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Easy access at Rangi Ruru Girls' School

Rangi Ruru Girls' school keeps apace with the demands of its tech-savvy students

Overview

Key points

- School networks will have to open themselves increasingly to a range of student-owned access devices
- Storage system performance will become a pressing issue as students produce larger volumes of multimedia content
- Virtualisation is increasingly an alternative to buying more hardware, and offers system administration advantages

Rangi Ruru in Christchurch is one of New Zealand's highest performing schools. As a private school on a tight budget, the school must be both prudent and innovative in its approach with technology. With a school community of over 800 students and staff the speed, reliability and flexibility of the school network is paramount.

The school has more than 350 PCs and Apple Mac desktop computers, and as many as 150 of the school's students and staff carry a mix of their own laptops, netbooks, iPhones and iPod Touch mobile devices. All these users need to connect, collaborate and store their work using the school network.

The mission of IT services manager Barry Baughan, with supplier Cyclone Computers, is to support them all. "The device is evolving and we just make sure they can plug into the school's wireless network with whatever they turn up with," says Baughan.

"We're basically becoming a provider of services for the girls in the sense that when they hook up to the network they can access their learning resources, email, collaboration tools and the internet."

If that sounds a bravely liberal approach to network access, Baughan says the school does take the necessary precautions. "Of course all the appropriate filters are in place for the internet, but we just want our students to have access to the stuff they need in the way they want it."

Student laptops have the school's antivirus software installed before being able to connect, but Apple's handhelds, happily, have so far been immune to viruses.

Just as the diverse range of access devices makes its demands on Rangi Ruru's IT infrastructure, so does the form the content takes. "Students are very visual — they like to present documents as video, animations or PowerPoints — so there's huge demand on the school in terms of storing their stuff," Baughan says.

"That's where IBM comes in, with the server and storage solutions Cyclone has been doing for us. It's effectively the foundation for everything that goes on around here."



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The setup, based on an IBM System x3650 and DS3400 Storage System, allows Baughan to assign the available 2 terabytes of disk space as required by different classes. “If one year level gets busy we’re able on the fly to allocate more storage to meet requirements — that’s the magic of the system.”

The school’s philosophy is to accommodate the student whose multimedia project unexpectedly balloons to 200 gigabytes in size, rather than stifle creative endeavours. And the key, says Baughan, is the flexibility of IBM’s Storage Manager software. “In the good old days the challenge for schools was getting enough server processor power but now the issue is how much reliable, high-end storage you can provide.

“With over 300 workstations connecting, it has to be reliable, fast and flexible.”

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— Barry Baughan, IT services manager, Rangī Ruru Girls’ School

Rangī Ruru’s storage solution, which Cyclone put in place in 2009, is also readily expandable. “At the moment we have two arrays but we can keep adding disks as the need arises — it’s just a matter of stacking more drives into the one unit.”

On the server side, the school is eagerly adopting virtualisation, both as an alternative to buying ever more hardware and for the system administration advantages that go with it. “When rearranging servers, you’re not talking about rebuilding hardware any more, but about moving system images.”

Baughan gets a lot of value from the relationship with Cyclone, saying the supplier has the expertise to offer sound advice. “We trust Cyclone in terms of the investments we make; we know we’re making informed decisions, which is important.”

What Rangī Ruru has in common with Aotea College is an appreciation of the merits of leasing. However, in the private school’s case the appeal is less to do with avoiding price shocks than staying up with technology.

“It’s a commitment from the board to make sure the technology is as current and up to date as it can be.”

The other great thing about renting back-end computer systems, Baughan says, is that you can never make a purchasing mistake. “Whatever you buy, whether it turns out to be a technology dead end or not have the required headroom, will be upgraded in three years anyway.”

Without that concern, he can get on with planning the school’s next major IT project, which is to equip a new media centre. “That will let students professionally create video content.”

It will put even more demand on the school’s storage system. But Baughan has no qualms about its capacity to cope.

“The way the school is increasingly working — everyone creating audio and video content — is one of the main reasons for providing flexible back-end storage. It’s so we are able to do this stuff.”

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