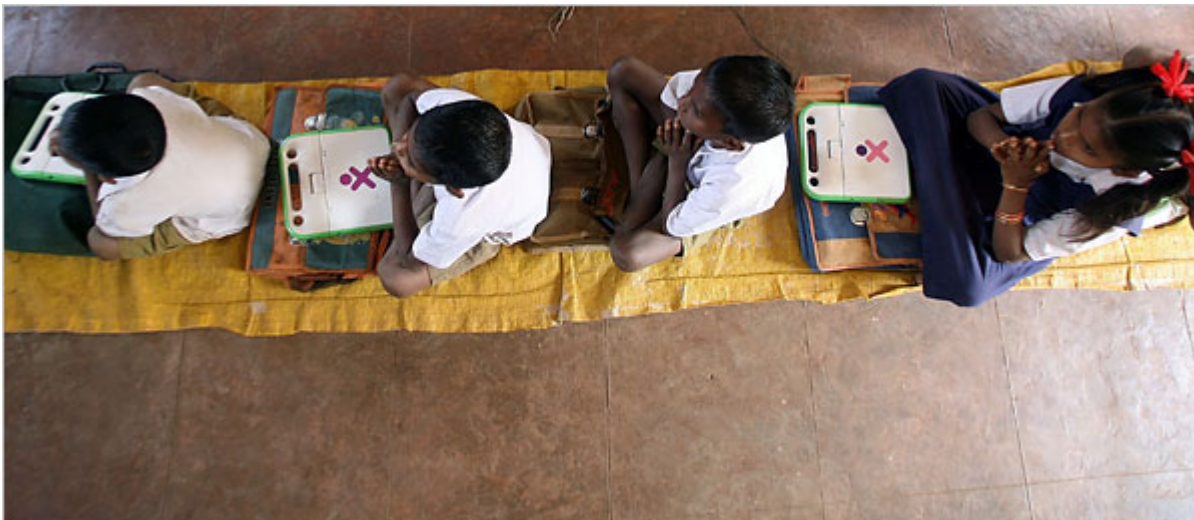


Microsoft Joins Effort for Laptops for Children

Steve Lohr



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Students pray before working on their computers in Vasti Vidhalaya, India. The XO laptop comes with a video camera.

After a years-long dispute, Microsoft and the computing and education project One Laptop Per Child said Thursday that they had reached an agreement to offer Windows on the organization's computers.

Microsoft long resisted joining the ambitious project because its laptops used the Linux operating system, a freely distributed alternative to Windows.

The group's small, sturdy laptops, designed for use by children in developing nations, have been hailed for their innovative design. But they are sold mainly to governments and education ministries, and initial sales were slow, partly because countries were reluctant to buy machines that did not run Windows, the dominant operating system.

Education ministries want low-cost computers to help further education, but many see familiarity with Windows-based computing as a marketable skill that can improve job prospects.

"The people who buy the machines are not the children who use them, but government officials in most cases," said Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the nonprofit group. "And those people are much more comfortable with Windows."

The XO laptop weighs 3.2 pounds and comes with a video camera, microphone, game-pad controller and a screen that rotates into a tablet configuration. About 600,000 have been ordered since last fall, with Peru, Uruguay and Mexico making the largest commitments. The alliance between Microsoft and O.L.P.C. comes after long stretches of antagonism, punctuated by occasional talks, between them.

Mr. Negroponte, a former computer researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a new-media pioneer, said he first talked to Bill Gates, Microsoft's chairman, three years ago.

But at the time, Microsoft was fiercely opposed to anything that might promote the use of open-source software like Linux. Since then, Microsoft has become more comfortable in competing against Linux, at times running its products on the same machines in data centers, desktops and laptops, Mr. Negroponte noted.

Back then, he added, the nonprofit laptop project did not have a working machine.

Last year, Mr. Negroponete said, he contacted Mr. Gates again, and this time the Microsoft chairman was receptive. He instructed Craig Mundie, Microsoft's chief research and strategy officer, to work out a deal with Mr. Negroponete. Those talks began in January in private meetings, when both men were attending the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

"Customers have come to us and said they really like the XO laptop and they would like to see Windows on it," said James Utzschneider, manager of Microsoft's developing markets unit.

The first of the project's child-friendly XO laptops running Windows XP will be tested next month in limited trials in four or five countries. Mr. Utzschneider declined to identify the countries, but he said XO laptops running Windows would be generally available by September. The pact with Microsoft is not an exclusive agreement. The Linux version will still be available, and the group will encourage outside software developers to create a version of the project's educational software, called Sugar, that will run on Windows.

Windows will add a bit to the price of the machines, about \$3, the licensing fee Microsoft charges to some developing nations under a program called Unlimited Potential. For those nations that want models that can run both Windows and Linux, the extra hardware required will add another \$7 or so to the cost of the machines, Mr. Negroponete said.

The laptops now cost about \$200 each, and the project's goal is to eventually bring the price down to about \$100.

O.L.P.C. led the way in designing inexpensive laptops for children in poorer nations, but others have followed, notably Intel with its Classmate PC, which runs Windows and is \$400 or less.

The project's agreement with Microsoft involves no payment by the software giant, and Microsoft will not join One Laptop Per Child's board. That contrasts with the approach of Intel, which joined the project last July, took a board seat and pledged an \$18 million contribution — only to quit in January amid squabbling over Intel's aggressive sales tactics with the Classmate PC.

Of the Microsoft arrangement, Mr. Negroponete said: "We've stayed very pure."

But the alliance with Microsoft has created some turmoil within the project. Walter Bender, the president who oversaw software development, resigned last month. His departure, Mr. Negroponete said, was "a huge loss to O.L.P.C."

Inside the project, there have been people who, Mr. Negroponete said, came to regard the use of open-source software as one of the project's ends instead of its means.

"I think some people, including Walter, became much too fundamental about open source," Mr. Negroponete said.

In an e-mail message, Mr. Bender wrote that he left the project because he decided his efforts to develop and support the Sugar open-source learning software "would have more impact from outside of O.L.P.C. than from within."

Outside the constraints of working on a single hardware platform, like the XO laptop, his work, he wrote, should "lead to a broader base, more options, and a better set of tools for children."

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