

October 2023 Newsletter

How One Rotary Project Narrows the Digital Divide by Training Teachers

In Panama, a seemingly simple backpack drive led to extraordinary changes in the country's education system. The [Rotary Club of Panamá Norte](#) initiated this backpack drive, a classic Rotary service project, and distributed essential supplies to grade schools throughout Panama. However, what they witnessed during these visits about a decade ago ignited a spark for change.

A Digital Gap Discovered

The Rotary members delivering backpacks were alarmed by the lack of technology and digital resources in these schools. Many computers were either destroyed or unused. Upon further inquiry and assessments, the club learned that teachers were unfamiliar with using the computers, which meant they were left unused by the students. This discovery exposed a significant digital gap between urban and rural schools.

Taking Action

The Rotary Club of Panamá Norte didn't stop at distributing backpacks. They decided to address the high-tech gaps they had encountered by focusing on two grade schools in Veracruz, a remote community about 10 miles from Panama City. With the support of the [Rotary Club of Westchester](#) (Los Angeles, USA) and funding from [The Rotary Foundation, District 5280](#) (California, USA), and other sources, they launched a project to provide modern technology and training to these schools.

Empowering Teachers and Students

The project, launched in 2018, equipped schools with 30 laptops for students, interactive whiteboards, and all the necessary hardware. But even more importantly,

the project included extensive training for school staff and community leaders, empowering teachers to use technology effectively and develop engaging lesson plans.

Success and Unexpected Challenges

The project was a success, with teachers and students enthusiastically embracing the new opportunities for learning. However, a new challenge emerged when the trained teachers were rotated out to a different school, a common practice in Panama's public schools. The new teachers lacked technology skills, prompting the Rotary club to seek a more permanent solution.

Enter Enedelsy (Nelly) Escobar-King

Nelly Escobar-King, a member of the Rotary Club of Panamá Norte and a former UNICEF worker, was determined to improve education in Panama. She recognized the dire state of primary education, as evidenced by low international rankings in subjects like science, math, and reading. "My main thing," she says, "was that I wanted to make sure that kids learn to read and write properly — and that they understand what they're reading."

The Solution: Paul Harris Interactive Digital Classrooms

To address these challenges, the Rotary Club of Panamá Norte, in collaboration with the [Rotary Club of Kansas City-Plaza](#) and other partners, secured a global grant of over US\$230,000 for the "Paul Harris Interactive Digital Classrooms." These classrooms would be established at the Normal School in Santiago, the main teaching college in Panama, and nearby grade schools where apprentice teachers would receive training.

Focusing on Innovative Teaching

The emphasis of this project was not only on providing technology but also on teaching innovative methodologies that leverage technology to enhance student learning. Collaborative efforts with various organizations, including the Ministry of Education, ensured the project's success.

Escobar-King also singled out the [Basic Education and Literacy Rotary Action Group](#) (whose board she serves on) and [The Rotary Foundation Cadre of Technical Advisers](#). "They are valuable Rotary resources," says Escobar-King, "and we have a very close working relationship with them."



A Promising Future

The impact of the Paul Harris Interactive Digital Classrooms project extends beyond the Normal School. Graduated teachers will influence up to 2,500 students each year, and they will pass on their knowledge to other teachers in their schools. Panama’s Ministry of Education will oversee this ongoing training process, promoting professional development among educators.

Expanding the Reach

Building on the success of this project, the Rotary Club of Panamá Norte aims to expand the interactive digital classroom model to eight of Panama's ten provinces, reaching 230 schools, 7,500 teachers, and 112,000 students.

The dedication of the Rotary Club of Panamá Norte to improving education in Panama, particularly by narrowing the digital divide through empowering teachers, is transforming classrooms and shaping the future of the country. This story demonstrates the significant impact that individual acts of service can have and emphasizes how Rotary clubs can drive sustainable change by identifying local needs, mobilizing resources, and collaborating with various stakeholders. Together, we can transform lives, one project at a time, and contribute to building stronger, more vibrant communities.

By Claudia Urbano, Rotary Service & Engagement Staff

This project was a finalist for The Rotary Foundation’s Program of Scale 2023. BELRAG members supported the club’s application and were active in advising on the project’s development. RC Panama Norte is moving forward with the project by applying for a large Global Grant, anticipated to be submitted early in 2024. For more information or to contribute to the proposed Global Grant, contact Nelly Escobar King, RC Panama Norte. eescobar_king@hotmail.com

Five tips for Effective Education Technology Projects



The question, “Can technology help solve themes important challenges in education?” opens the 2023 [Global Education Monitoring Report on Technology in Education](#) (UNESCO, 2023). This year, education experts from around the globe have worked with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to research how technology can support education for all students. Unfortunately, the answer to the question is not a simple one. Technology has the potential to improve education outcomes but there is limited evidence on technology’s impact on student learning and teaching.

During my time at Rotary as the Basic Education and Literacy Area of Focus Manager, I often encounter this same question as I support members and clubs with their education technology projects—**How can club-led service projects effectively use technology to improve learning in primary and secondary education?** There is no one answer to this question because students

and teachers have diverse needs, country contexts are different, and there are many digital technology tools. When designing a digital technology in education project, keep in mind these five tips:

- 1. Focus on learning outcomes instead of equipment inputs.** [The World Bank estimates that 70% of children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a simple story in 2022.](#) Around the world, children have lost months and years of learning due to COVID-19 school closures and struggle with basic literacy and numeracy skills. When designing your project, focus on how your technology tools can improve learning outcomes such as reading comprehension, writing, mathematics, or science. Providing digital tools on their own will not improve student learning or their teachers’ ability to teach effectively. Think about the educational goal the community has prioritized and how technology can support that goal.
- 2. Integrate teacher professional development.** Teachers are the backbone of the education system and are integral to student learning. Digital technology tools should not aim to replace teachers but should enhance their pedagogy and classroom instruction. Remember to talk with teachers during your [community assessment](#), before designing a project, to learn about their professional development needs and how they imagine technology enhancing classroom instruction. Learn from teachers about their digital skills and professional development experiences over the past school year. Well-designed teacher training improves the capacities of teachers to use digital tools effectively to impact student learning outcomes.
- 3. Consider gender equality and social inclusion in program design.** Girls, marginalized students, and students with disabilities still struggle to access schooling and learning around the world. Digital technology tools in education can help to increase their participation rates and learning. When designing your educational project, consider how excluded students will have access to the tools and include software programs that provide personalized, targeted instruction for students with diverse learning needs.

- 4. Understand the education policy environment.** Public schools across the world are often part of a regional, district, and national education system overseen by a ministry of education. Often, the ministry of education or regional ministry has policies regarding educational technology in the classroom. Before beginning your project, research the policies and systems in place that guide educational technology in the schools and communities you want to support. Your project can have a greater impact on students if it complements or works with the existing education infrastructure.
- 5. Include youth voice in program design:** Young people are the fastest growing population on earth and bring a variety of perspectives and opinions on project design. Championing youth participation in project design ensures that your project reflects the needs of students in your communities. Be sure to talk to students during the community assessment, project planning, and project implementation stages to undertake projects that prioritize their educational needs and address their challenges.

By anchoring projects on improving learning outcomes, supporting teacher professional development, promoting gender equity and social inclusion, aligning with education policy, and amplifying youth voices, we can pave the way for equitable and impactful education technology initiatives.

Regina Fuller

BEL Area of Focus Manager, Rotary International

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BEL Webinar series: Designing effective education technology projects ***Sponsored by Rotary International and BEL Rotary Action Group***

Mark your calendar for these webinars designed to provide research and examples of best practice in BEL projects using technology to enhance teaching and learning. Join experts in the education technology field, Rotary member project developers and Rotary grants staff for these enlightening programs to help guide your support of BEL technology interventions.

Full descriptions of each program, meeting dates and webinar links will be shared separately.

Webinar 1:

What works in technology and education projects: insights from current evidence

November 28, 2023

A panel of technology in education experts will share evidence and research on how technology can improve the quality of instruction/learning, show evidence-based interventions around the globe

Webinar 2:

Education technology projects across Rotary

December 7, 2023

Explore examples of good education technology projects that have strong teacher training alongside the provision of equipment. Examples from multiple programs around the Rotary world will be shared. There will be a strong emphasis on project planning.

Webinar 3:

Designing an effective education technology service project for global grant funding

December 14, 2023

Rotary members and Rotary staff will lead participants through the guidelines for Rotary Foundation projects in technology and education. There will be a strong emphasis on how to design teacher training and professional development that meets Global Grant guidelines

BELRAG and Save the Children Webinar
Developing Community Partnerships: Project Exemplars
Tuesday, 7 November at 4:00 PM (Eastern)



Working with our community partners is essential to developing projects with impact and sustainability. BELRAG and Save the Children have enjoyed a strong partnership for several years. Save the Children has been generous in offering grants to Rotary Clubs engaged in early learning programs that involve partners throughout their community (*see current grant recipients and project descriptions in the Sept 2023 BELRAG newsletter*)

Join this [webinar](#) on Tuesday, 7 November at 4:00 PM (Eastern) for an informative discussion illustrating the impact of community partnerships on early learning. Rotarians from three clubs will share how their community based early education projects have been enhanced by fostering strong partnerships.

Get a sneak preview of the plans in place to expand the partnership between Rotary and Save the Children. Please register in advance. [Registration link](#)



**BASIC EDUCATION
AND LITERACY**

Webinar Announcement

Basic Education and Literacy: Rotary's Strategy for the Future
Tuesday, 14 November

Join our BEL Area of Focus Manager, Regina Fuller-White, to learn about a proposed strategy for Rotary's future work in Basic Education and Literacy. This 5 year strategy will serve as a roadmap for future partnerships, programming, and focus areas within the BEL portfolio. Join this [webinar](#) to give your feedback and ideas on where Rotary members can have the biggest impact in BEL.

Meeting translation will be provided in Spanish

14 November: 8am Chicago / 2pm London / 7:30pm Mumbai

[Meeting Link](#)

Meeting ID: 957 3018 4343

Passcode: 693714

Education and Literacy: Tools of All-round Development in Rotary

“Education is not about the learning of facts, it’s about training the mind to think.” I read this quote by Einstein when I was a college educator in India. I will strive to imbibe it for the rest of my life. Education and literacy, we all agree, are the most empowering tools for bridging socio-economic, racial, and gender disparities, and for promoting all-round economic development, all over the world. In the middle of the twentieth century, literacy became a global priority, but more than 775 million people over 15 years of age that was 17% of world’s population in 2020, were still battling illiteracy. In this century, about half of the population in economically disadvantaged countries on the African Continent and Haiti remain illiterate. As per the United Nations Economic and Social Council [<https://www.unesco.org/en>], more than a third of the older population and 90% of the younger population in North Africa and the Middle East are illiterate. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, war and conflicts have exacerbated the inequalities caused by illiteracy.

Literacy remains as Sustainable Goal number 4 in the agenda of UN for “building more inclusive, peaceful, just, and sustainable societies.” As per the journal “Economics of Education Review” (Vol. 30), literate individuals earn 21.25 percent more income than their illiterate counterparts. With particular reference to the United States, I found some fascinating data on the National Center for Education Statistics website. Among the 25-34 year olds who worked full time, all year round, higher educational attainment was associated with higher median earnings. This pattern was consistent for each year from 2010 through 2021. For example, in 2021, the median earnings of those with a master’s or higher degree were \$74,600, 21 percent higher than the earnings of those with a bachelor’s degree (\$61,600). In the same year, the median earnings of those with a bachelor’s degree were 55 percent higher than the earnings of those who completed high school (\$39,700) [<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cba/annual-earnings>].

As one of the five avenues of service in Rotary, Vocational Service tells us that Rotary projects place a lot of emphasis on vocational education as a tool of empowerment and financial independence for all our communities. As a result of the tireless efforts of UNESCO, global/local non profits, and humanitarian organizations like Rotary, the ability to read and understand a simple text among 10 year old children in low and middle income countries around the world, has increased from 57% in 2019 to and estimated 70% in 2022 [<https://www.unicef.org/>]. UNICEF has played a vital role in making basic education and literacy accessible to children who don’t have access to STEM education and digital technology due to gender barriers, online safety hazards, special needs, homelessness, and displacement due to war and conflicts.

The Rotary International Foundation has supported literacy and higher education projects around the world through Peace Fellowships, Grants & Scholarships, Rotary Youth Leadership Academy, New Generations Youth and Friendship Exchange, and service projects that support schools, teachers, and innovative academic programs. Digital technology has transformed some of these cultural and academic exchanges into digital platforms. Two outstanding examples of global grant projects done by the Panama Norte Rotary are the Digital Classrooms project and the Santiago project that provide schools in Panama with laptops, hi-tech equipment, whiteboards, auxiliary hardware, furniture, and smart technology training for teachers. In the view of R.I. President R. Gordon R. McNally, cited in the September issue of the *Rotary* magazine, “The importance of communicating with and learning from another culture cannot be overstated, and Rotary is making it even easier to do so. A virtual exchange uses online platforms to connect people from different parts of the world so they can share their traditions, priorities, values, and more.” (see article about this project in Oct 2023 BELRAG newsletter)



A partnership between Rotary clubs and CoEd
to promote literacy in Guatemala

The Guatemala Literacy Project (GLP) [<https://www.guatemalaliteracy.org/>] is one of the largest, multi-club, multi-district projects being done by 800 Rotary clubs across 90 districts to improve the quality of education for underserved students in Guatemala. In the words of Past R.I. President (2017-18) Ian Riseley, GLP is “the gold standard of Rotary projects.”

Among many other outstanding country wide programs being done by Rotary around the world, a trailblazer program called Rotary India Literacy Mission [<https://www.rotaryteach.org/>] has designed a comprehensive program called TEACH, which represents endeavors for Teacher Support, E-learning, Adult Literacy, Child Development through programs like *Asha Kiran* (A Ray of Hope) and *Mera Happy School*.



Programs like the Uganda Sanitation Project for Health Activity [<https://riusaidwash.rotary.org/>] are working on projects related to water, sanitation, hygiene, and menstrual health management, which are changing the lives of young school-going girls in Uganda. Twenty nine Rotary clubs, along with United States Agency for International Development [<https://www.usaid.gov/>] are partners of USHA.

While surfing on the [<https://www.rotary.org/en>] website, I discovered that Rotary has helped in raising reading levels by three grades among the adult population in Detroit by training tutors, in partnership with Pro Literacy. More than \$100 million in grants have been given for clean water supply to Lebanese schools. Rotary has provided education and food for refugees and communities that are battling the Boko Haram in Nigeria. In Kenya, Rotary clubs are advancing life long opportunities of education for economically underprivileged and marginalized kids through global partnerships. The SONUS program in South Africa and Puerto Rico has trained teachers to recognize letters by sounds. In Afghanistan, Rotary has opened a girls' school to break the cycle of oppression and poverty. In Taiwan, Rotary has trained teachers to promote scientific literacy among elementary school children. USAID has played a vital role in all of these partnerships. The Rotary Action Group against Slavery (RAGAS) [<https://ragas.online/>] has used the model of "Schools4Freedom" to break the cycle of modern slavery.



As the Literacy chair of District 6910, it's my honor to share these success stories for our clubs to realize their potential in empowering communities closer to home and around the world by supporting literacy programs. I am so grateful for all the ongoing programs that are being done by Rotary clubs in our district to promote education and literacy. Some of these range from Mobile libraries, Donation of books to School libraries, Adult Literacy programs, After School Tutorials, and English as a Second language programs. Interact and Rotaract clubs are engaged in substantial ways to promote and

implement some of these programs. I am personally grateful for my own involvement with a unique program called the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest Program (GLL), which is being sponsored by several Rotary clubs in our district. The terrific pool of teachers and Rotarians who work in collaboration with the GLL team have given opportunity to high school students across Georgia for participating in an essay contest wherewith they manifest their writing skills while reflecting on their core values in life. This program was founded by Sir John Templeton 36 years ago. Each year, more than 40,000 high school students in GA participate in this program, and cash awards are given out to winning essays.

In conclusion, it's pertinent to quote a Rotarian called Mark Wilson, "When you teach somebody how to read, they have that for a lifetime. It ripples through the community, one by one [<https://www.rotary.org/en>]. Amen.

Dr. Anu Narula

RC Johns Creek

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The Rotary Club of Winder, District 6910 in Georgia, U.S.A. has participated in many Literacy and Education Projects in the last year. Rotarians regularly read to classes at the local elementary schools and have donated dictionaries to the local middle school. The Rotary club of Winder has also collected teen books for Adventure Bags for students, and their weekly speakers are presented with a book to sign which is then given to the local public library for all to enjoy. All of these fun-filled initiatives to promote reading and early literacy are an amazing and inspiring example for all Rotary clubs to emulate.



“Rotary People of Action: Champions of Impact” **Call for Nominations of Rotary Members Who Make a Difference**

It is time to recognize our Rotary People of Action! The 2023-24 Rotary People of Action will honor six Rotary members, Peace Fellows, Global Grant Scholarship recipients, or Rotary alumni, who have had a leadership role in implementing an impactful project in their communities. Do you know someone who has conducted a highly impactful project in your community? Nominate them today to be a Champion of Impact! Please share this with your networks; it will be great to have as many BEL-focused nominations as possible!

Champions of Impact

Rotary defines impact as “positive, long-term changes on individuals, communities, or systems that result from Rotary’s actions.” The highlighted Rotary projects will demonstrate sustained impact of Rotary member actions. While projects could address any community need, we want to see clear evidence of the change resulting from the project. Projects that align with President Gordon’s mental health initiative are eligible for nomination. Honorees will be recognized at the International Convention in Singapore.



Individual Eligibility:

Rotary People of Action: Champions of Impact project representatives must:

- Be a Rotary member, Peace Fellows, Global Grant Scholarship recipient, or Rotary alumni
- Be involved with a project that is currently active or concluded no earlier than June 2022
- Over the age of 18 by the nomination deadline
- Have held a leadership role in the hands-on implementation of the project.
- Self-nominations will not be considered.

Who can submit a nomination?

- Cadre members
- Rotarians
- Rotaractors

-Peace Fellow Alumnus or Global Grant Scholar to our new Rotary year where **Education Creates Hope in the World.**

Nomination link: https://rotary.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0ByPOhjBmc654LI

Note: Nominations will open on Thursday, 12 October 2023 and close on Friday, 17 November 2023.

Coming Soon: New BELRAG Website

BELRAG is getting ready to launch a new website that will better serve our members. Features will include:

- a ‘Members Only’ access that will enable networking with other members.
- access to pages for the Professional Expertise Teams and resources
- opportunity to promote and share projects (find partners and funders)
- streamlined membership management and easier ability to review and renew your membership

The new website will have both public facing pages with information about our activities and a members-only section (password protected) for BELRAG member to share and network with each other.



To keep the new website current and best able to serve our members, we are seeking a Website Manager. This person should be familiar with website management - knowledge of ClubRunner is a plus. If you are interested in getting involved as the BELRAG Website Manager, get in touch with Nancy Leonhardt wlrrotary@gmail.com