

ability

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Chance of a lifetime for IT in schools

Plans for £4.5bn of spending on IT in secondary schools are an exciting prospect – but disabled students’ needs already risk being overlooked, warns John Liddle

The government’s £45bn secondary education capital investment programme, Building Schools for the Future, is an exciting prospect for both education professionals and students. But will information and communications technology (ICT) provision be accessible for the thousands of disabled children in state secondary education, and how can we ensure that it will serve those in greatest need?

Over the next 15 years the extensive programme of rebuilding, remodelling and refurbishment, Building Schools for the Future, will change the shape of our education system.

For children with disabilities it could potentially herald a huge opportunity for real progress in ICT accessibility and enrich the lives and opportunities of hundreds of thousands of children who

would otherwise face barriers to learning. We could be on the threshold of a period of great change for the better.

But if due diligence is not paid to the role of accessibility, the rise of innovative technologies will result in the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in access to learning becoming ever wider. Those in greatest need will in effect become victims of a technological lock-out.

Back to basics

If accessibility is ever going to be a standard feature in further and higher education, not to mention the workplace, we have to ensure that it begins in secondary schools. If children with special education needs are offered a level playing field as far as accessible ICT is concerned at school, many more will achieve their potential, go on to further study, training and work – and demand the same levels of access to which they have become accustomed.

For perhaps the first time this is a real opportunity to oblige ICT suppliers to get accessibility right. Some £4.5bn will be directed towards ICT provision: an average sized secondary school could attract a budget of around £1.5m. The collective force of education procurement managers across the country has the power to specify exactly what is required in terms of universal access. They can demand that suppliers and service providers re-evaluate their offers and make changes to meet the needs of special needs children. For far too long we have accepted what has been provided, rather than questioning its suitability and viability.

The pitfalls of not thinking about the needs of ‘non-standard’ children are numerous. A supplier tasked with providing whiteboards might supply 30 fixed, wall mounted devices with no alternative access method for children unable to manipulate a pen. A supplier with no understanding of accessibility might forget that some children are not mobile or are vision impaired. For those pupils to participate and integrate, the provider must ask key questions: “Can you bring a slate to the child rather than the child to the whiteboard?” and, “Can children get a local image of the whiteboard on a screen at their desk?”

Imagine ordering new computers and forgetting that wheelchair users are going to struggle to reach USB ports at the back of the machines if they want to change input device. In the hurry to update systems with the latest operating system it is also easy to overlook students using access technologies like voice recognition, screen readers or magnifiers, which might not be compatible with the latest version.

Make it a priority

Without local pressure, these pitfalls will be inevitable. Special needs considerations may not be a top priority of Building Schools for the Future teams and there are barriers which will stop accessibility being addressed as a matter of course.

While local managers identify the appropriate educational vision and strategy for change, secure funding, identify suppliers, establish their local education partnership, design and construct new buildings, implement a managed ICT



Huge new opportunity for children

service and balance the needs of all the key stakeholders, a 'little' thing like ICT accessibility can easily slip off the agenda, never to be retrieved.

Moreover, there will be detractors claiming that the pot doesn't stretch to universal access; they will say that the budget has to finance every aspect of ICT provision – supporting learning, teaching and management.

These challenges mean that for many authorities it might seem easier to achieve minimum accessibility standards and focus on other issues deemed more important and more worthy of time, energy and finance.

The signs so far are not encouraging. It is still too early to come to any concrete conclusions, but the types of specifications currently being issued by authorities seeking delivery partners for ICT systems and equipment are disappointingly lacking both in investment and imagination where accessibility is concerned.

National guidance

Lip service is paid and suppliers are requested to consider the guidelines contained in the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative and the special education needs code of practice. But alluding to admirable aspirations like 'global accessibility' does not automatically translate into pragmatic measures. And national guidance in this area is still hard to come by.

Not only is it evident that special education needs professionals' opinions are not being proactively sought during the consultation process, but even more shockingly many of these specialists do not even understand that they have a stake in Building Schools for the Future and that it is passing them by.

Don't expect this ship to go down without creating a few waves, though. Building Schools for the Future might be a unique chance to demonstrate how ICT can successfully promote inclusion, level the playing field and help thousands of disabled children find and exploit their potential – and we ignore it at our peril.



Building Schools for the Future should herald a new utopia

As disabled learners enter the shiny new gates of their refurbished and re-equipped schools, full of optimism, their justifiable indignation on finding that the new technology is inaccessible is likely to convert into some interesting tribunals.

As in most things, a successful outcome depends on nurturing a culture of cooperation and consultation. Some local authorities have seen the light already. In Newham, Tower Hamlets, Coventry and Norfolk, for example, special needs professionals are making a valuable contribution to the procurement process. In Leicester, AbilityNet has been brought in at an early stage to ensure that ICT accessibility is top of the agenda in the Building Schools for the Future roll-out. In Manchester and Waltham Forest AbilityNet is working alongside their elected ICT partners in the delivery of accessibility advice, services and products.

Reaching for utopia

Building Schools for the Future should herald a new utopia for disabled learners – a future where regardless of their ability they have equal access to ICT, are able to

log into their school's learning system like any of their classmates and therefore benefit from a learning experience appropriate to their level and needs. Any access solution required should be delivered seamlessly to them over the network or supplied to them as required, not provided as the result of an arduous and divisive process which makes them feel different and alienated from their peers.

Let's not forget just how powerful this is. It has the potential to massively improve access to learning for all special needs and disabled learners – but it also has the potential to be a wasted opportunity, as accessibility could be seen as a small and easily overlooked element. It is the responsibility of all of us to see that this doesn't happen. ■

John Liddle is head of services to education at national IT and disability charity AbilityNet. AbilityNet offers support for local authorities, schools and ICT suppliers looking to get this process right for all pupils, whether disabled or not. John Liddle is at john.liddle@abilitynet.org.uk and on 01480 839091.