

Open Source Software for Schools

Open Source software, such as the Linux operating system, is free in terms of cost and in terms of development. We are free to adapt the work of others for use in our schools. This kind of freedom produces better software and makes Linux the right choice for schools and agencies concerned with the ethical use of public funds.

Projects such as the *K-12 Linux Terminal Server Project* (www.k12ltsp.org), Tux4Kids (www.tux4kids.com) and *Schoolforge* (www.schoolforge.net) are made of volunteers from around the world that advocate, use, and develop open resources for primary and secondary education.

There are roughly four billion people on the earth who are too poor to have independent access to any form of computer technology. However, a super majority of the world's economy is driven by information technology and computer skills are a key ingredient to personal growth.

For a number of reasons including acquisition costs, many people do not have access to use computers. We don't need to point to the extremes to understand this. We haven't to go to the villages in Sierra Leone, the forests of Uganda, or a metropolis of Zambia. Although I've tried to address technology in Africa as well. We can see the technology divide even in our own cities.

At the core of this great divide that often impacts our schools and children is the cost basis of computer hardware and software. Fortunately, hardware costs today have declined greatly. At last, it is the cost of software that remains inhibitive.

Put yourself in the shoes of a person of authority ready to help your school create a simple computer lab. You have no great ambitions, simply a desire to allow your school kids to access computers. These are not easy shoes to wear, I know.

You begin by asking for donations of used computers. There are a great number of used computers that today simply end up being dumped in trash cans. So it's viable to ask individuals and companies to donate these old machines. Thanks to generous hearts, your organization receives some systems.

But even with the used computers being donated, with all shipping costs included, assuming every system arrives without any breakage, you still have plenty of work to do. Believe me, you can't just take a dozen used computers and plug them in and find them useful.

The government of Zambia was given stern warning to crack down on piracy by Microsoft. We're talking about the nation of Zambia in Africa. One of the world's poor nations, and Microsoft is asking them to cough up money for software licenses.

Read more of Mark Rais' article at:

<http://www.reallylinux.com/docs/linuxclassroom.shtml>

See cases studies of Linux in schools:

<http://www.k12ltsp.org/casestudy.html>

Learn about your local Linux user groups: www.lugod.org www.saclug.org www.roselug.org



Elementary school children using Open Source software at a school in Belgium.

Requiring Microsoft in Schools; A Counter-point

Many argue that schools should teach Microsoft products because they are what is used in business. But by the time the kids get out of school and into business, the Microsoft tools they used in school will no longer be current. This is also like a car repair class only teaching how to fix Fords. However, there's a bigger paradigm shift going on, which is being missed by the people who say kids should use Windows because that's what businesses use.

In ten years the software landscape will probably look quite different from today, as Open Source Software continues to ascend at the expense of proprietary software, perhaps glacially but nevertheless inevitably. The Internet makes this all possible.

Kids are quite familiar with downloading such things as music (as are a fair number of adults). However, there's a moral and legal impediment in that some/much/most of the music available on-line wasn't intended by its creators to be freely available. *Yet imagine if it were.* People would come up with all sorts of creative things if they had unlimited access to music files. Now substitute software for music, software that is *intended* to be freely shared, which people do re-combine to make new things.

Understanding how the Internet allows sharing and collaboration and connecting with others is what matters, and proprietary software like that of Microsoft only inhibits participating in that.

Choosing Windows over Linux is to choose yesterday's technology over tomorrow's.



Inexpensive "thin client" computers running Linux, designed for the developing world.

Photo credit: BBC News