China Evergreen Rural Library Service

Project uses public schools to provide free access to information resources in remote China.

Reaching China’s Rural Poor

Of China’s 1.3 billion people, two-thirds live in rural areas, where poverty and illiteracy levels are high. Because most public libraries are located in cities, and many charge for access, China’s rural residents have little contact with books, let alone digital information. If they are able to reach a county library, they most likely will find outdated collections that have not been added to in 10 years or more.

The China Evergreen Rural Library Service (CERLS), which received the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Access to Learning Award in 2004, has formed partnerships with public school libraries to provide free access to computers and the Internet to students, teachers, and members of the public in rural communities. Since its founding in 2001, CERLS has added 10 public school libraries to its network, serving more than 1 million people.

“Accessing information is crucial not only to all levels of education but to the advancement and economic prosperity of any civil society,” said Zhou Wenjie, CERLS technology manager. “If we can utilize our school libraries to provide Internet access for the general public, we can significantly improve the quality of life in rural China.”

Providing More Than Just a Computer

CERLS schools go out of their way to reach those least likely to seek out their services. For example, one teacher travels to remote villages with a laptop computer to teach farmers about new agricultural techniques and environmental issues. Another school is creating a mobile library to reach herdsmen with information in both Tibetan and Chinese. Service stations have been set up wherever locals gather, including cultural activity centers and fine art shops.

CERLS not only provides computer hardware and software to school libraries but it also offers critical training on how to use information technology, automate library operations, and promote information literacy. School librarians are trained in system operations, classification, and online cataloging, as well as how to teach in a classroom setting, how to develop a library collection, and how to create effective outreach programs. These librarians then train 15 to 30 students at each school on how to use technology and teach their fellow students. Finally, teachers and librarians learn to encourage inquiry-based learning—using information resources to learn and explore independently—a vast departure from the rote learning prevalent in most Chinese schools.

“I’ve lived here all my life and could not see any hope for my children,” said Wang Yinfang, a 35-year-old woman from Danfeng County. “But now I see for myself from the computer that the more we learn, the more developed we can become. My children are definitely going to lead a better life.”
Support From All Levels

Having the support of everyone involved, from teachers to principals to county governors, has been key to the program’s success. While CERLS supplied the computer equipment, software, training, and books, schools provided the Internet access, librarians, staff, space, and furniture. Local and provincial governments and ministries also helped out by providing extra computers and equipment. For example, Tongwei First High School in Gansu province was able to convince the local government to donate 90 computers, in addition to the 30 computers provided by CERLS.

Corporate partnerships also have been an integral part of the program. One Chinese technology company donated 1,000 reading cards that allow each CERLS library access to an online database of more than 1 million digitized books and 10 million articles. Another company donated teleconferencing software so schools can hold virtual meetings to share ideas.

CERLS plans to use the funds from the Access to Learning Award to install computers with Internet access at existing satellite information stations, facilitate resource sharing among schools, add new schools to the network, and provide more training for librarians and community members.