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## Triangle entrepreneur donates \$50 tablets to bridge digital divide in schools



By JASON PARKER, WRALTechWire

Tags: STEM education, People

**RALEIGH, N.C.** — If technology can help open doors to educational opportunity, technology entrepreneur Chris Evans believes it can also help solve the gulf between technology haves and have nots – the “digital divide.”

Minority and low-income parents are more likely to see serious problems in their schools than those who are affluent or white, according to results from a recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research Poll. The poll demonstrates that parents of minority students – 50 percent of Hispanic parents and 34 percent of black parents, compared to 16 percent of white parents – believe that a lack of adequate computers and technology is a problem in their student’s schools.

Evans, the founder of Raleigh software company Accipiter, which was acquired by CMG Information Services in a deal valued at \$35 million in 1998, is seeking to address this problem and he’s doing it in our backyard.

Evans is now CEO of The Deepwood Group but he also volunteers for Wake County’s Communities in Schools (CIS) as a board member.

“Communities in Schools is a nationwide federation of charities,” said Evans, “a lot of what CIS does is mentoring and education programming.”

The goal of the organizations, said Evans, is to reduce dropout rates, absenteeism, and to keep students from falling through the cracks.

Evans and his wife recently purchased 130 Aakash tablets, a low-cost computer tablet that made its controversial debut in India in October of 2011 (a second version, the Aakash 2, made its debut in April 2012).

“It was a mockery on Indian late night comedy shows because everyone said they were trying to be Apple,” Evans said,



Evans didn't buy the negative press. He saw a future in which these tablets gained massive adoption within the developing world, and also within the American educational system.

The entrepreneur who started the company is trying to solve the digital divide, Evans said. He looked at data from the PC industry that suggested that the tipping point for mass adoption was when a device cost the equivalent of four weeks of salary.

The Aakash, an Android tablet, functions much the same way as other Android tablets. What sets it apart is its price. The Aakash costs \$50, though the manufacturing company plans to price as low as \$35 once the device gains enough traction in the market, said Evans.

"I thought it was a great platform and I ordered 130 of them," Evans said. He donated 100 tablets to CIS in order to run a pilot program. Evans kept 30 in order to distribute them in the community.

"We're a pilot to figure out if students accept it and we're looking forward to, in the future, putting them into everyone's hands," he said. "Right now, it's anecdotal but the pilot program, launched earlier this summer, has been a smashing success."

The tablets had games on them. Evans said there's a challenge within each of these games and in order for students to advance to the next level, they must complete problems in arithmetic.

"There are entrepreneurs who are looking at doing customer surveys using these tablets," said Evans. "The ability to transfer successfully to an Aakash," said Evans, gives entrepreneurs a much more cost-effective solution for doing business."

The tablets are certainly making an impact for the 100 students in the CIS summer program. Students are so proud of themselves when they're using the tablets and the applications as a learning device, Evans said. On a recent morning, one student who had begun a game announced to the room that he had achieved Level 4.

"What I saw is that the interactivens of these games on this tablet is very effective," said Evans.

Teachers appreciated the technology, as the devices enabled students to learn by doing, and to learn at their own pace.

"The management of something like CIS and the ability to have a roomful of kids who are continuing to grow in their learning," said Evans, "is very promising in terms of our ability to grow our services in a cost effective way."

"CIS Raleigh has done some very interesting things," said Evans, like rehabilitating old buildings or community centers to serve as a central library and community point.

"It's a point of pride within the community," said Evans, "which makes it okay to be good in school and to do well in school."

It's working. A decade ago, many of the neighborhoods in which CIS operates had a dropout rate of nearly one hundred percent. Now, "these students are virtually the same, demographically, as their peers," Evans said.

Leveling the digital divide using affordable tablet technology makes sense and it is a project that Evans believes could be replicated in CIS and non-CIS programs nationwide.

The pilot program “really makes a terrific case,” said Evans, “and this is very in line with where the City of Raleigh is going with how they are building out their technology infrastructure.”

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