

LESS IS MORE

At a time when most schools are buying multiple solutions to manage technology in the classroom, centralization reigns supreme

If you've seen an iPhone advertisement in the last few years, you've probably heard the phrase, "There's an app for that."

The same slogan could be applied to classroom management in the world of K-12.

Sure, in the case of SmartPhones, "app" stands for lightweight applications that make life in a mobile environment easier. In the case of primary education, it stands for old-school software applications that each promise to improve the efficiency of one aspect of classroom IT.

Pressured to cover all of their bases, most schools and school districts buy multiple solutions to meet these challenges. The strategy creates management nightmares for network administrators. It also can get costly, since budgets are smaller than ever and many of these applications aren't exactly cheap.

Managing classroom technology doesn't have to be this hard. In reality, the best strategy is to tackle the task with one solution that meets multiple objectives.

In short, the secret is centralization, and standardizing on one tool.

Meeting top needs

Across the country, teachers and school district administrators have prioritized the same basic needs for classroom management technology. In general, they seek tools with the ability to:

- Inspire student collaboration
- Meter and control student behaviors online
- Facilitate quick look-ins at student screens
- Digitize (and virtualize, in some cases) the student register
- Deliver and annotate presentations
- Administer tests and quizzes

Endpoint security is also a big concern; recent studies from the vendor, CDW-G, as well as from nonprofit organizations such as the Brookings Institution, indicate that many schools have ranked this as their top priority for the next decade.

Tackling these challenges can be difficult. Because the majority of schools and school districts already have invested big bucks in student management systems (and other enterprise-level technology), they attack classroom management needs with a patchwork approach and implement one-off or add-on solutions whenever possible.

Even with ample budget, managing all of the disparate solutions can be a nightmare; at a time of reduced budgetary cycles, it is downright impossible.

By and large, the problem is one of logistics.

With educators busy tackling their primary job (teaching), the burdens of monitoring and maintaining these disparate systems falls on local IT staffs. But considering how limited and overworked these staffs are, inevitably something has to give.

The central approach

Perhaps this is why centralizing the approach to classroom management technology works so well.

By combining a number of formerly individual technologies into one overarching (and therefore standard) solution, schools and school districts can empower educators to take responsibility for a greater share of the management burden. This, in turn, frees up IT staffers to focus on other or more pressing priorities.

Centralizing on one classroom management platform has other benefits, too.

For starters, updating the technology is easy, since one update covers everything and the updates come from one place.

Second—and in many cases more important—a central solution provides peace of mind with regard to compliance; with one tool that indicates which regulations and pieces of legislation it fulfills, school district officials don't have to worry about keeping track themselves.

A winning plan

The NetSupport School solution from NetSupport (www.netsupport-inc.com) meets all of these objectives.

For educators, the solution incorporates tools to enhance teaching, keep students on task, encourage continual assessment, and reduce workload. For students, it limits the use of social media by encouraging interaction, collaboration and the safe use of technology.

For network administrators, NetSupport School offers dedicated tools to aid in managing all IT assets, including a dedicated console that provides real-time views of all computers across the campus, generates a full hardware and software inventory from each PC, remotely manage services and processes and deliver files to selected computers in a single action.

For district officials, the solution also supports and reports compliance with national standards.

Specific features of the product include ePortfolio-like Student Journals designed to capture electronic copies of all relevant materials for review at a future date, as well as Device Control that prohibits data from being copied to flash drives. Other highpoints:

- Real-time student screen and audio monitoring
- Endpoint security
- Internet and application controls
- Printer management
- Multimedia testing and screen annotation for a variety of platforms
- Virtual whiteboard

Like the commercials say, there are apps for all of this stuff. And using them is a whole lot easier, more efficient and more affordable when they're in one place.



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