

NetSupport School (v10.5)

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When asked to review classroom monitoring software, NetSupport School, I was a little hesitant. This was not because I doubted its success or suitability for the classroom, but because I was having a mental battle about the benefits of controlling an entire class through a PC system. Would it mean there was no trust in the pupils? Was it not a bit totalitarian and Orwellian in its controlling state? Well, my fears were quickly brushed aside as I realised my preconceived ideas were unfounded and there was so much more to this exciting piece of kit.

NetSupport

NetSupport School is the creation of NetSupport Software, a company that has been creating classroom management systems for over 20 years. It is currently available in over 60 countries and supports more than 7 million desktops, laptops, servers and mobile devices.

Features

Where to start?! After being continually developed for over 15 years, NetSupport School has a whole host of easy to access features from three perspectives; pupils, teachers and technicians. The premise behind NetSupport School is that it allows teachers to retain control of their lessons whilst teaching any subject through the use of ICT. Each feature can be utilised for the whole class, a portion of the class or an individual pupil, but for ease of explanation, we will assume the teacher is monitoring the class as a whole.

The system takes minutes to install and is incredibly user friendly. Once the teacher logs in, they are presented with a dashboard which displays all the logged in computers labelled as pupil names. From here, the teacher can implement any one of numerous features across the class. Initially, you are shown thumbnails of every computer's screen, ensuring each pupil is undertaking the activity asked by the teacher. You can lock every mouse and keyboard to pause the lesson whilst you talk about the subject or explain something in further details. In a click of a button, files can be transferred to every pupil's workstation – no longer is the class left to search the network folder for that Geography worksheet!

But the real strength in NetSupport School is the web and application control facilities.

There are two trains of thought when it comes to web access in schools – the first being that of the 'blocker', website access should be restricted to Google and BBC etc, with Hotmail, Facebook et al banned. The only issue here is that of Proxy Bypassing the websites. The second school of thought is that of the 'opener', website access should be unrestricted and we should give the pupils the responsibility to use the internet safely and in accordance with the lesson. A nice thought, but without some kind of monitoring software, how can you as teachers ensure you are keeping the pupils as safe as possible and on track with the lesson plan rather than posting messages onto each others' Facebook walls?

This is where NetSupport School comes into play. As a teacher using the software, you no longer have to gain permission from the ICT Technician to unblock a website three days prior to your lesson. You can block and unblock whichever websites you require – I am sure we can all think of examples when a recent news story would have been great to include into your lesson plan, but unfortunately it is very tricky to gain access onto that particular website. This does not take any responsibilities away from the technician however, as they have their own administrative logins with added control and monitoring facilities. So, with this ‘on the fly’ restricting and unrestricting, the system can cater for both schools of thought meaning teachers can allow open access or only allow viewing of one or two websites as required.

We all know feedback from pupils is invaluable but often gathering it can be tricky. With NetSupport School teachers can send a multiple choice survey around the class and be presented with instant feedback to gauge the level of understanding or general consensus between the students. Additionally, a timed test can be created through the testing console to be administered at a time to suit. This takes the form of a multiple choice quiz with ‘fill in the blanks’, ‘drag and drop’ or ‘select the correct answers’ style questions. The real time reporting means as a teacher you can see exactly where each student is in the test, which answers are correct / incorrect, and generate reports for the success of the lesson. Whilst immediate reporting saves a lot of time, I wanted to see just how long these tests take to create, and you will be glad to know I managed to make one in the testing console in the same amount of time as it would take to create one in MS Word.

An exciting new feature for v10.5 is the language lab. NetSupport have worked tirelessly on creating a full service sound recording and assessment tool for NetSupport School. Whether your emphasis on audio learning is for teaching foreign languages or for listening to lesson-related sound bites, NetSupport School’s real-time audio monitoring component ensures teachers know instantly what the student is listening to and what is being said through their microphone.

The thumbnail view of the entire class makes it simple to identify which machines have audio activity, and with one click the teacher can listen in to the sound being played through the computer. The system, in addition to providing a 2-way chat facility with individual students, automatically records the previous minute of audio so if you missed something vital, you can quickly rewind and listen back.

There are a whole host of other features including a journal for lesson notes and homework guidelines, a live chat room resource, a whiteboard integration module and a treasure chest which acts as a shortcut folder for the students. Teachers can block printers or set thresholds on the number of pages to be printed and automatically highlight target and inappropriate words typed into each keyboard.

The Teacher’s Perspective

Derek Ridings is a Technical Manager at Salford Learning Centre. He purchased NetSupport School approximately four years ago and shares his thoughts on the system.

‘Installation of NetSupport Schools is incredibly straightforward. The software includes a deployment tool which makes setting up the system very easy. In addition to this, the comprehensive manual is well written and acts as an excellent guide should you seek further knowledge about the product.’

'We have a range of clientele at Salford Learning Centre – from primary and secondary school teachers, through to outside trainers and local authority staff. It was important to us that every user could quickly grasp the technology and utilise the most relevant features to their needs. With NetSupport School, every class or group has predefined rules – which websites are restricted, which files to allow access to etc. and when each group logs into the system, their rules are instantly loaded.'

'Prior to purchasing NetSupport School, we used another product for monitoring PC usage, although the system was not very user-friendly and seemed to take an age to undertake any tasks you required of it. We trialled out NetSupport School and have never looked back. Since purchasing it, two large local secondary schools, one local primary school and a number of specialist centres have bought it since trying out our setup.'

Ease of Setup: 5

Ease of Use: 5

Fit for Purpose: 5

Value for Money: 5

Technicians

With all these added features and the ability for the teacher to block and unblock sites as they please, is NetSupport School not taking away the responsibilities of the ICT Technician? Well, no. In fact, the technicians have even greater control of the system and can determine set parameters and functions across the school.

Using the system, Technicians can monitor all computers across the school in a single view, look specifically into individual computer internet and application usage, transfer files and folders, generate hardware and software inventory summaries, power on and power off computers, conduct live chats with one or multiple teachers or students, remote control any computer and much more! In effect, NetSupport School can actually make the ICT Technician's job simpler without taking away any of their responsibilities.

Future

As NetSupport School is an ongoing development, there are many more features planned for the near future, but I am pleased to say, the system will retain its simple layout and easy navigation features.

Pricing

NetSupport School is licensed per machine – the cost decreases in relation to the more licenses you buy – for example the retail cost per machine if you were to buy 100 licenses is £21.86. *'The initial outlay is obviously a considered purchase, but the system is well worth every penny. The team over in Peterborough are incredibly friendly and open to future improvements, provide lots of support and ensure the annual renewal price is kept low.'*

Final Thoughts

Before I began this review I was very dubious about the whole classroom control world, however, since seeing NetSupport School in action and considering the flexibility it gives to teachers, I am hugely impressed. The system really bends around the needs of those that administer it and can

really help to teach the correct use of ICT within the classroom.