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## LAPTOPS AND LESSONS REACH LATIN AMERICA

### KIDS IN REMOTE URUGUAY HAMLET EAGER TO CONNECT

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Associated Press

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VILLA CARDAL, Uruguay - Big smiles spread across the faces of the 160 pupils at a public elementary school in this rural South American hamlet: Each sat gawking at a brightly blinking laptop given them days earlier.

"This is like an early visit from Santa Claus," beamed 11-year-old Eduardo de los Santos, clutching his computer with its shiny white case and bright green trim.

The machines are the first in South America from the much-publicized "One Laptop Per Child" project, which hopes to put low-cost portable PCs in the hands of children in developing countries. Still in a pilot phase, the group has also placed machines at one school in Nigeria and another in Thailand.

At the only public elementary school in this Uruguayan community of 1,300 people, children who never used computers are now being exposed to the digital age.

"Thanks to this, I'm going to be able to study tons of science," said 8-year-old Joel Nicoletti.

The ambitious non-profit project was launched in 2005 by Nicholas Negroponte, then-director of the media lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"There are 1 billion school-age children in the developing world and most don't have an opportunity to learn," said Walter Bender, president of software for the One Laptop project. "We're trying to go where there's an education gap."

The laptops currently cost about \$175, though the project believes the price will drop to \$100 once the machines are mass-produced, and Bender hopes they might one day be \$50.

The first computers to Uruguay were donated; the rest are to be bought by the government, which has budgeted \$15 million. A final agreement, however, is still pending.

The portable computers have already transformed the classroom in Villa Cardal.

"The power of these machines is impressive," said the school's principal, Marcelo Galain, noting their promised 12-hour battery life.

He said students got their computers a day ahead of a national holiday, but went to school on their day off to start using them.

Some children began warming to the computers by playing "Tetris," a popular falling-blocks puzzle video game. Later they will explore the Linux operating system.

Maria Fojo, mother of 10-year-old twins Lucas and Franco, said her family couldn't afford a computer. Now they have two.

"Lucas took his computer to his grandmother's house and then went to see his godmother with it," she said.

The computers are designed for children, boast extremely low electricity consumption, a pulley for hand-generated power, 1 gigabyte of flash memory, built-in wireless networking and a screen with indoor and outdoor reading modes.

"The laptops all talk to each other automatically, have voice chat, file sharing and all that can be done between laptops without Internet," Bender said of the design. "If any laptop has access to the Internet, all can share it."

Bender said the machines come loaded with children's books in local languages, along with encyclopedias and more.

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