Handheld Computers: A Boon for Principals

As I reflect on my many years as an elementary school principal, I realize how much more effective I would have been if I had owned a wireless handheld computer. This relatively new technology can provide considerable assistance to today’s principals and recent advancements have increased its functions and capacity.

Handheld computers are inexpensive mobile computing devices that have outgrown their description as Personal Digital Assistants. Handhelds have evolved into sophisticated computers with expandable data storage and exceptional capabilities for improving communication, security, discipline, and management of data files, while providing stress relief for overworked principals.

**Speeding Communication**

At costs ranging from $200 to $400, handheld computers are affordable enough to distribute a number of them to administrators and teachers, who can use them to check e-mail, beam information to each other, interface with stationary computers, and record information in real time. Handhelds are also available with built-in or attachable keyboards, voice recorders, and user-sensitive writing screens. Several models have built-in cameras or camera attachments, giving principals the ability to provide documentation should problems occur and a powerful tool for reinforcing positive behavior.

One of the latest developments in handheld computer technology is the hybrid smartphone, which combines a cell phone and a handheld computer. Smartphones sell for around $600 and represent a significant improvement in communication by putting two highly effective tools into a single handheld product.

**A Tool for Discipline and Security**

There is a variety of inexpensive and easy-to-use software for handheld computers that can help a principal access and download a host of databases. No longer do administrators have to ask stray students where they are supposed to be. Student schedules, room assignments, discipline records, medical notations, and home contact information—even photographs—are instantly available in the most remote part of the building at the touch of a button.

Handheld computers also provide a mobile station for storing security information in the event of an emergency. During a recent emergency drill in our school district, I watched a principal use her handheld to check emergency procedures and phone numbers in the parking lot of her school. She had a database listing all of her staff, students, and their contact information.

Precautions should always be taken when confidential information is added to a handheld database. Such information should be added on a need-to-know basis only and school districts should develop policies for managing data on handheld computers that meet both legal guidelines and common-sense standards.

**Managing the Databases**

One of the greatest advancements in handheld computers over the last couple of years has been the increase and improvement of available software. Downloading, managing, and accessing data for thousands of students is easy and inexpensive. I use a software program to maintain a secure database of student information for over 18,000 students and 2,500 teachers in my handheld computer. Software to manage school inventories, maintain instructional records, conduct classroom observations, research the Internet, provide access to thousands of books, and interface with a myriad of electronic equipment is also available. Most of this software costs less than $100, and in some cases it’s free.

**They Can Relieve Stress, Too**

I keep a couple of game cards to use in the expandable memory slot of my handheld because I enjoy chess and some of the less demanding games they provide. Today’s handheld computer offers a variety of diversionary options, including a voice recorder, MP3 player, stopwatch, game board, and many other devices, both useful and playful.

**Are You Ready for Handhelds?**

Handheld computers fall into two basic categories: those that function with the Palm operating system and those that use a Windows-based operating system. Currently, there is more administrative and instructional software for educational purposes on the Palm system, but there appears to be more equipment options with the Windows-based system. Because handheld computers using different systems cannot communicate with each other, you should avoid mixing them.

Whichever system you select, handheld computers are relatively easy to use and require only an hour or so of training, followed by updates on a regular basis.

Before investing in a handheld computer, you should:

- Research whatever you can find about handhelds;
- Test different models;
- Arrange for training after purchase, and at intervals afterwards;
- Plan to share information with other users, and to stay current on rapid changes and upgrades.

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