

Managing Tech Support

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One of the hardest things that a technology coordinator (TC) has to deal with is the management of technical support for teachers and students. Whether at the district or site level, the TC must implement creative strategies to keep up with the multitude of requests for the often aging equipment at the school sites.

Site technology leaders have many resources available to assist them with addressing the overwhelming need for technical support. These resources range from utilizing students and volunteers to installing desktop security systems and creating web accessible databases.

Preparation

There are some software utilities that schools should acquire to prevent many of the common errors that technicians are asked to repair. For example, no K-12 school should be without a desktop security system on every student computer. A desktop security will restrict student access to such things as the control panels and prevent students (and teachers if you set it up this way) from installing, moving, or deleting programs and files. In Santa Cruz City Schools we do not support computers that do not have the district - licensed desktop security installed. Before we had this policy, we would fix a computer, only to be called back a week or two to address the same or similar issue. We use FoolProof (www.smartstuff.com) because it is cross-platform and easy to install and manage, but there are other desktop security solutions available on the commercial market.

Another software utility that can assist with managing computers and decreasing the number of technical support requests is a software and settings distribution utility. Apple Network Administrators Toolkit (<http://www.apple.com/networking/anat>) is excellent for the Macintosh platform and ManageWise by Novell is a similar utility for a Novell network. These utilities make it possible to access every computer on your network and update settings and applications with a few clicks of the mouse. This is better than running around the site or lab repeating the same adjustments and installs independently on each computer.

Responding to the Request

Every site needs a technology leader, someone to help with technical support and the various aspects of technology leadership. This person could be a full time site technology coordinator but often times it is a teacher who has some technical expertise and a willingness to carry the torch. Teachers should not be expected to have extensive technical knowledge about computer repair and their training and expertise should remain focused in the area of curriculum development and instruction. However, as with any tool, teachers need to have basic troubleshooting skills such as confirming that cables are secure and restarting the computer before calling for technical assistance from the site

technology leader. Developing a list of the five or ten items that a teacher should do prior to asking for technical assistance can save the technician numerous hours and empower the educator at the same time.

One of the most obvious resources for technical assistance is utilizing student expertise at the school site. Even elementary school students can be trained and organized to perform various tasks to assist the site with their technology needs. One good resource to assist with the development of a student based technology support team is the S.W.A.T (Students Working to Advance Technology) team web site at www.swatweb.net. This site offers step-by-step resources for developing your own site S.W.A.T team.

A technology support specialist quickly realizes that people should fill out a specific form to request technical support. This requires the teacher to provide all the necessary information, which will make providing technical support more efficient and successful and assists with creating a record of the technical issues associated with individual computers and the site. An example of a basic tech support request form can be found at <http://www.sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us/html/forms.html> however an online database is more efficient and has greater potential to assist in many other areas of technology leadership. If you have a basic familiarity with FileMaker Pro and Claris Home Page, you can easily create web accessible databases. With web accessible support forms, teacher's submit a request via your Inter or Intranet. The request then is stored in a database and an email is automatically sent to the technician or the person who is responsible for coordinating the repair. The technician can follow-up with a detailed description of the repair which can later be transformed into a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) resource. Working with databases instead of hard copy is not difficult to create or maintain and offers great opportunity to streamline the technical support process. For an example of a simple FileMaker Pro database that could be used for technical support, visit <http://www.sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us/html/techres.html>

Parent volunteers can be a great assistance but they need someone to coordinate and make appropriate requests of the volunteers. One way to incorporate parent volunteers is with a program called the Armchair Consultant. During an Open House or other school function when parents visit the site, set up a comfortable armchair in front of a computer that is running a database. Ask parents to enter their name and email address for the purpose of assisting with the school technology program. Later add all the email addresses to a listserv or a group address in your email client. Then when you need assistance with a particular aspect of the school technology program, send out an email request to your Armchair consultants. Parents want to help if they can, and this type of program makes it possible for parents to be a true assistance to the school with a minimal amount of effort on part of site employees.

In addition to the above ideas and resources, there are web sites and listservs that can be of great assistance to the person trying to figure out a difficult technical support issue.

No Wonder! www.nowonder.com/

No Wonder! provides troubleshooting information for Mac, PC, Unix, and other operating systems. The site claims that it will respond to any email query within 24 hours. No Wonder! also has a great bulletin board/newsgroup section for tech support discussions.

The Snorkel www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/snorkel

Doug Prouty of the Contra Costa County Office of Education developed and manages this site. Be sure to visit Davey Jones' Locker, where technicians and coordinators register to share their expertise. If you have questions about a specific issue, you can search the locker for names and email addresses of someone with expertise in that area that can and is willing to assist you.

ZDNet Help www.zdnet.com/zdhelp

ZDNet is part of ZiffDavis, one of the largest computer magazine and book publishers in the United States. This help site includes a large variety of resources for all platforms and interests.

Help-Site.com www.help-site.com

This is a great site that claims to have links to 984 documents and 232 sites focusing on tech support for all platforms.

There are many other great web sites but don't forget to utilize the technical support of the vendor with which you are having the technical issue. Apple computer offers free technical support for all Macintosh computers installed in a K-12 environment and is a simple (yet sometimes lengthy) phone call away at 800-800-APPL. Microsoft offers free technical support to the K-12 education community and be accessed via the telephone as well.

This final resource should not necessarily be the last option for your technical support needs. Other technology coordinators have faced the same issues you are dealing with and you should utilize their experience. Although its main function is not technical questions, the Technology Coordinators Listserv is a good resource for connecting with other technology coordinators about issues relating to K-12 technology. To subscribe, send an email to: macjordomo@sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us and in the body of the email write: sub techcoord.

With systems in place and a comprehensive approach to technical issues at the site, a technology coordinator can decrease the demands for technical support and address the resulting requests with efficiency and accuracy. Be sure to utilize streamlining options such as databases and desktop security and the number of technical support requests will decrease while your effectiveness will increase.