

## **Setting the Standard**

### *Identifying and implementing technology standards for your school district*

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Software and hardware standards are an important step in assisting schools with implementing viable educational technology. Standardizing each helps reduce costs and provides more efficient technical support. Staff development and student use is simplified for the instructor as well as the learner. Additional benefits are a consistent look and feel among all of the district computers.

Before implementing any standard, be sure to investigate the existing inventory. Inventories, however, are often inaccurate due to the difficulty of keeping them up to date (I will discuss inventories in a future column). If your school district has a district license for a particular piece of software then it would be much easier, and often most economical, to stay with that product as the standard, however there are additional considerations to keep in mind when making that decision.

Equipment and software standardization will have a cost saving impact. By developing a rapport with local vendors who are familiar with your purchasing needs, a district can leverage its buying power with volume purchases. Consistently buying from that vendor can have numerous other positive impacts including improved service and predictable product quality. When a school has specific guidelines to follow with purchases, then the decision making process is simplified and the product received will work predictably with the district standards.

It is important to be open to teacher's experimentation with various software products that may meet their individual curricular needs and it is equally important that the proposed hardware standards will meet the requirements of the classroom. Teachers are the most familiar with their classroom needs. The district software standards should meet the needs of the staff and be readily supported by technology leaders. It may be necessary to formulate a variety of standardized software suites; perhaps one set for administration and another for curricular purposes. Each suite should include the software developmentally appropriate for that age group which also aligns with a technology scope and sequence for the district.

Technical support is a giant issue when you are trying to support hardware from multiple vendors along with a variety of software products. Standardization simplifies this issue by reducing the number of possible combinations. When teachers are able to move among computers and be greeted with similar configurations and familiar software at each machine, their need for technical assistance will decrease. Also, along with the teacher's comfort with the products, the use of educational technology in the classroom will inevitably be easier.

When the district staff development offerings are based on a particular suite of standardized software and hardware, then the staff development opportunities can be

more focused on a smaller number of products. Therefore, more attention can be applied to the use of these products in the classroom curricula.

There are various difficulties associated with implementing standards throughout a district. The first and obvious one is identifying which software and hardware product is the best for the district. It is important to be familiar with the products that presently exist in the district. Although a product that may be abundant in the district is not necessarily the best product to standardize upon, it will play a role in the decision of which products will be chosen. Getting input from all stakeholders is critical when developing your district's technology standards, as they will have valuable input concerning the validity and usefulness of certain items. Be sure to connect with technology coordinators in other districts to find out what products they have standardized upon and what methods they use to move towards a standardized technological environment.

If a school has already standardized on a particular product for whatever reason, it will be difficult to persuade the staff of that site that the district standard is a better way to turn. If there is funding available to simply buy replacement product(s) for the school site, then the transition will be easier and met with fewer objections. In Santa Cruz City Schools we began the standardization process by purchasing one software suite for all school administrators who did not already own the products. This demonstrated the power of standardization to the "decision makers" and was an economically attainable step in the direction of standardization. Large purchases are not always possible and therefore an option for input from all stakeholders is imperative to facilitate a viable standard.

Standards should not be limited to only new purchases. It is critical that school districts devise a standard for donated products as well. Schools often receive donated items that cost so much to upgrade and refurbish that it would be better to not accept these items in the first place. It is important that people who offer such items are acknowledged for their intentions yet informed of the value of, and need for, up-to-date hardware and software for the local schools.

Devising and implementing software and hardware standards may be a daunting task at first but the long-term benefits will provide your teachers and students with numerous benefits for years to come. Be sure to investigate what is in place, consult with representatives of all the stakeholders, and speak with others who have walked a similar path before you. When you have successfully moved a district to hardware and software standardization, you will reap the rewards for years to come.