



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

## 2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

### -School Laptop Project comes to Fruition in Iraq-

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**Combat Outpost 6, Muthanna** - It's a long way from technologically-rich Cambridge, Massachusetts to Iraq's poorest war-torn province – Muthanna. But the distance just got smaller because of a recent agreement to initiate training in both Cambridge and in smaller desert communities to implement the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC ) program.



Muthanna PRT Team Leader Paul O'Friel meets with Provincial education officials to implement school computer program.

The idea is to use inexpensive computers to speed up learning for children and thereby further the province's ambitious development and educational goals, says Paul O'Friel, team leader of the Muthanna Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).

"For the first time in Iraq, specific educational programs utilizing the small OLPC computers will establish an electronic base for students to broaden their educational environment," he added.

Meeting in a traditional reed guest house, known as a "mudhif," which the PRT helped build, representatives of the Muthanna Department of Education, and USAID advisors with O'Friel's team agreed to move forward to pilot the laptop program in one local girl's school.

"We've launched the program successfully and this is going build not only a bridge between cultures, but more importantly it is going to provide the young people of Muthanna a better future through education," said Team Leader O'Friel.

The PRT funded project is designed to enhance activities through individual expression. Teachers will promote the development of the technology and its many educational applications. At the same time, by their very nature, the laptops will promote greater collaboration among students, he explained.

"This will assist us in adapting our learning programs to the laptop environment," said one Iraqi teacher at the meeting. Discussions regarding community buy-in focused on the need to obtain parent, teacher, student and administration agreement to loaning the laptops to the students each term, "like a book" the teacher said.

To oversee the OLPC program a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is being formed to enhance awareness, understanding and collaboration within the community.

To ensure there is a technological fit with the local teaching needs, two English-speaking Iraqis from Muthanna will go to Cambridge for training in both the laptops and practical electronic teaching methods. Those individuals will return to Muthanna and share the knowledge with other teachers.

After the technical training in Cambridge, the school teachers will start utilizing up to 200 computers.

Each computer provides a student with networking, word processing and other computational features. The Laptop features are extremely robust for such a small and inexpensive Personal Computer (PC). If repairs are needed in the field, the primary circuit board also known as a mother board can be easily replaced by removing just four screws.

“We believe families are beginning to see the many possibilities the world holds for their sons and daughters. They recognize, as we do, the strategic importance of this laptop initiative.” said one Muthanna department administrator.

Established in November 2005 PRTs are run by the State Department with volunteers drawn from various Federal agencies, like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Their aim is to partner with Iraqis to build capacity and empower local and regional governments to provide essential services. PRTs help refurbish schools, train journalists, upgrade farmer’s knowledge and skills as well as work with civil society groups.