

Australian school turns to open source to cut costs

When existing computing facilities were not meeting the growing need of students and teachers at the Lorien Novalis school in Dural, New South Wales, Australia students suggested that the school investigate open source software as a cost effective way of improving its computing power.

Now, Lorien Novalis has a network of more than 30 1.6GHz Pentium desktops between some 160 users. Most of the work in setting up the network, including laying down CAT 5 cable, crimping wires, and installing software, was done by the school's ICT (information and communications technology) manager, Stuart Rushton, and students.

The school's workstations operate on the Mandriva 2006 Operating System, and run free and open source software options including: Open Office for office applications; Mozilla Firefox for Web browsing; GIMP for image editing; and Evolution mail for sending and receiving e-mail.

At the core of the network is a simple Hewlett-Packard Co. ProLiant ML 110 server running Mandrake 10.1, NIS and NFS, and that connects to the Internet via a 1.5Mbps broadband connection.

Besides reducing costs for the school, Rushton expects Lorien Novalis' use of Open Source software to also have educational benefits for students, as students are able to look up the source code of any application that sparks their interest.

"We want the students to be able to see a computer as a wonderful piece of technology made by people, and not a sort of mystical, God-like thing," he said, speaking at linux.conf.au on Monday. "Kids are the most prolific producers of creative work, and open source offers opportunities for that."

Lorien Novalis' widespread use of Linux on desktops is unusual for an Australian school, Rushton said, attributing the ease with which the school migrated to Linux from its previous Macintosh systems to its status as an independent school.

"We are a non-systemic school, so when we decided to change to Linux, we just did it," he said.

But the decision may not be so easy for government-funded schools operating bureaucratically, according to Donna Benjamin, a member of Open Source Industry Australia and another speaker at linux.conf.au. Benjamin highlighted a bureaucratic reluctance in considering open source options, ascribing this to what she called Microsoft Corp.'s "Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt" (FUD) marketing strategy that, she said, creates lock-ins and dependencies.

According to Linux Australia member Janet Hawtin, the reliance of schools on proprietary software and the rules that govern them could be sending a message that is incongruent with learning and curiosity.

"The message that students and teachers are being taught is that sharing is bad and evil, and inquisitiveness is not encouraged either," she said. "That is not appropriate in an educational context."

Despite the success of Linux at Lorien Novalis, Rushton notes that there is no single solution that can satisfy an entire organization. In addition to its Linux desktops, the school also uses 14 Macs for administration and video editing, and two Windows machines for a library catalogue application.

"Every teacher is an influential end-user," he said. "As educators, we shouldn't be able to say, 'Linux good, everything else bad,' any more than other people say 'Microsoft good, everything else bad.'"

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