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Microsoft Enters K-12 Desktop Virtualization Market with MultiPoint Server

By Dian Schaffhauser 02/24/10

Microsoft has joined the desktop virtualization fray with the launch of Windows MultiPoint Server 2010, an application that allows multiple users to access their own computer sessions at the same time through a shared computer. Each user has a monitor, keyboard, and USB mouse. The company said it expects the new program to appeal to budegt-conscious educational customers, particularly schools and libraries.

MultiPoint was first shown in fall 2009, when company demonstrated 16 monitors, each playing 720p high-definition video from a single PC with an Intel Core i7 processor.

"Shared resource computing can multiply the number of student workstations available to schools, delivering more value while staying within the same budget," said Bill Rust, research director at Gartner. "Teachers can better align computing resources with instructional strategies while deploying fewer fully configured computers and reducing workstation support liabilities."

"Implementation was a breeze," said Dave Moon, technology coordinator at Sultan School District in Sultan, WA. "It was much simpler than we thought it would be. It's literally just setting up the server, running USB cables to each of the breakout boxes, hooking up the monitor, keyboard, and mouse to it, and turning it on. It literally took us 12 minute to have eight workstations up, ready to turn on the box."

Paraeducator June Farwell at Sultan Elementary School noticed that having fewer computers running in the classroom helped student learning. "We have a lot less machines running and therefore it's much quieter and much easier for students to focus and concentrate."

HP was the first original equipment manufacturer to announce support for the new server, which is based on Windows 2008. The company recently made available its HP MultiSeat t100 Thin Client, a user device, as well as the HP Compaq MultiSeat ms6000 Desktop, which can support up to 10 users when running MultiPoint Server 2010.

This particular segment of computing already has several well known offerings, including systems from NComputing and Wyse. However, both competitors have announced offerings that work with the new software from Microsoft.

For example, as a test, Rheem Elementary School in Moraga, CA set up a lab based on Windows MultiPoint Server with NComputing vSpace software and U170 clients.

"We researched many virtual desktops over the past year," said Courtney Guinn, director of Instructional Technology. "We were impressed by the simplicity of the NComputing and Windows MultiPoint Server solution and the fact that it required no new inftastructure."

"The thing that kills us over time is that PCs have to be replaced every four years or so. So even if we get a good budget one year in 10, it creates an obligation that we can't afford to keep up with," added Guy Seltzer, district network adminstrator. 2By sharing PCs with Windows MultiPoint Server and NComputing, we've drastically reduced the amount of money we need to keep up."

Wyse introduced the E01 Zero Client, a device specifically designed to work with Windows MultiPoint Server 2010 to make Windows 7 available on the user machines. Teachers connect the E01 devices to the PC running Windows MultiPoint Server 2010 via USB cables to get the Windows 7 system is up and running.

"We've looked at other solutions, but have always been concerned about sharing a single Windows license across multiple users." said Sean Colt, IT director at Belmont-Redwood shores School District in Belmont, CA. "The Wyse E01 Zero Client with Windows MultiPoint Server 2010 provides us with a reliable, efficient and economical solution to our computing needs, while legitimizing our software licenses."

Microsoft said it has also reached agreement with DisplayLink, ThinGlobal, and Tritton Technologies to develop additional MultiPoint Server hardware.

On the software side, NetSupport have said they'll be developing applications that extend the MultiPoint platform to provide classtoom management and other education-focused technology. Microsoft has released the MultiPoint Mouse Software Development Kit, a free SDK that enables devlopers to create interactive applications that allow multiple users to use their own mouse on a single PC display.

"With Windows MultiPoint Server, we can offer more computer access to more students, even on our tight technology budget," said Cary Petersen, executive director of IT at Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, KY. "Teachers can easily distribute tailored curricula to individual students and help them progress at their own level and pace. Students can develop 21st-century skills that will help them with their school projects and prepare them for the next level of schooling and for jobs in the future. Besides, the system is easy to set up and maintain, meaning less work for our IT department."