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Lole Lolesio, 13, Richard Moon, 15, and Ngawai Manuel, 14, from Computer Clubhouse 274.
Picture / Martin Sykes

Cheap laptops to reach poorest children

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By Simon Collins

Three Otago teenagers are spearheading an audacious bid to get 300,000 supercheap laptop computers for the poorest children in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

Lole Lolesio from Clover Park Middle School and Ngawai Manuel and Richard Moon from its bilingual Maori-English sister school, Te Whanau o Tupuranga, will represent NZ at a "teen summit" of computer clubhouses in Boston next month.

Their Computer Clubhouse 274, housed in a prefab at Clover Park, is the first local outpost of a worldwide network of 121 clubhouses started in 1993 by the media laboratory at Boston's Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

The executive officer of their Computer Clubhouse Trust NZ, Mike Usmar, hopes the link will help him pull off local participation in MIT Media Lab's latest project - "One Laptop Per Child", a plan to distribute an initial 10 million laptops to the world's poorest kids at US\$100 (\$160) apiece.

He has put Communications Minister David Cunliffe in touch with the Media Lab and hopes that its head, Nicholas Negroponte, will visit New Zealand this year. MIT is developing the supercheap laptops and aims to distribute them through state-backed projects that Mr Usmar hopes will get the laptops to local children free.

"We have to provide a case that it is a Third World scenario in the Pacific," he said. "Manukau City has the largest Pacific Island population in the world. So the way to transfer knowledge to the Pacific Island people is to see how it works in New Zealand and hand the knowledge on to the Islands.

"If you look at the social deprivation scale in Manukau, this is truly an under-served community, and some of the health statistics suggest that we really have a Third World scenario operating."

Mr Usmar says it may be 2009 before this part of the world gets the new laptops. In the meantime, Clubhouse 274 has started with just over 80 members from the two Clover Park schools queuing up to use nine computers in two after-school sessions.

Lole Lolesio, 13, is already creating three-dimensional worlds on the computer screen to rival some of the spectacular landscapes in Peter Jackson's blockbuster, *King Kong*.

Mr Usmar says that a year ago Lole was "a nothing kid".

"He was under the radar. No one had ever heard of him," he says.

But he watched his older brother, who was "always on the computer doing stuff". And in the year since the clubhouse opened, he has become a skilled graphic artist, creating stunning images using his imagination.

He has started an online forum for other teen summit participants around the world. The Boston trip will be his first outside NZ.

Ngawai Manuel, 14, says that before the computer clubhouse started, the only thing she could do on

a computer was to open Microsoft Word. Now she mixes music and creates and presents PowerPoint shows to potential clubhouse sponsors.

Richard Moon, 15, edits pictures and aims to learn about the electronics used in modern cars.

The Clubhouse Trust has applied for funding from the Government's Digital Strategy to top up industry sponsorship for a purpose-built, \$586,000 building on the site, which will allow it to open daily from 9am to 7pm for people aged from 10 to 18. It is also seeking "less than \$500,000" for the technology to create a wireless network, allowing students to plug into the clubhouse intranet from home.

Mr Usmar hopes to provide sponsored recycled computers to the homes of the 150 students of Te Whanau o Tupuranga next year, and to extend the wireless network and provide more recycled computers to 600 Housing NZ and Habitat for Humanity homes between Otara and Clendon from mid-2008.

Auckland University researchers are monitoring the project to provide a basis for seeking funds to reproduce the programme in other low-income areas of New Zealand and the Pacific.

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