

ZDNET EDUCATION IT BLOG

June 9, 2006

Eschewing outdated tech, Indian edtech group makes strides

India is often proclaimed a South Asian tiger, leaving Americans to think the whole country is filled with doctors, computer scientists and well-paid call center workers. The reality is quite different, [Indiawest Online reports](#) from a summit of the American India Foundation at Intel's headquarters in Santa Clara, Calif.

Mythili Sankaran, director of AIF's Digital Equalizer program, explained:

"Of the approximately 1.1 million public schools in India, less than half of one percent have any form of IT infrastructure or computer-based education. In the majority of these schools that primarily serve the economically disadvantaged communities in both urban and rural India, access to computer and technological resources is almost non-existent. With only two percent of India's population having a PC or Internet connection, the problem is daunting."

Over the past five years, Digital Equalizer has trained over 100,000 children and 6,000 teachers in over 170 underprivileged schools in India. One of DE's main tenets is to eschew outdated or second-hand equipment.

"If you don't have enough memory, or a fast enough connection, they'll lose interest right away," said Vinod Dham, chairman of the Digital Equalizer council and cofounder of New Path Ventures, described as the first India-U.S. venture capital fund focused on cross-border investments.

The cost of setting up and running a DE center is \$20,000 per three years and currently located in cities and small towns in 12 states across India, with plans to open 400 more centers in 2006. Since a consistent power supply is an issue, AIF searches for schools with strong infrastructure. The schools must be secular and serve economically disadvantaged communities.

In response to a point made that 50 percent of all people are technophobes, Raj Reddy of Carnegie Mellon University. Reddy, a world-renowned researcher in the field of human-computer interaction said, "It's no big secret. A car, or a mobile phone, is probably a lot more complicated to use than a computer. The trick is to hide its complexity."