MANAGEMENT RESPONSE
Evaluation of the SchoolNet Program
January 16, 2004

BACKGROUND:

This evaluation was undertaken by BearingPoint on behalf of the Audit and Evaluation Branch of Industry Canada and Information Highway Applications Branch.

The purpose of the evaluation is to provide input to policy and programming decisions regarding the development of the next generation of Industry Canada's Connecting Canadians and Innovation strategies, specifically as this relates to the SchoolNet family of programs. Furthermore, this study involved an extensive consultation process with key informants, participants and partners in SchoolNet initiatives and activities.

The mandate of SN is to work with Canadian learning partners to increase access to and the integration of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) into the learning environment in order to develop an ICT-skilled population, capable of participating in the knowledge economy.

The evaluation study demonstrates a strong commitment by the organization to working in a more coherent and integrated manner in future. Although SN currently sunsets on March 31, 2004, this evaluation study will be very helpful in making recommendations to guide decisions for the future of the program.

Program Management is committed to addressing each of the recommendations found within the evaluation study as set out in the detailed Management Response below, as applicable now and if the program continues.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO THE LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Flexibility of the Program:

For future programming design needs, it is recommended that SN retain a flexible delivery approach that responds to the different requirements of the varying provincial/territorial and First Nations education systems across Canada.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. A flexible delivery approach has been essential to the design and operations of SchoolNet programming to date. SchoolNet operates a number of institutional mechanisms to allow input from partners on program design and operations: the SchoolNet National Advisory Board (SNAB); the GrassRoots National Working Group; the Network of Innovative Schools Institute; and the Regional Management Organizations for First Nations. Recently, SNAB has provided advice on priorities for future SchoolNet programming, and on considerations for its implementation.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, SchoolNet management proposes to consult with its partners about any new or modified e-learning programming initiatives.

Mission:

SN was served well by an original, consensus-building long-term connectivity goal for implementing ICT in schools. There is currently a need to articulate a similar, consensus-building steady and long-term mission for SN. In other words, there is a need to clarify the role of SN as it relates to where Canadian education should be five years from now with respect to the use of ICT.

Recommendation:

The SchoolNet National Advisory Board could be recruited for this purpose—with a special working group from within SNAB commissioned to address specific challenges and workable solutions. The "Foresight" document prepared by SNAB in this respect is an appropriate foundation to build on. Active representation on this working group from educational institutions, private sector stakeholders, and federal and provincial/territorial government departments is required.
Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. In developing the common Foresight and its subsequent Action Plan, SNAB Members had the opportunity to reflect on the roles of all major players in the e-learning network, and to determine where SchoolNet could make a unique contribution without duplication or overlap. The Foresight and Action Plan are now more than two years old. It would be appropriate to review roles and responsibilities with partners and collaborators, prior to establishment of a new program direction.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, SchoolNet management will consult with its current and/or modified partners in e-learning to develop an updated shared vision and action plan.

Program components

Future program designs of SN should continue to incorporate project-based delivery and professional teacher development schemes as a means to effectively engage partners and to implement innovative ICT solutions for education.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. Project-based delivery and teacher professional development have been found to be effective in supporting ICT integration into learning settings. Design for new program initiatives must take into account that:
- project-based learning is now more widely accepted in the primary and secondary learning systems and thus may need less of a direct incentive than in the past;
- any teacher professional development schemes developed at the federal level must respect provincial and territorial jurisdiction.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, for new program design SchoolNet management will emphasize whole school change (of which project-based learning is a part) and the development of future teachers who are ICT-enabled.

Partnerships and voluntary participation

SN should continue to implement its stated goals through program initiatives that are based on voluntary participation of partners, providing value-for-money financial and in-kind incentives that contribute to the adoption and use of ICT by educational institutions and learning environments.
Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. The SchoolNet Program to date has depended extensively on the voluntary participation of teachers, for example (in identifying and/or developing learning content) and on the provision of in kind contributions from provincial and territorial governments (without which the Computers for Schools and GrassRoots initiatives, for example, would not be possible). Program delivery involving volunteer efforts and the provision of in kind services allows far greater leverage for federal program resources. Increased risks entailed in such an approach are identified in the Risk-Based Audit Framework for SchoolNet; in brief, the risks are managed through strategies of regular consultation and partner empowerment.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, exiting and new program initiatives will rely on the voluntary participation of partners.

Program alternatives/options:

A study of the most cost and outcome effective practices for different provincial and territorial education systems will contribute to determining if there are appropriate alternative delivery

mechanisms that meet present and future challenges. In addition, cost-effectiveness comparisons of Canada's SchoolNet program to other national SchoolNet programs in other countries would provide valuable insights. Industry Canada should initiate a comparison study to identify the most cost and outcome effective practices for continuing to integrate information and communications technology in learning environments.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. Some work has already been completed in this area. Michael Teeter and Associates completed a study in the Fall of 2003 which looked at the extent of duplication and overlap between the federal SchoolNet website and provincial and territorial government websites. SchoolNet also attempts to keep all its partners up to date on provincial and territorial initiatives through reporting at regular SNAB meetings. Schoolnet management agrees that a more disciplined and regular approach would be justifiable. SchoolNet management would also a study of international practices to support ICT integration into learning. This information could allow more rapid adoption of promising practices from other countries, and could be shared with provincial and territorial partners.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management will re-allocate funding for such studies.

Innovation:

Any new SN policy and program design, that focuses on early adopters and innovators, needs to "raise the bar" on what constitutes innovation. Naturally, the relevance and impact of innovative initiatives also need to be considered.
Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation, noting that continual innovation is already part of the Program's culture. What is acceptable as a GrassRoots project today, for example, is markedly different than it was five years ago; today's projects create provincially-authorized learning content. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that online projects, in themselves, are no longer leading edge. New programming should address whole school change, how a whole learning system can make an irreversible transition to ICT-enabled learning.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management will propose new or modified program instruments which will reflect .

Entry levels:

Agreed. Future SN program designs need to consider different entry levels for participants in

the program— e.g., based on different skill levels, age groups, geographical distributions, cultural differences, and provincial/territorial school systems and characteristics.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management provides qualified support for this recommendation. Management believes in a program designs which respond to the needs of partners and clients (see Flexibility of the program above). Especially in its early stages, the GrassRoots initiative was highly customized to each jurisdiction (it was the Provinces who pushed for uniformity). Initiatives such as Network of Innovative Schools allow for differences between primary and secondary, and among regions. However, as a federal program SchoolNet has its own objectives and responsibilities, and program initiatives must be consistent with them.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management proposes to consult with its partners about any new or modified e-learning programming initiatives.

Networking opportunities:

SN should plan and budget for frequent networking events (both virtual and face-to-face) to bring together participants and partners in the program, particularly educators, to learn from each other and share results of their initiatives.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. The SchoolNet Program already supports some networking opportunities of this type. The chief example is the annual Symposium for the Network of Innovative Schools Program. In 2003, 200 teachers were brought together in a Forum organized by the Canadian Teachers Federation to discuss their needs to make technology integration work better in the classroom. Youth are invited to participate in online discussions under the auspices of the SchoolNet Youth Advisory Board, and meet face to face on occasion.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management will re-allocate funding for such events.

Regionalization and devolution

Industry Canada and the SN program should continue to rely on a decentralized delivery mechanism for its program components, while retaining overall budget control and oversight responsibilities, as well as policy and program design and delivery decisions.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management supports this recommendation, with qualifications. Decentralized delivery is known to work effectively with the Computers for Schools and GrassRoots initiatives. So far, it appears to be an effective model for delivery of First Nations programming. Nonetheless, there are some initiatives where decentralized delivery makes no sense (e.g., the Website), or where a pan-Canadian approach requires one program office (e.g., Campus Connection, Eduspecs).

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management proposes to consider the application of decentralized delivery systems to program initiatives.

Collaboration with schools and school boards.

Collaboration with schools and school boards is essential, if the program is to continue to succeed.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management supports this recommendation, with qualifications. SchoolNet has long standing effective and collegial relationships with the Canadian School Boards Association and the Canadian Association of Principals. SchoolNet has worked directly with some school boards on particular projects (e.g., Laval), and directly with schools in the Network of Innovative Schools Program. However, working directly with school boards and schools poses some challenges: there are more than 400 school boards in Canada, and more than 16,000 schools, so direct relationships with all would be difficult; as well, direct contact with schools and school boards can pose jurisdictional questions if the contact is seen as widespread.

Role of Industry Canada and the private sector:

Research should be supported to understand the appropriate business model and incentives to engage the private sector in future SN initiatives.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. SchoolNet has successfully engaged the private sector in the past (e.g., Stentor and Bell on connectivity, the Royal Bank in the PMA, several companies in GrassRoots and Computers for Schools). There was a temporary collaborative engagement program in the SchoolNet Multimedia Learnware and Public Access Applications Fund. There are other opportunities, as yet not fully exploited.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management will re-allocate funding for such

research.

Issues scan:

The timing seems right to do a broad issues scan of what is needed and what needs to be done for future applications of ICT in education in Canada.

Recommendation:

Industry Canada is in a position to provide leadership to oversee such an issues scan, and therefore should consider undertaking this initiative.

Management Response:

Agreed.   SchoolNet management strongly supports this recommendation. Management believes such a scan could be done within the context of development of a new Mission for SchoolNet (see Mission above).

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management will re-allocate funding for such research.

Absence of a national strategy for ICT in education:

Results from SN initiatives often evolve slowly and the process of fostering innovation and innovative uses of ICT in education requires a long-term commitment, by all stakeholders, and by federal/provincial governments. In the absence of a national strategy for the use of ICT in education, it is very important to at least articulate a clear vision that creates consensus for action.

Recommendation:

 Industry Canada, with the participation of the SchoolNet National Advisory Board, should play a leadership role in articulating this vision.

Management Response:

Agreed. SchoolNet management supports this recommendation, with qualifications. As with the previous Foresight document, collaborative visioning among SNAB members appears to have positive results in defining strategy. SchoolNet management believes that the national strategy for ICT in education should arise from the work of all players on SNAB. The SchoolNet Program can

take leadership in starting the process, organizing the work and drafting documents for the consideration of SNAB.

If the SchoolNet Program continues and/ or evolves, management will present this as a proposal to its advisory board.