

## All Netbooks Are NOT Created Equal

By Edward S. Lee

When you and your school administration have determined that classroom Netbooks will be part of your learning environment, there are several factors to consider prior to making a decision on which Netbooks to purchase.

If your school has a "one laptop per student" goal, the numbers can add up very quickly and make this a major purchase. For this reason, you and your staff will require key information that will feed into your decision. Netbooks will be put into service for a number of years, so making the right choice now will help to ensure that your school will get the most out of its investment.

There is no way to say that there is one perfect Netbook that will satisfy the requirements for all school districts. Key requirements may differ from one school district to another. This can be especially challenging in the Chicago area due to the way that our school districts have been established over time. Our school districts are very fragmented as compared to other metropolitan areas and this has a direct effect on decision making. You will never see this kind of decision made at regional level, which may be common in other states outside of Illinois. In the end the pricing per unit will likely carry the most weight when making this decision. However, it is highly recommended that other factors are considered.

For example, what other technology based tools are currently in use at your schools and will they be compatible with the specifications of the chosen Netbook? If you encounter problems (we are talking about technology here which is inherently imperfect) how will the hardware be supported and who will be there to help?

### Key Points to Consider

Although there are many differences between Netbooks, there are several things that many have in common. The two most notable are:

- Processor: Regardless of brand, most Netbooks will likely have the same processor (Intel's Atom). Clock speeds will vary, but most quality manufacturers will utilize the Atom. There are a few other options out there in terms of processors, but for now, be sure that your chosen system(s) have the Intel processors.
- No optical drive (CD or DVD): Netbooks are designed to be compact. So much so that the optical drives that are common to most other computers are not a feature on Netbooks. If you must have an optical drive, consider a traditionally sized laptop computer.
- Small form factor: The compact size of Netbooks make for great portability and are perfect for classroom use, up through about the Junior High level. Kid's hands start to grow larger in this timeframe and full sized laptops may be a better choice for High School and beyond. This can also be a judgment call since I know many adults that use Netbooks on a day-to-day basis, portability outweighing keyboard size.

There are several other important factors to consider in your Netbooks:

- **Durability:** Students can be especially rough on computers. There are several "ruggedized" and even water resistant designs that take this additional (ab)use in mind.
- **Battery life:** Netbooks typically come with batteries that have either four or six cells. More cells equals longer battery life. A four cell battery equates to approximately five hours of battery life and a six cell battery will give approximately eight hours.
- **Imaging (computer cloning) services:** If you are outfitting a large class or your entire school, this type of service is almost a necessity. It will save your technical staff literally hours of time that would be spent if they were to manually install your OS and standard software to each individual PC. Some vendors will charge up to \$40 per PC while others actually offer this service free of charge.
- **Included software:** There may be differences with regard to what is offered as standard depending on the vendor that you work with. Take a close look at what's included as you shop and compare everything side by side. A "bundled" software scenario could save you a significant amount of money if you get something for "free" that you originally planned to purchase separately.
- **Support:** Who will be there when there's a problem? We are talking about computers after all. We've all probably experienced one form of computer problem or another. Be sure that you ask your Netbook vendor how support will be handled once your purchase is made. Some may handle service themselves and others may outsource. Can you guess which scenario will be less of a headache?