

NZ Herald Article: 13/11/03 'Computer plan to lift community'

EDUCATION: Free PCs project aims to improve the odds for poorer families

By Jo-Marie Brown

Dozens of families in one of Rotorua's poorest suburbs will get free computers in a bid to lift educational achievement and empower the community.

Sunset Junior High and Sunset Primary schools will jointly run a Computers in Homes programme for the Fordlands area, which is often compared to the tough neighbourhood where the film *Once Were Warriors* was set. Twenty-five Fordlands families will receive training, ongoing technical support and, if necessary, have a telephone line installed for Internet access.

"Lots of our people do not have vehicles, they do not have transport or an income or landline phones. It's all the classic low decile stuff," said Sunset Primary School's principal, Niels Rasmussen.

People living in wealthier areas were almost always computer-literate but Fordlands' low socio-economic status meant local children were disadvantaged, Mr Rasmussen said.

"There's definitely an 'us and them' scenario in terms of opportunities for our kids and this programme gives us the ability to get our kids and families to that same place."

Sunset Junior High principal Peta Brown said the schools would retain ownership of the second-hand computers which have been funded by the Ministry of Education. Sponsorship money would be sought by the schools to buy more in the future, he said. It was envisaged that newsletters, absentee notes and letters would be emailed between teachers and parents, while children could study numeracy and literacy on home computer programs.

"It will be used even to the extent that sick kids at home can have their assignments emailed to them," Mr Brown said.

"It's going to be a huge thing for the area." "This is an opportunity that would never otherwise come along to some of these families, ever."

The schools plan to block Internet access to websites they deem inappropriate. The placement of computers would also be reviewed every three years.