



School Hardware Solutions

In June, we asked readers to tell us their top picks for school hardware at eSchool News Online. More than 600 readers responded, and the results of our first-ever Readers' Choice Awards in School Hardware Solutions follow.

Because respondents can only be expected to choose products they are familiar with—and because some voters only have experience with one type of product—past Readers' Choice surveys on such topics as curriculum software and network management tools ran the risk of being more a reflection of the installed base in schools than a true survey of which product is best. To avoid this problem, we set up our survey a little differently this time.

Besides asking readers for their top picks in each of seven categories—desktop computers, laptop computers, handhelds, tablets, servers, switches, and storage devices—we also asked readers which products they have used or evaluated for use in their schools. By comparing the percentage of respondents who have used or

evaluated a particular product with the percentage who chose it as the best, readers will have a much more accurate gauge of which products their colleagues have enjoyed the greatest success with: The closer the correlation, the more valued the product.

(For our survey, we divided the percentage of readers who evaluated a company's products by the percentage who chose these as the best. The closer to "1" this figure is, the better the correlation.)

Just as revealing as the results of the survey are the reasons voters chose the products they did. With computers, as with cars, people tend to be quite loyal to particular companies or brand names. In some cases, this was a platform issue—Apple fans (and there still are many) strongly supported Macintosh products in our survey. But other readers said they saw very little difference among the various companies and product lines, and their decision came down to the quality of service they have experienced with a particular company and its solutions. (Company executives, take note: Building brand loyalty starts—and often ends—with customer service and support.)

Best desktop computer for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
Dell Inc.	36%	86%	2.39
Apple Computer	27%	41%	1.52
Hewlett-Packard	9%	53%	5.89
IBM	5%	12%	2.40
Gateway	4%	23%	5.75
Sony	3%	10%	3.33

Dell, the market leader in desktop computers, also placed No. 1 in our survey. More readers chose Dell computers than any other company's offerings, though Apple's eMac was the most highly regarded single model of computer for education, and Apple scored the best in our correlation index.

In choosing Dell, readers most often cited Dell's value, reliability, and outstanding service as reasons for their decision. "Dell has provided the best and most timely service during our association with them over the last five years," one reader wrote, while another indicated that "Dell has the best overall value."

Among readers who voted for Apple products, the keys to their selection were ease of use, more robust multimedia features, reliability, and less susceptibility to viruses. But it's clear from our survey that old perceptions die hard for some people: "Apple cares most about education ...," said one reader. "Most other companies don't support schools at all."

Many readers noted that different types of computers are best suited to different tasks. "Different machines have different strengths," one reader noted. "I like [Apple's] eMac for students and Dell computers for special-ed staff."

Outside of the "Big Five"—Dell, Apple, Hewlett-Packard (HP), IBM, and Gateway—Sony, which garnered 3 percent of the vote, won kudos for its ability to handle multimedia applications on the Windows platform, and several readers said they used custom-built, generic "white boxes" in their schools and were happy with the results.

Best notebook computer for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
Apple Computer	29%	44%	1.52
Dell Inc.	26%	72%	2.77
IBM	9%	28%	3.11
Toshiba	7%	22%	3.14
Hewlett-Packard	5%	16%	3.20
Gateway	4%	15%	3.75
Sony	3%	14%	4.67

Apple and its iBook narrowly bested Dell's array of notebook computers as our readers' top pick in this category. Durability, cost, and battery life were the most important factors for our readers, and the iBook scored well on all three.

Readers who chose Dell again cited the company's exemplary service, and one reader said the keyboard on Dell's Inspiron was easier to use. The Toshiba Satellite and Sony VAIO drew praise for their multimedia capabilities, and several readers voted for AlphaSmart's Dana, a Palm-driven computing device, though one reader noted that "Dana works best when students do not need the full features of a computer."

Best handheld computer for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
PalmOne	46%	86%	1.87
Hewlett-Packard	13%	40%	3.08
Sony	7%	19%	2.71
Dell Inc.	6%	16%	2.67
Casio	2%	8%	4.00

PalmOne and its variety of handheld computers were the runaway winners in this category. Many readers cited palmOne's Tungsten as the best handheld computer for educators and the company's Zire 71—with its digital photo capabilities—as the best fit for students.

HP's iPaq, which runs on the PocketPC platform, was our readers' second choice, though a few readers said they've had problems with the iPaq's docking station. Interestingly, the Sony Clie placed third in our survey, despite Sony's recent announcement that it would no longer manufacture the device.

The Clie has the "best options for the price," wrote one reader. "I am sorry to hear Sony is no longer making or supporting the Clie."

Best tablet computer for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
Hewlett-Packard	25%	54%	2.16
Gateway	13%	31%	2.38
Toshiba	11%	28%	2.55
Motion Computing	5%	9%	1.80
Acer America	3%	17%	5.67

Tablet PCs, which combine the functionality of a laptop computer and the simplicity of a spiral-bound notebook, are still so new to education that fewer than one-sixth of survey respondents have even evaluated them yet. Of those who have, some said they thought tablet PCs were still too expensive and fragile for use in schools. But those who disagree made HP's Compaq Tablet PC their top pick.

Though Motion Computing's M1300 and M1400 tablets aren't as well known to educators, they scored very well in our correlation index. Besides those appearing in the graphic, other tablets garnering votes included NEC's VersaLite and Viewsonic's V1250.

Best enterprise-level server for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
Dell Inc.	28%	53%	1.89
Apple Computer	24%	33%	1.38
Hewlett-Packard	15%	32%	2.13
IBM	6%	20%	3.33
Gateway	2%	10%	5.00

The results in this category mirrored those in the desktop computer class, with Dell, Apple, HP, IBM, and Gateway all placing in that order. Power, performance, and price were what drove the responses, and Dell's PowerEdge server nipped Apple's XServe in the overall voting (though Apple again scored slightly higher in our correlation index).

"In the three years we've had our Dell server, we had only to replace the CD-ROM drive," wrote one reader. "Dell also updated our firmware—without our asking! We are about to order a new Dell server." Another reader reported that Xserve's cost per user was lower and that "Apple servers will work with Windows machines, but Windows servers do not work well with Apples."

Best enterprise-level network switches for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
Cisco Systems	43%	66%	1.53
Hewlett-Packard	11%	18%	1.64
3Com Corp.	6%	26%	4.33
Dell Inc.	4%	12%	3.00
Nortel	3%	9%	3.00

Though Cisco's Catalyst switches were recognized by readers as the industry standard and thus placed No. 1 in our survey, HP's ProCurve family of switches scored nearly as well in our correlation index. One reader called the ProCurve line "a good switch at a great price" and noted that HP's product comes with a lifetime warranty for a fraction of the cost of Cisco's solution.

Besides those listed in the graphic, other companies receiving votes in this category included Alcatel, Amer.com, D-Link, Enterasys, Extreme Networks, and Foundry.

Best network attached storage (NAS) device for education

COMPANY	% READERS WHO CHOSE AS BEST	% READERS WHO EVALUATED	CORRELATION
Dell Inc.	19%	41%	2.16
Hewlett-Packard	8%	23%	2.87
IBM	6%	12%	2.00
EMC	6%	9%	1.50
lomega	5%	17%	3.40
Apple Computer	4%	4%	1.00

Dell's PowerVault won in the storage category, beating out HP's StorageWorks, IBM's TotalStorage Gateway 500, and products from storage specialists EMC Corp. and lomega. Apple's Xraid also garnered several votes and scored extremely well in our correlation index.

Though Xiotech Corp.'s Magnitude 3D only received one vote, the reader who cast it was effusive in his praise for the product. "After looking at several units, this product offered the most easy setup and management tools," he wrote. "And it's easy to add more storage to a drive or to add new units to the system. It has great expansion capabilities as we grow."