

Ministry of Public Administration and Administrative Reform, Bulgaria



Solid Partnership Edges Bulgaria Closer to the Creation of a Sustainable Knowledge-Based Economy

For Kamelia Petkova, Vania Boteva, and Maya Dobрева—all teachers of informatics in secondary schools in Bulgaria—working life will never be the same again. They are among the first to benefit from a dramatic change in the country's education system, which has given them access to the latest information and communication technology (ICT) and expertise"

Bulgaria is transforming its schools to embrace technology that can benefit staff and students alike. The aspiration is that every student has access to the latest, localised ICT resources, and teachers are experts both on desktop and education-specific applications. In Bulgaria, this vision is becoming a reality for its education sector of more than 3,000 schools, 120,000 teachers, and one million students.

Traditionally, Bulgaria, like many countries, needed to juggle spending priorities to boost educational budgets. This situation has become a thing of the past for the country, thanks to the commitment of the Bulgarian government's drive to enhance the education system through public-private partnerships (PPP). This national programme of change, entitled i-Bulgaria, aims to make the country more computer and Internet literate as Bulgaria works towards its 2007 goal of acceptance into the European Union (EU). The vision of i-Bulgaria is in line with the Lisbon Agenda, which aims to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based-economy in the world by 2010.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Thematic Review of National Policies

for Education—Bulgaria: "The transition of the region towards a pluralistic democracy and a market economy has been marked by economic, social, and political changes of extraordinary breadth, and depth. The talents, skills, and knowledge of the population are crucial in this process; hence the ambitious scale and urgency of the reforms being advanced for education."

Nikolay Vassilev, Minister of Public Administration and Administrative Reform, Bulgaria, who is the key person responsible for Information Society development, says: "The Bulgarian society traditionally gives high importance to the quality of education at all levels. A major part of i-Bulgaria is the i-Class project, aimed specifically at ICT access in Bulgarian secondary Schools. "Supported by funding totalling €72 million (U.S.\$87 million) for the period 2005-2007, it envisages a holistic approach for the introduction of ICT in each and every school. It has four distinct areas: equipping all schools with modern computer labs, connecting the schools into a broadband virtual private network (VPN), creating extensive digital educational content, and showing teachers how to more effectively use ICT in their work."

The journey towards the realisation of i-Bulgaria, and specifically i-Class has already started thanks to a partnership between the Bulgarian Ministry of Public Administration and Administrative Reform and Microsoft® through its Partners in Learning initiative. Microsoft has provided further funding of U.S.\$700,000 to complement the initial government investment.

Bulgaria is home to a population of 7.8 million people. The Bulgarian education community is made up of more than 3,000 schools and more than 120,000 teachers and one million and students respectively.

Situation

Like many countries, the Bulgarian education system is under immense pressure to do more with less. Financial pressures have resulted in de-motivated staff and students and a lack of vital ICT tools and resources.

Solution

The Bulgarian government has started an ambitious project to transform the education sector, called i-Bulgaria and backed by an investment of €72 million. The project aims to increase computer and Internet literacy and access throughout the country. A key component of this strategy, i-Class, is focused on increasing ICT access in schools. Microsoft Bulgaria has worked with the government and a consortium of partners to fuel this change, and train teachers in the use of ICT through its Partners in Learning initiative.

Benefits

- Thousands of teachers will gain more up-to-date ICT skills, boosting confidence and enhancing the teaching and learning experience.
- A greater resource pool of IT-savvy workers will help Bulgaria create and sustain a stronger local economy

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These include the Ministry of Public Administration and Administrative Reform and Science, Syndicate of Bulgarian Teachers, Sofia University, Technical University of Sofia, Plovdiv University, Junior Achievement Bulgaria, National Pedagogical Centre (NPC) and a number of other non-governmental, branch, and professional organisations.

The government has set the NPC—the main organisation for teacher training—stiff targets to train at least 40,000 teachers in ICT during the current academic year. To reach this target, some 28 training academies have opened across Bulgarian districts. To support this teacher training drive, Microsoft and its partner consortium are building a National Education Portal. The portal will serve as an information repository, assist teachers’ interaction, and provide best practice exchange through virtual professional communities.

The Partners in Learning initiative has bold aims and is backing these aspirations with even bolder achievements:

- So far, more than 3,000 school systems administrators have passed through the programme in Bulgaria. Each administrator is now able to maintain their schools’ network and actively support the teaching and learning process through ICT.

- By the end of the programme, 90,000 teachers will be equipped with solid ICT skills. Furthermore, some 900,000 Bulgarian students will obtain the digital skills they need to be competitive in the modern knowledge-based society.
- Every school in Bulgaria has been equipped with new laboratories, delivering more than 35,000 computers. The ratio of students per computer has improved from 49 to 15.
- More than 200 senior instructors for training of educators have been trained.
- Five curriculum programmes, developed by outstanding experts in ICT and education on behalf of Microsoft, have been localised by leading Bulgarian universities.
- 1,500 curriculum textbooks for three of these localised programmes have been published.
- Microsoft has provided the K-12 system with licensed Bulgarian and English versions of its latest desktop software at extremely favourable prices.
- Every Bulgarian teacher has been granted free work-at-home rights for the above-mentioned software.
- By the end of 2006 more than 90 per cent of Bulgarian schools should have broadband access through a VPN.

Kamelia Petkova, a teacher at the Ivan Peichev secondary school in Montana, Bulgaria, says: “As a result of the training and technology implementation in the classroom, I will be able to motivate my students to work harder and to achieve excellent knowledge about using ICT in innovative ways. Vania Boteva, who teaches at Batcho Kiro school in Pavlikeni, also feels well supported by the programme: “I received a high-quality curriculum, learning plans, teacher and

students manuals, and didactical references, all for free.”

Maya Dobрева, Informatics Teacher, P.K.Yavorov secondary school in Sofia, says: “The training supported my professional development route. The knowledge and materials I received will help me to move faster”. As well as adding individual value through the advancement of skills, creating opportunities, and building confidence, the local community will also benefit at both a business and social level. The community will receive a resource pool that is willing and able to support the growth of the local economy. The Bulgarian Business Leaders Forum (BBLF), an international non-profit organisation, recognises the valuable contribution that companies, like Microsoft and its network of partners, make to the social and economic prosperity of local, national, and regional communities around the world.

For the second consecutive year, Microsoft has won the BBLF Annual Award (<http://www.bblf.bg/annual.php?sub=3>) for corporate social responsibility in the category “Investor in Education”. Microsoft received this accolade solely for the impact of its Partners in Learning initiative in Bulgaria.

Milev says: “Building a sustainable partnership environment, facing government and society needs, and delivering the exact level of support needed. These are the three main steps of being a responsible company, recognised throughout the world as a trusted partner. It is of crucial importance that we help define government agendas and work in close support and cooperation with authorities, education leaders, and key educational institutions to respond to these needs.”

Vassilev adds: “We believe the i-Class project and digital education in a more general sense is the best investment a nation can make for its future.”