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Are we getting it?

As you may have heard, on October 26th, Apple released its new operating system, OS 10.5, nicknamed Leopard.

Currently, our Mac Mini labs run OS 10.4 as well as some other individual machines around the District, particularly in our school offices and LMC offices. Our indigo iMacs that fill many of our classrooms, other labs, and workstations in our LMC are running Mac OS 10.3. Most of those computers will not run a higher operating system very effectively or at all.

Just to be clear, we, like most big organizations, will not be moving directly to a new operating system. The reasons for this include: Bugs and Flaws, Consistency for Help and Support, Lack of Software Support, Financial Concerns, and Human Costs.

The other side of this document explains each of these reasons in detail. While School District 21 will not be serving as an early adopter for Mac OS 10.5, it is likely only a matter of time before our machines are using this operating system.

10.5--The Long Pause; Here's Why

-Bugs and Flaws--In spite of all the testing an operating system undergoes, mistakes and flaws are typically discovered in new software and operating systems. When an operating system is first released, there are usually a number of updates and patches that are created for it very quickly to solve these problems. At home, one is less likely to encounter these problems. In an organization our size, these are risks and potential headaches not worth encountering, so it is wise to wait until they have been resolved.

-Consistency for Help & Support--As difficult a job as it is to support computer hardware and software, it is made far more difficult when machines are not standardized. Running multiple operating systems unnecessarily creates significant obstacles for technical staff and is likely to lead to increased downtime due to lack of knowledge and expertise and increase complexity. The more similar the machines look and function, the more likely it is that our support team will keep them running smoothly. The only machines that can be upgraded are the Mac Minis and these individual machines floating around out there. If we did upgrade these machines new, we would be in a situation in which we continue to rely on all of the 10.3 machines and would also be using 10.5 machines, a difference of two operating systems. Not only might products work differently on one or the other, which would impact productivity for students and staff, but some software may not work at all on one or another. This presents a very large gap given the number of 10.3 computers and the number of potential 10.5 computers.

-Lack of Software Support--When a new operating system is released, the software that runs on that operating system must often be updated as well. For example, PowerSchool has asked its users NOT to update to 10.5 until it can certify its product's ability to work within this environment in a real world setting. Again, this is an area where it is unnecessary to voluntarily serve as an uncompensated guinea pig.

-Financial Concerns--We do participate in a program through Apple that allows us to upgrade to new operating systems after they are released on our most up-to-date current computers. This provides a cost savings for us. Nevertheless, there are significant costs that are likely to be incurred. These include: labor, software upgrades, upgrades to peripherals, and the cost of downtime during which the upgrades are taking place.

-Human Costs--There are two major categories of human costs to consider. First, we have undertaken a great deal of work to get more comfortable on our computers in recent years already for many District 21 staff members with our increased use of PowerGrade and PowerSchool, as well as the Microsoft Office suite of programs, iLife applications, and the middle school assessment databases. Introducing a new operating system, in the middle of the year without time for support and training on this, too, may serve as a tipping point to computer frustration and decreased productivity. Additionally, there is tremendous cost to actually deploying the new operating system. Typically, we would estimate a minimum of 8-10 hours of work for a team of two to complete a single lab of 30 computers. In other words, if our two field engineers ONLY worked on operating system upgrades, it would realistically take almost four weeks of school to complete. Imagine how many tickets would have gone unresolved!?! (Answer: Approximately 150 tickets!)

So, while I'm sure that some of our techno-teachers and staff members would love to get their hands on Apple OS 10.5, we're going to continue using 10.4 for the remainder of this school year. We will develop a plan, which will include test computers and which will take into account the experiences of other school districts. We will communicate the plan for transitioning to OS 10.5, and then, we will (hopefully!) successfully execute the plan. In the meantime, thanks for your enthusiasm!
