

Low-cost computing for education

Rural Idaho school district supports large area with limited resources

Challenge

Increase computing access across all Fremont County schools without purchasing additional computers, or upgrading existing workstations. Maintain more computers across a large geographic area.

Solution

Upgrade and expand access using the NComputing X-series to extend each computer to accommodate four or seven users at a fraction of the cost.

Impact

Allowed the district to keep all of its computer labs up to date and added at least three computers in every classroom. The X-series also saved the district money on maintenance and electricity and required fewer computers to be replaced each year.

The Fremont County Joint School District 215, located just west of Yellowstone National Park in St. Anthony, Idaho, has as its mission, "...to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to be contributing members of society." With over 2,100 students in nine elementary, middle and high schools spread out over 160 square miles in rural Idaho, Fremont County shares the same technology challenges faced by most rural school districts in the United States.



South Fremont High is one of nine schools in the district.

Not enough money—or people

Fremont County's core challenge stems from a limited IT budget that restricts computer access and keeps students one upgrade away from the latest computing technology. Compounding the problem for District 215 is a limited staff that must support and maintain systems spread out over a large geographic area.

"Being a rural Idaho district, we don't have a lot of funding and we have a lot of computers that we're trying to upgrade," said Tracy Smith, director of technology for Fremont County Joint School District 215.

Like most school technology directors, Smith wanted to give students more access to new technology but could only buy new computers when the budget permitted. Unfortunately, his budget only allowed for a few additional computers every year since most of the budget was used to replace older computers no longer practical to keep in service.

"With our budget it would have taken us years to replace close to the 240 computers we needed across the district," said Smith. This meant that not only would students be working with older technology, but the computer-to-student ratio would not improve over time. Smith was challenged to find a better, more cost-effective and practical solution to meet his technology goals.

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TRACY SMITH,
DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY FOR
FREMONT JOINT COUNTY
SCHOOL DISTRICT

A recommendation from a colleague

While attending a regional technology meeting, Smith heard about the NComputing solution from a colleague at another school. Based on the endorsement of his colleague and intrigued by its potential, he ordered an NComputing X-series kit for evaluation, with the promise that if he was not satisfied, he could return it for a refund.

Smith deployed it in one of the school computer labs. The X-series allowed Smith to harness the unused power of his PCs by efficiently sharing them among multiple students. Soon after the first evaluation, Smith ordered more X-series and began reallocating his PCs to be shared in the classrooms so more students would have access to modern computing resources.

By using the X-series, Smith lowered his per-seat computing cost, allowing him to put more seats in each classroom. The X-series system also relieved any concerns about overloading electrical circuits in the classrooms, since it uses far less electricity than a standard PC.

A definite recommendation

“We were able to deploy more than 200 computers at a fraction of the cost and that allowed us to go into every elementary school in our district and upgrade every classroom. Now we’ve got at least three more computers in every classroom that’s an up-to-date workstation,” said Smith.

“The installation was really slick,” continued Smith. “It was a matter of plugging in a PCI card in the computer, then plugging in a keyboard, mouse, and monitor at each station. Then we installed the software, and a few clicks later, we were up and running.”

In addition to reducing his acquisition costs, Smith and his staff have reduced the amount of time spent on maintaining computers and deploying software.

Another benefit that no one expected was making it easier for students to adhere to the district’s technology acceptable-use policy, specifically the part which states that a student will “...not load any program onto any computer without the permission of the teacher or a network administrator.” Because most students don’t have direct access to the shared PC, it is difficult for students to load software without the teacher’s approval.

Is Smith happy with the overall results?

“We will definitely buy more in the future, and I would definitely recommend NComputing products to other school districts,” he concluded. “It’s a great way to get quality workstations to more students at a low price.”

