

ICTs in Dutch Schools: Problems, Prospects and Promises

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Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly influencing the daily life of individuals, the way business organizations work and the work done by people within those organizations. Education can help promote social cohesion and political participation in society. For young people, this education could be an important factor in preventing a potentially dangerous dichotomy between those pupils who have access to a PC at home and those pupils who do not. This article will explain the ICT policy initiatives that are being taken in the Netherlands. Dutch policy (i.e., the National Electronic Highways Action Program [Nationaal Actieprogramma Elektronische Snelwegen], intended to prepare the Netherlands to become a knowledge-based society) will be evaluated in the context of the European Union. The Netherlands has the highest 'telecompetitiveness index' (level of competition in the telecommunications industry) of any Benelux country and occupies fifth place in the league for ICT access and use among the fifteen European member states.

At European level, the European Commission has launched an initiative aimed at bringing together national and other education networks in order to promote co-operation between national Education Ministries and to interconnect all existing school networks as part of the "Learning in the Information Society" program. Web for Schools (WfS) is one example of such an initiative funded by the European Union. The WfS project was re-

cently transferred to the European Schoolnet (EUN) and now links some 150 European schools and 750 teachers. All EU member states are working together with the common aim of helping teachers and pupils introduce the Internet into all aspects of education. The European Schools Project (ESP), initiated by the University of Amsterdam, is a similar network. This project works closely with 600 schools in 28 countries (including those in Central and Eastern Europe). The current status of a Schoolnet for Europe is that it has rather more of an accumulation of regional initiatives than a network proper. New partnerships between governments and private sector companies are being created to get this interoperable Europe-wide Schoolnet up and running sooner rather than later. In other words, Europe is still a long way away from Canada's highly successful SchoolNet. This system was launched in 1993 and delivers over 1,000 Internet-based educational services and sources, all of which promote learning and offer direct creative resources to their users, and is especially aimed at teachers and pupils in primary and secondary education.

To ensure that no one is excluded from what ICTs have to offer, it is important that children become familiar with new media from a very early age, and the school environment plays an essential part in that. Livingstone & Bovill (1999) believe that schools provide the opportunity to close the PC use gap that exists between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. As