We've recently heard of an idea which sounds as audacious as altruistic: provide a personal laptop computer to every schoolchild, particularly in the poorest parts of the world. Is such a thing possible?

The first step to making that happen is reducing the price down to $100. And that is the goal of a group of American techno-gurus led by Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the famous MIT Media Lab. The group is called One Laptop Per Child (OLPC). When Mr. Negroponte unveiled the idea at the World Economic Forum in January it seemed wildly ambitious. But, surprisingly, it is starting to become a reality. Mr. Negroponte plans to display the first prototype in November at a United Nations summit. Five countries—China, Brazil, Egypt, Thailand and South Africa—have said they will buy over 1 million units each. Production is due to start in late 2006.

How is the group (OLPC) able to create a laptop so inexpensively?

It is mainly a matter of cleverly combining existing technologies in new ways. The laptop will have a basic processor made by AMD, a flash memory instead of a hard disk, will be powered by batteries or a hand-crank, and will run open-source software. The $100 laptop also puts all the components behind the screen, not under the keyboard, so there is no need for an expensive hinge. So far, OLPC has got the price down to $130.

But good news for the world's poor may not be such great news for the world's computer manufacturers. What will be the impact of this project on the computer industry?

The new machine is not simply of interest in the developing world. On September 22nd, the governor of Massachusetts said the state should purchase one for every secondary-school student, when they become available. Sales to schools are just one way in which the $100 laptop could change the computer industry more widely. By depressing prices and encouraging the trend for "good-enough computing", where customers upgrade less often, it could eventually put pressure on the world's biggest PC-makers.