Getting the Most from IT

Keeping the district's network and applications up and running efficiently is critical to success.

By Rich Kaestner

Most school district budgets are still below 2008 levels; however, the increasing demand for technology devices and networking infrastructure has not abated. With the growing need to have access to the district's information technology (IT) resources, including servers and networks, internally and from outside district "walls," keeping the network and applications up and running 24/7 is crucial.

Enhanced staff and student productivity requires reliable computing infrastructure and professional support staff. Contributing to that growing demand for access to IT resources is the proliferation of computers, tablets, and smartphones; the need for private, secure student access; and the ever-increasing need for Internet access for instructional resources and online assessment.

The Role of the IT Department

The effectiveness of IT in your district depends on how you and others view the IT department. The chief technology officer (CTO) is in a unique position to understand and enhance processes that cross organizational silos, and he or she should be considered a team player who provides support for productivity and learning.

In a small district where the CTO focuses more on the technical side of technology than the education side, a bit of coaching may be required to get the CTO

to consider the big picture—the role of technology in instruction and assessment—and to contribute resources and ideas at the level necessary to achieve the district's goals. In larger districts, the CTO may already be immersed in the instruction side of technology use.

Regardless of which primary role the district CTO plays or who supervises that position directly, the CTO must be included in district-wide discussions about instructional *and* business issues and must be encouraged to contribute to solutions. School technology leaders should meet with department heads—administrative and instructional—to discuss how the departments use technology; whether they would be able to get along with cuts in hardware, applications, and support; and how technology could be used to further leverage staff productivity and improve student results. Such discussions build relationships and lay the groundwork for future collaboration.

Technology initiatives that are perceived as providing little or no value to the district cause others to view IT as a cost center rather than as an integral part of district operations. That's why district leaders must recognize the importance of justifying IT initiatives. Too often, new projects are authorized without closely considering the return on investment (ROI); however, in these times of limited funding, it is important to determine the value of a proposed investment before committing large expenditures.

For school districts, projects focused on saving money, time, or both can be evaluated using classic ROI calculations. Projects focused on enhancing student learning or other nonmonetary district objectives need to be measured for their anticipated qualitative benefits, or the value of investment (VOI).

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The Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) developed an initiative to help school system leaders determine costs and benefits for proposed projects. Information on the value of investment, along with tools to evaluate proposed project costs and benefits, is available on CoSN's SmartIT website (www.cosn.org/smartit).

Efficient Use of Technology

IT is a vehicle to enhance district-wide productivity, so it is important to determine whether the district's IT organization and infrastructure are operating efficiently from an IT department viewpoint and from a more holistic district-wide perspective.

Tips for IT Department Efficiencies

- Standardize on cloud-based email.
- Save energy with server consolidation and virtualization and end-user management tools.
- Consolidate networks with convergence of different networks.
- Investigate Voice over IP to reduce telephone bills.
- Replace old computers and reduce the number of operating systems supported.
- Use IT asset management to track computers and application usage.
- Use self-service for data entry and go paperless where possible.
- Implement centralized user support tools and centralized user computer software upgrades.
- Evaluate the purchase of spares versus extended warranties.
- Consider and evaluate open-source software alternatives.
- Leverage volume purchasing with vendors through multidistrict contracts.
- Restructure service contracts; negotiate lower vendor maintenance charges.
- Consider leasing or purchasing refurbished equipment, if necessary, to replace old technology.
- Discard personal printers; consolidate print-copy center devices to multifunction.

When budgets are tight, district leaders may put off upgrading computers or implementing projects that have solid ROIs. They may decrease the IT staff. Such decisions may provide some initial help in creating a balanced budget, but the ramifications of reduced computing reliability, reduced support responsiveness, and the loss of future savings should be considered.

The IT department can't possibly develop or maintain a positive image with unhappy users. Running an IT operation that is too lean not only slows project implementation but also causes schools to create ad hoc, informal support organizations that are unofficially staffed by teachers and other professionals who are not trained in computer and network support.

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There is always room for improvement, and CoSN's *SmartIT Leadership Guide* provides some great tips for supporting improved IT efficiencies and effectiveness.

From an IT efficiency perspective, most IT departments have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in

others. A benchmarking tool that is gaining popularity in school districts is key performance indicators. That tool allows officials to compare specific departmental performance indicators—such as IT budgets and responsiveness—with those in other comparable districts. Comparing those measurements with similar districts, and internally tracking them over time, can provide valuable data to assess districts' operational systems and to inform decision making.

Funding

According to a recent CoSN K–12 IT leadership survey (www.cosn.org/focus-areas/it-management/it-leadership-survey), budget constraints and lack of resources are top CTO concerns; 47% of the CTOs who responded reported that budgets are not adequate to meet school board expectations. Without adequate funding, school districts have particular difficulty upgrading infrastructure or taking on major new initiatives while continuing to support existing operations. In those situations, it pays to look at potential funding sources outside the technology budget—both within and outside the district. Departments that benefit from the implementation of technology should help pay for the implementation and ongoing costs of the initiative.

IT budgets can be supplemented in other ways, beyond shuffling internal funds, especially when looking to enhance infrastructure or to implement new major initiatives. The following are some popular external sources:

- Special education
- Community donations
- E-Rate
- Rebudgeting
- Fundraisers
- Grants
- Technology budget.

Of particular note is E-Rate, a significant source of funding for wireless and broadband communications. E-Rate is being revamped to support modern communications networking needs for schools, and additional funding has been proposed. Be sure to keep up with the latest developments.

Technology can greatly enhance the productivity of staff and students, support student learning, and promote school–community relations, but it must also be effective and reliable. Maybe it's time you took your CTO to lunch.

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