



Community & Neighbourhood Services  
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To: Community Services Committee

From: Commissioner, Community and Neighbourhood Services

Subject: KIDS @ Computers Scholarship Pilot Proposal

Purpose:

To inform Committee about an innovative pilot project, KIDS @ Computers. The report provides an overview of the scholarship pilot's goals and objectives and identifies the partnerships that are being developed to undertake the project. KIDS @ Computers will be funded through revenues available from the province as a result of Toronto exceeding its Ontario Works Community Participation (workfare) targets. This report seeks City Council's approval to move forward with the pilot as proposed.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no direct financial implications for Toronto Social Services 2001 budget arising from this report.

As a result of exceeding its 1999-2000 Community Placement (CP) targets, the City received one-time funding of \$622,000 from the Province. Toronto Social Services (TSS) has also exceeded its 2000-2001 CP targets and will receive additional funding pending a Provincial audit of the City's CP outcomes. All such funding is provided at 100 percent provincial subsidy. Funds must be allocated based on provincially stipulated guidelines. The City cannot accrue the funds as savings. This report proposes that the CP target achievement funds be used to support the pilot phase of the KIDS @ Computers project as discussed below.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and concurs with the financial impact statement.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- (1) City Council approve the KIDS @ Computers proposal as described in this report for a total cost of \$622,000 which will be funded using the one-time 100 percent provincial contribution which resulted from Toronto's over-achievement of its Community Participation targets for 1999-2000;
- (2) Toronto Social Services be authorized to proceed with plans to implement the pilot phase of KIDS @ Computers for the summer of 2001;
- (3) the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services report back to Council in the fall of 2001 regarding the results of the KIDS @ Computers pilot; and
- (4) the appropriate City officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect hereto.

Background:

Community Participation (CP), also known as workfare, is a key component of Ontario Works (OW). Through CP, OW clients can update their work experience and work-related skills and contribute to the community. In November 1999, the Province introduced several initiatives aimed at rapidly increasing the number of OW clients participating in CP. These included establishing higher CP targets for each delivery agent, as well as financial incentives providing 100 percent provincial funds to those jurisdictions meeting the new targets.

Toronto Social Services (TSS) exceeded its 1999-2000 CP placement targets, thus receiving \$622,000 in one-time performance funding from the Province. TSS has also exceeded its 2000-2001 CP targets and will receive additional one-time funds pending a Provincial review of its CP outcomes. All proposed expenditures of these funds by municipalities are subject to Provincial guidelines released in the Spring of 2000 that stipulate that the money must be used to meet local human service needs. It cannot accrue as savings or offset other regular program expenses.

Reflecting the values and priorities which underpin the City's approach to social development, and which have influenced the way in which Ontario Works has been delivered in Toronto, TSS proposes to use CP funds to directly benefit economically disadvantaged children, including those whose families are in receipt of social assistance. This approach, which will see these funds flow back to low income families, also reflects the fact that the city has received the funds as a result of the participation of OW clients in activities that have benefited the overall community.

In an increasingly information driven world, lack of access to the powerful tools like computers and the Internet is making it prohibitively difficult for many children from low-income families to compete in school with their classmates. There are growing fears that entrenched poverty

will be exacerbated by this emerging digital divide. Steps to address this divide increasingly represent measures to break the cycle of poverty that many families struggle to escape.

TSS is thus proposing that the one-time CP performance funds be used to launch an innovative scholarship pilot project, KIDS @ Computer. The project draws on approaches being pioneered elsewhere in Canada and the United States that seek to give disadvantaged children the ability to use computers and the Internet to get ahead in school, and to acquire skills that will eventually serve them well in the job market. Since the Provincial funding is of a one-time nature, maximum benefit will also be achieved by investing in options that increase children's opportunities over the longer term, and that can lever resources from other sectors, including private partners. The following section provides an overview of the proposal.

#### Discussion:

##### I. What is KIDS @ Computers?:

There is growing evidence that lack of access to computers is creating a "digital divide". This divide applies particularly to the ever-widening gap between children who have access to computers, educational software and the Internet, and those who don't. Seymour Papert, a pioneer in technology-inspired educational reform and the author of *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap*, has bluntly observed that "kids who have access to computers are streaking ahead in their rate of learning and preparation for the modern world." His fear is that this fact of contemporary life "increases the gap between the haves and the have-nots, in terms of knowledge, skills, and ways of thinking for the 21st century."

Nearly all teachers, and an increasing number of parents, have first-hand experience of the digital divide. While some children are downloading information from sites around the world for school projects, other children, many of who are from poor families, are merely spectators in the emerging e-world. Increasingly, children who rarely or never get to use computers or the Internet are at a significant disadvantage. Research indicates that low-income families in Canada are much less likely to own computers than other groups.<sup>1</sup>

Using a scholarship approach, KIDS @ Computers aims to recognize and reward the achievements of children in low income families in Toronto, and to provide them with an opportunity to gain access to computers, educational software and the Internet in their homes.

The pilot project has two inter-related goals:

1. to ensure that children from low income families have the opportunity to use computers and the Internet in their homes to further their education and interests and effectively compete on a level footing with their classmates; and

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, while almost all higher income families with working age parents now own at least one computer, the rate of ownership among families with lower earnings is stagnating at about 40 percent. (Woodward, Emory.2000. *Media in the Home 2000, the Fifth Annual Survey of Parents and Children*. The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.)

2. to assist children to acquire knowledge and skills that are increasingly crucial to excelling in school and in the workplace.

TSS recognizes that making KIDS @ Computers work in the longer term requires active collaboration among interested and involved partners from the public, non-profit and private sectors. Initially, TSS and the Toronto Public Library (TPL) are jointly supporting, planning and implementing this pilot project. Efforts will be made to bring other organizations on board, notably private sector firms that are part of the technology or information services cluster.

#### Primary Features of the KIDS @ Computer Pilot:

In line with the above goals, the pilot has the following features:

1. a scholarship application process, including qualifying criteria, will be used to award Internet-ready PC's and basic software to children on social assistance, at no cost to their families;
2. children between the ages of 8 to 14 years who do not have a computer in their home will be eligible to apply for the project ;
3. through the Toronto Public Library (TPL), basic computer orientation sessions will be provided to participating children and adult family members at 8 User Education Centres across the city, with the potential for providing ongoing instruction and mentoring to children through computer clubs or other existing Library programs;
4. one-time Provincial CP performance funding will support the pilot; and
5. the pilot will be jointly managed by TSS and TPL, with an interim steering committee comprised of senior staff from both areas providing oversight and overall direction.

#### Project Benefits:

By providing Internet-ready computers to families who qualify for the pilot, in conjunction with instruction and mentoring, both children and families will benefit in a number of concrete and enduring ways:

- a. in school, children will share the competitive advantage that access to these powerful tools gives many of their classmates;
- b. at home, children will have the opportunity to spend constructive time at a computer, using basic software and the Internet to complete school projects, build computer literacy skills and broaden their knowledge base;
- c. at libraries, children will be provided basic instruction in productive and stimulating environment; and
- d. the project supports parent's efforts to help their kids succeed at school and involves them in their children's education.

Evidence from similar projects indicates that children will build confidence based on their ability to share in the excitement and learning possibilities opened up through the Internet and through use of various software programs. Attachment 1 presents information about a successful project that has been operating in New York City for several years.

KIDS @ Computers is ultimately about promoting and encouraging positive attitudes towards overall educational excellence among children and adult family members so as to better prepare children for success in school and eventually in tomorrow's jobs. In an information age, where knowledge and access to knowledge are the foundation for economic and professional success, the project also represents a key component of efforts to give children the tools to break free of poverty. The following briefly describes the major components of the project.

## II. Pilot Project Components:

### 1. Key Partnerships:

By virtue of its aims, and the outcomes it seeks, KIDS @ Computers is an initiative that requires constructive collaboration among the private, not-for-profit and public sectors. TSS has talked with groups from various sectors in the course of developing KIDS @ Computers. The result to date has been the establishment of a key partnership with both the Toronto Public Library and the Toronto Public Library Foundation. Fruitful discussions are also being held with a range of other parties, including firms in the technology sector.

#### Toronto Public Library's Role:

KIDS @ Computers is rooted in the belief that computers and the Internet represent avenues to information and knowledge that should be accessible to as many people as possible, at as young an age as is practical. Given its long history of promoting access to knowledge as a basic public service and its current emphasis on expanding children's opportunities to use computers and electronic resources, the Toronto Public Library (TPL) is a logical partner to design, develop and implement the pilot.

KIDS @ Computers is consistent with the Library's new strategic plan (Creating the Future, Treasuring the Past 2000-2003). The project's approach is also consistent with the fact that providing access to computers is not in itself a sufficient strategy to address the digital divide. Instruction in using new technologies is also essential. Based on their experience providing services to youth, and their diverse resources, TPL is well placed to provide basic computer instruction for children, as well as to offer a safe and enriching setting for children to participate in computer related activities after school.

By partnering with the Library, TSS is ensuring that children participating in the program have the best of both worlds: they will have maximum access to an Internet-ready computer in that one will be available in their home, but they will also receive instruction at and become familiar with local libraries. In doing so, they will have the opportunity to meet and interact with other children who share their interest in computers.

Working with the TPL Foundation, TSS will explore ways in which private sector firms or individuals can supply or donate computer hardware, software or other resources to support the pilot.

#### Linking with Other Sectors:

The role TPL will play illustrates the potential that exists for productive partnerships within the KIDS @ Computers program. In fact, it is through creative collaborations with a range of organizations from the public, non-profit and private sectors that TSS believes KIDS@ Computers can become a sustainable program that makes an ongoing contribution to low-income families in Toronto.

The Yonge Street Mission, in partnership with the Royal Bank and AOL Canada, recently launched Kids Online, a program similar to KIDS @ Computers, for 100 Regent Park households. This is one of few such projects in the Toronto area. TSS plans to establish linkages with these projects in order to benefit from their experience in setting up such programs and to be able to provide support to mutual clients where appropriate.

A very real potential advantage of the initiative is the opportunity it presents to involve the private sector in a constructive and innovative social project that benefits the most disadvantaged families in the city. TSS is confident that the City's resources can be the catalyst for matching contributions from private sector sources, whether cash or in-kind, or both, and is continuing to meet with firms to explore their involvement.

#### 2. Scholarship Application Process:

Through the KIDS @ Computers project, children in low-income families will be provided with new Internet-ready PC's, basic software and service support at no cost. The value of the scholarship is between \$1200 and \$1500. Initially, priority will be given to children of social assistance families. The intention is to subsequently expand the project's scope to reach children of other low income families.

Only families who do not currently have a computer in the home can apply to take part in the project. The scholarship selection process will then take into consideration specific criteria, including:

- a) interest expressed in the essay by the child outlining why they want to participate and the benefits thereof;
- b) letters of reference from schools or community agencies;
- c) participation in basic classes on computer usage and the Internet; and
- d) of overwhelming importance, a commitment of support from the family.

Families will receive an Internet-ready computer after successfully meeting these requirements. Appropriate arrangements will be made to deliver and install computer equipment in the homes of families who qualify to participate in the project.

An application form and process are being finalized. TSS and TPL will use the initial pilot launch and other appropriate media to provide information about the project to families on social assistance.

Increasing access to educational materials with the aim of facilitating academic achievement is at the heart of KIDS @ Computers. Synonymous with it being a scholarship, children will earn the opportunity offered through the project. Motivation and commitment are thus key facets of the project for both children and adult family members.

### 3. Scholarship Participants:

KIDS @ Computers is aimed at children between the ages of 8 to 14 years, who are likely to benefit most from participation in the project. During this period, children are at a stage in their education when access and exposure to the Internet and computers become increasingly essential to success in school. While they may have some access to these tools at their schools and local libraries, an ever-growing number of their classmates will have computers in their homes, and will complete the majority of projects using various software programs and the Internet.

The pilot's focus is on children in families on social assistance, with up to 600 kids qualifying for a scholarship (a smaller number of families will participate in the pilot since there will be more than one eligible child in many families). Based on TSS' experience, very few children whose families receive social assistance have access to computers in their homes. Ultimately, the aim is to expand the project's scope to include children from working poor families.

### 4. Project Timeframes:

TSS and TPL are proposing to implement the KIDS @ Computers pilot this summer, pending Council approval. The pilot will be launched at a press conference in late May. The application process will commence in early June. Scholarship candidates will be selected by July. Computer instruction will commence in July and August and children will receive a computer upon completion of the instruction sessions.

### 5. Pilot Budget:

The pilot will be funded using the \$622,000 TSS received from the Province for exceeding its 1999-2000 CP targets. TSS again exceeded its Provincial CP target for 2000-2001.

At this point, over 50 percent of the funds for the start-up phase will be allocated to supplying computer equipment to families who qualify. It is estimated that this level of funding will enable approximately 250 children to participate in the program.

The remaining funds will be used to develop the infrastructure necessary to deliver instruction to families participating in the program, including basic administrative supports. To a substantial extent this involves the development and delivery of computer instruction and mentoring by TPL, which is discussed below.

#### 6. Delivering Computer Instruction and Associated Supports:

Currently, TPL has User Education Centres at libraries across the city where computer based instruction and a general introduction to library services can be provided to children. As part of the KIDS @ Computers pilot, the TPL will strengthen a number of these centres, plus add two new sites in high need areas (Cedarbrae and Richview libraries). Attachment 2 contains a map displaying the location of the 8 Centres where children participating in the pilot will receive computer instruction.

TPL staff will deliver an introductory computer and Internet course involving three discrete modules for children and their families participating in the pilot. Parents are welcome to participate in all the modules. However, the third module will require participation of both the child and an adult family member. In completing this course, children will acquire a basic knowledge of computers and software, and the Internet. Families will receive a new Internet-ready computer following the satisfactory completion of the TPL course. There may also be an opportunity for children to participate in a summer computer club through the Centres, thus providing another vehicle for adding to their level of knowledge and skill sets.

#### 7. Management of the Pilot:

Both TPL and TSS have put the necessary staff resources in place to oversee the administration of the KIDS @ Computers project and to manage specific project development and implementation responsibilities. Senior staff from TPL and TSS continue to be involved in key project design, development and promotional decisions. An interim Steering Committee comprised of senior staff representatives from TSS and TPLB will oversee the start-up phase of the project and provide overall direction.

#### 8. Assessing the Pilot:

A framework for reviewing the outcomes of the pilot will be put in place prior to implementation. For example, the effectiveness of the initial course modules will be assessed. How children have benefited from the use of computers will also be examined, and information will be obtained at several points for up to six months following their receipt of a computer. It is anticipated that the pilot will provide TSS and TPL with valuable information about the project's outcomes.

#### III. Building on the Pilot: Next Steps:

Maintaining the project's momentum is a priority for TSS. Reflecting this commitment, TSS will continue to seek private sector partners to participate in the project. A progress report and



project update will be provided to Council in the fall of 2001. Based on what has been learned to that point, recommendations for further phases of the project will be made at that time.

Conclusion:

The KIDS @ Computers pilot represents a merit based approach to reinvesting one-time Provincial CP funds back into low-income families in Toronto. Based on a scholarship model, the project pilot is initially aimed at children on social assistance. Through the combination of a home computer, focused instruction in computer and Internet basics, and after-school activities, the project offers an innovative proposal to level the playing field in an important area for children in low-income families. Children will be recognized and rewarded for their achievements and will be encouraged to pursue educational goals. At the same time, parents will have an opportunity to increase their involvement in their children's education and improve their own computer skills.

Partnerships will be central to the project's success. Working together, TSS and TPL, with the anticipated involvement of additional private sector partners, will provide the expertise, resources and management oversight necessary to implement the pilot. Seed funding for the pilot will be provided through revenues available from the province as a result of exceeding CP targets.

Ultimately, KIDS @ Computers builds on exciting efforts in communities elsewhere in Canada and the United States that are leveraging available public and private sector resources to bridge the digital divide.

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**List of Attachments**

**Attachment 1 – Computers For Youth: Focusing Digital Divide Efforts On The Home**

**Attachment 2 – Toronto Public Library Branch Locations for Instruction**

[About the Divide](#)  
[Digital Divide Basics](#)  
[Access](#)  
[Literacy & Learning](#)  
[Content](#)  
[Economic Development](#)  


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# Digital Divide Network

Knowledge to help everyone succeed in the digital age

## Computers For Youth: Focusing Digital Divide Efforts On The Home

Elisabeth Stock, Computers For Youth

Recently there has been a flurry of media attention on what should be done about the disparity in home computer ownership between our nation's wealthy and poor households. By sharing experiences from Computers for Youth, this paper attempts to provide some insight into the successes and challenges of running a program that provides inner-city children with home computers. This paper then examines what our findings have taught us and how these findings might help shape public policy.

Computers for Youth (CFY) is a New York City-based nonprofit that provides inner-city students and their teachers with fully-equipped home computers and comprehensive services including training, technical support and tailored web content. CFY was founded to refocus digital divide efforts on the home. The home is where family members can spend unlimited hours on the computer, something not possible at libraries or community centers. In addition, studies show that home computers can motivate students to do their homework and encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education.

### CFY's STUDY

Last year Computers for Youth ([www.cfy.org](http://www.cfy.org)) selected one inner-city public middle school in the South Bronx and provided all the students, parents and teachers with a Pentium computer after they completed a CFY half-day training session. Beginning in October 1999, CFY conducted 11 training sessions during which it distributed 228 home computer to families and teachers, and trained approximately 470 members of the school community. All computers were configured with Internet accounts (CFY paid for the first three months, thereafter the families had to pay \$8.50/mo to keep the service) and a set of 112 pre-selected Internet browser bookmarks/favorites. After families and teachers took their computers home, CFY provided them with ongoing technical support free of charge.

A preliminary study completed after CFY's first year of operation shows that students are using their CFY computers for such meaningful activities as homework, word processing and finding information on the Internet. It shows that overall the same percentage (90%) of CFY students were using their home computer as were other school-age children across the nation. It also shows that a dramatically higher percentage of CFY children were using their home computers for word processing (80%) than were lower-income students (24%) and even higher-income students (50%) across the nation.

CFY's home computer program has also had a positive impact on the school. In informal conversations, teachers report that their students' schoolwork has improved not just in presentation but also in quality. They say their students think "more clearly" when writing on the computer. Students say their computers help them organize their school work better and that they love doing research on the Net. Students, who are often forbidden from hanging out on the street, have said that the Internet has enabled them to break their social isolation.

CFY was able to keep the program's cost-per-family low by leveraging investments from the business community and the households themselves. The business community provided CFY with donated Pentium computers, which we upgraded and reconfigured before distributing to families. Once the computers were taken home, the families make additional investments in the technology by purchasing complementary equipment such as printers, scanners, or educational CD-ROMs. These investments suggest that the families value their home computers and have found them useful.

### TECHNICAL SUPPORT AND INTERNET ACCESS

Since completing the school in the South Bronx, CFY has worked with three additional middle schools: one in East New York (Brooklyn), one in East Harlem and one in West Harlem. Overall CFY has trained 914 individual members of these four school communities and distributed 443 home computers. For all these families and teachers, CFY provides ongoing technical support free of charge. To date, CFY has resolved over 130 tech support problems, most of which have revolved around families' confusion over dialup networking, conflicting software packages, or accidental damages to the operating system.

CFY's experience over the past year suggests that the typical "for-profit" model for technical support-a help desk and a computer servicing site-may not work well for new computer users. Some families call the CFY help desk for support immediately, while others do not. Yet when CFY representatives visit a partner school-a school where all the students and their families have received CFY computers and support services-the children with computer problems come immediately to the staff to request help.

CFY's response to this finding has been to staff our help desk with students recruited from the community served and to train "technical helpers" who are a human presence in each of the partner schools. A "technical helper" may be a CFY technician who periodically visits the assigned school or a trained high school student from the community. For families unable to bring their computers to the warehouse for servicing, CFY has made arrangements with an outside technician to make home visits at a reduced fee.

Some CFY families found it difficult paying the \$8.50 monthly bill for Internet access once the first three months of CFY-sponsored access expired. CFY has since launched its Community Corner website ([www.communitycorner.org](http://www.communitycorner.org)) which should help explore whether families stopped paying because they found the Internet to be of limited relevance. This website, which is the default homepage on all computers now distributed, provides families with an inviting and easy-to-use entrance to the Internet. To ensure that this website reflects families' needs and interests, CFY has built two programs that tap into the creativity and imagination of individuals from the community. To learn whether families stop paying for Internet access because they cannot afford it, CFY has begun providing all families with Internet Service from a free commercial provider in addition to giving them the option of having the \$8.50 monthly service for unlimited advertisement-free access.

#### **THE INTERRELATIONSHIP OF SCHOOL COMPUTER USE AND HOME COMPUTER USE**

In his national study, Professor Henry Jay Becker of U.C. Irvine found that higher-income children used their home computers for a wider range of applications overall than did lower-income children. The applications Becker examined were school assignments, e-mail, graphics/design, word processing, educational programs, and games. He also found that schools serving high-income students generally used computers in more intellectually powerful ways. Teachers in these schools were more likely to use computers to teach students to make presentations, analyze information or express themselves in writing, compared with teachers in schools serving low-income students who were more likely to use computers to emphasize skills reinforcement and remediation.

CFY's findings raise important new questions about the relationship between how students use their computers at home and how they and their teachers use computers at school. CFY found that teachers who know that all of their students have home computers are more likely to assign computer-based homework (such as researching a subject on the Internet) since they know they will not be giving some students an advantage over others. CFY's study suggests that computer-based homework assignments may be important in encouraging students to use their home computers in substantive ways. Students in higher grades, who said they were assigned more computer-based homework, appear to use their home computers more often and for more purposes than did students in lower grades.

In addition, CFY found that students with home computers tend to improve their computers skills, which in turn enables teachers to enrich the way they incorporate the "classroom" computers into their lessons.

One social studies teacher reported that before his students had home computers he had difficulty incorporating Internet research into his lesson plans because he spent too much time teaching the basics of turning on the computer and launching the web browser. Now that all his students have home computers, he merely needs to give them the website address.

#### **CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE – THE PUBLIC POLICY DEBATE**

As a nation, we have spent billions of dollars equipping schools, libraries and community centers with computers and Internet access. What has been left behind is the home. While 93% of families earning more than \$75,000 per year own home computers, only 40% of families earning less than \$30,000 per year own them (Woodward, 2000). The research suggests that the numbers of low-income families owning home computers has stabilized (it was 41% in 1999 and 40% in 2000).

Providing access to computers in school, libraries and community technology centers, while necessary, is not sufficient. The lack of public support for home computer projects has significant educational consequences. It forces children with no home computer to do much of their homework away from their family, staying late after school or visiting a community center or library just to do their research and writing. It is a missed opportunity for parents to

learn about the school curriculum and become more involved in their child's education. And, it presents obstacles for teachers who wish to incorporate technology into their lessons but have students with little ability to practice their computer skills outside the classroom.

Public policy to close the digital divide must also focus on bringing technology into homes. Computers for Youth's program provides policymakers with an inexpensive model. CFY's approach is both school-based and comprehensive. Rather than selecting recipient families individually, CFY identifies inner-city public schools and provide our services to all the members of the school community. Students, parents and teachers receive a computer and a comprehensive package including training, technical support and tailored web content. CFY believes these elements can strengthen the home-school connection, enable students and teachers to use technology in more intellectually powerful ways, and encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education. It is school and family together that instill in children the knowledge and skills to lead productive lives. Let's not leave the families behind.

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**Instruction Locations**

