international recognition for the artwork he contributed to a collaborative student-designed web site that earned a silver medal in the ThinkQuest competition, an annual Internet challenge co-sponsored by [SchoolNet South Africa](#) (SA), the Telkom Foundation, and Advanced Network and Services.

A shining star? Perhaps. But there other bright lights in the new world opening up within South Africa and, indeed, globally: the world of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

## **Focus**

In a country where almost 70 % of schools are still without computers, SchoolNet SA has carved out a niche not just by making technology more available, but by focusing on historically disadvantaged schools. "The environment that SchoolNet finds itself in is one where racial relationships are fractured as a result of South Africa's history," says Executive Director Denis Brandjes. "As part of our mission, SchoolNet SA has chosen to focus on the use of ICTs to redress some of these injustices of the past, in order to bring about equitable distribution of resources and knowledge."

When teachers first articulated their dream of linking up South African schools, the notion of using ICTs for these ends was revolutionary. Three years later, in 1997, SchoolNet SA was formally launched, with the support of the national Department of Education.

## **Partnerships**

Since 1997, SchoolNet SA has established partnerships with the private sector, government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the donor community, strategically positioning itself to draw on a wide range of resources from different sectors, while ensuring that it works within government policy and implementation frameworks. The list of accomplishments is long and growing. Of South Africa's 28,000 schools, almost 3,000 are already involved in SchoolNet SA, and at least as many more are involved in various ICT initiatives throughout the country. The organization has trained more than 3,000 teachers and is currently developing an education content "portal" for use by teachers and students. And on an international level, SchoolNet SA is one of the leading projects in a broader SchoolNet Africa initiative, which involves school networking projects in up to 23 African countries.

To support its vision, SchoolNet SA has attracted funding from the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF) and the World Bank. Through its [Acacia](#) program initiative, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) provides core funding and houses the organization. ICT companies such as the Telkom Foundation, Nortel Networks, the Internet Solution, Simeka TWS-IT, Sun Microsystems, and Microsoft provide in-kind contributions including computers, software, Internet connections, ICT training, technical visits to participating schools, free publicity, and the sponsorship of competitions. (Some of these companies also fund SchoolNet projects.)

## **Volunteers**

People from far and wide are becoming involved in SchoolNet SA. Recently, eleven Canadian volunteers were paired with South African interns in six provinces to provide capacity building and technical assistance. The volunteers were recruited by Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) Canada, which worked in partnership with NetCorps Canada and IDRC's Acacia program.

"The primary objective of the volunteer programme is to develop a 'cadre' of youth — both Canadian and African — who have a solid knowledge of information and communication technologies in Africa," notes Kantha Singh, General Manager of SchoolNet SA. "After observing the first group of volunteers and interns, this objective is being met with immense benefits, in the sense that both teachers and pupils have acquired useful ICT skills that will assist them in their professional and academic pursuits." As a result, more volunteers are expected.

## **Online resources**

To learn more about SchoolNet SA, check out their [web site](#). Under the 'Resources' subdirectory, there's a link to the Britannica.com site, which offers information on just about any subject of interest — a handy resource for schools that can barely afford to stock their library shelves with books. There are also resource materials and school project ideas for teachers, parents, and students, and summaries of SchoolNet-hosted conferences and events.

From the ThinkQuest web site, you can find a list of last year's finalists, who include the creators of the 'Healing the Nation' web site. Five students from Mpophomeni High School developed this site, which puts a human face on the pain of the past — reconciliation following Mpophomeni township's 1985 "war" — and the pain of the present — the HIV/AIDS crisis, through interviews with victims made accessible by translations into local languages.

## **Projects**

Projects stemming from partnerships are plentiful. In the impoverished Northern Province, SchoolNet SA provides support and training for three community computer centres. In the Eastern Cape, another poor region, a collaborative project with OSF has used ICTs in four Umtata schools to improve teachers' learning strategies and ICT skills — ultimately to enhance the teaching of math, science, and English. SchoolNet SA also offers opportunities for distance education. To facilitate this, mentors are being deployed throughout South Africa to train teachers in basic ICT skills, combining face-to-face teaching with distance education through e-mail and the Internet.

Taking stock after more than three years of work, SchoolNet SA concludes that its original vision and mission still hold true. As with any new organization, SchoolNet SA has had some growing pains. Besides the usual administrative obstacles, it faces the challenge of ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of ICT facilities at schools and community centres. In response, the organization intends to develop innovative funding opportunities and collaborative projects, while

exploring the possibility of reselling its organizational capacity and knowledge through consultancies to government and research organizations.

### **Knowledge organization**

"SchoolNet SA considers itself a knowledge and learning organization. It is therefore committed to a process of ongoing evaluation and assessment to ensure that it remains on the cutting edge of the research and technology fields in the area of ICTs in education," comments Ntutule Tshenye, SchoolNet's Educational Initiatives Director.

Thanks to SchoolNet SA, more and more people like Sizwe Ngcobo are expanding their horizons. In the world of ICTs, it is refreshing that such an organization exists not only to provide opportunities to South African youth and educators, but also to establish links between students from around the world and help make information on South Africa more accessible to people everywhere.

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SchoolNet South Africa was established as an independent South African non-profit company in September 2001.

*If you have any comments about this article, please contact [info@idrc.ca](mailto:info@idrc.ca) .*

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