Tonnta and its parent charity Sólás - Ormeau Road, Belfast

Background to Sólás and Tonnta

Sólás was officially constituted in March 2009. All of the directors share a passion for improving the current provision for Special Education Needs and Additional Needs in schools. They believe in enhancing opportunities for all children through education and tackling underlying educational barriers through the implementation of practical early intervention programmes in a child’s formative years.

What Needs does Sólás Address?

Most recent figures available from the Annual School Census (2007) indicate that there are now 58,827 children with Special Education Need, which is 17.7% of the entire school population. As a percentage of the total school population the number of pupils with statements has risen from 2.5% in 1996/7 to 3.9% in 2007. Some 170 Special Units are attached to 88 mainstream schools cater for a wide range of Special Education Needs and all Education & Library Boards operate specialist “outreach” support services for children with literacy problems and behavioural difficulties. In spite of this dedicated resource, it is estimated that the educational needs of some 10 – 15% of children in mainstream education are not being met. We believe that something needs to be done to address the deficit in all schools and subsequently we formed an educational charity, Sólás, with the core objective of developing, providing and / or enabling the mobilization of extra resources to support the Special Educational Needs of children in education Northern Ireland.

The purpose and activities of Sólás.

We focus on providing additional means of support to schools to assist those children that require additional help and support with learning and who are not provided for within the current statutory Special Education Needs system.

Tonnta Ltd – the Trading Arm

In tandem with setting up the charity we also set up a trading arm, Tonnta Ltd which will establish a revenue generating stream for the charity over time. Our first tradable product www.tonnta.org, a podcasting product for the Irish Medium primary education sector, was launched in October 2009 by the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane. Our English language version of the product

2 http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/7-special_educational_needs_pg.htm
www.schoolpodcast.org was launched in April 2010 at Loughview Integrated Primary School. We are currently building up a customer base of primary schools, who are adopting our podcasting product to advance children’s ICT skills and enable schools to meet the Primary ICT Accreditation Scheme by 2013.

Joanne Stuart Chairperson of the Institute of Directors Launching www.schoolpodcast.org

We are also working with Invest NI to develop the Republic of Ireland market for our podcasting offerings and according to our business projections will be generating a profit from our trading activities in Tonnta within 3 years. Ultimately our aim is that within 3 years we will have developed the means to ensure that Sólás is sustainable with little or no funding support from outside funders.

The Benefits of School podcast

- The www.schoolpodcast.org is an extremely powerful tool which actively engages children in learning across all areas of the curriculum through the integral use of digital technology.
- It provides a communication portal for the school, enabling the exhibition of children’s work as presented by the children themselves using video and audio podcasts.
- Furthermore, www.schoolpodcast.org enables the school to present latest news, prospectus, calendar information etc. to parents in an efficient and reliable manner.
- It enables pupils to collaborate with other pupils in other schools, and become part of a wider learning community.

Endorsement of www.schoolpodcast.org and www.tonnta.org

Fionnguala McCotter (principal of Scoil an Droichid in South Belfast) is highly complementary of the podcasting programme “In my opinion it is one of the most engaging ICT programmes that we have encountered. We are an Irish Medium school and this product has enabled us develop our own website page where we can communicate better with the outside world. We also have the children making audio and video podcasts on everything from the titanic to ‘at home with the aliens’. They are so keen and developing all the skills they need for the ICT accreditation scheme. We have uploaded podcasts of Irish language story books to help parents read with their children at home and enable parents with little Irish help their children with homework. We update the calendar daily with notes to parents. This programme has been a real revelation for us and we are delighted to have been one of the first primary schools to sign up to it”.

More information about Tonnta is available at: www.tonnta.org