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## DepEd to pilot test web-based training for children with autism

A WEB-based visual learning technology for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will be pilot-tested in two public elementary schools in Metro Manila, the Department of Education (DepEd) announced Friday.

Undersecretary for Plans and Programs Yolanda Quijano said the visual learning material would contribute greatly to the school's capacity to support learning and communication of school children diagnosed with autism.

“Most of the children with disabilities belonged to the 5 million that are out-of-school. This is the number we are targeting so that they will be included in our program,” Quijano said at the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement between the Education department, Autism Society of the Philippines (ASP) and Globe Telecom for the program's partnership.

The technology will be pilot-tested at the Padre Mariano Gomez Elementary School and at the P. Villanueva Elementary School in Pasay City. Ten teachers from each school will be trained to handle the program.

VizZle is a visual learning software that uses video and audio and can run on any computer enabled with Internet connections. It was created by the Monarch Center for Autism, Harvard Medical School and Children's Hospital Boston.

The schools will be given one-year free Internet connectivity courtesy of Globe Telecom while the software and related trainings for teachers and parents will be handled by the ASP through the acquisition of a technical grant of the program.

Yoly Crisanto, head of Globe Corporate Communications Division, said the project will enable the department to address the unique needs of students with mixed host of disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, hearing/speech/visual and physical impairments.

“With the lack of facilities and special education professionals in public SPED centers, Globe and ASP believe that ICT can help address the problem by allowing easy implementation of differentiated learning across a class of unique learners,” Crisanto said.

Quijano is also hopeful that the program will be adopted in other schools across the country.

Data cited by the department showed that only 195,000 children are currently enrolled in special education (SPED) schools. This comprises roughly 5 percent of the total number of Filipino children with special learning needs.

There are about 231 public SPED centers in the country observing a 25:1 student-teacher ratio.

Metro Manila has about 5,000 of more than 6,000 children enrolled in the country’s SPED elementary schools. ASP said at least 500,000 families had someone affected with the disorder.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how an individual interprets what he sees, hears, touches and tastes. It impairs understanding and use of language, as well as adaptation to the environment.

For her part, ASP Board of Trustees member Cristina Estampador said the agreement would mark the beginning for public schools to be aware of the technology and how it can assist children with special needs.

“Technology is here and available. There shouldn’t be any excuses to delay this,” Estampador said, adding that this would encourage more public-private sector collaboration.

**Maria Nikka U. Garriga**

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