

# Demystifying Remote Access



By Grant Howe

**W**ith money tight, more and more districts are considering remote access as a way to reduce expenses and budget information technology costs more effectively. But what exactly is remote access and what's the best way for a district to implement it?

Remote access allows staff members to work with a hosted software application from any school campus without being tied to a specific physical location. Each school can access critical business applications directly from the hosted server, ultimately leading to increased productivity, more accurate data, and better collaboration across campuses.

For example, remote access to a financial management system allows school administrators to enter budgets directly into the district system or enter invoices or payments into the district's centralized accounting system, reducing time and the chance of transmission errors and freeing district staff from daily data entry tasks.

By combining infrastructure costs, schools can save a significant amount of overhead without sacrificing any resources for students.

Remote access  
can reduce expenses  
and increase  
productivity.

## How Remote Access Works

Most application providers today use a remote access protocol, such as Microsoft's Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) or Citrix's XenApp, to offer secure remote access with a reasonable amount of bandwidth.

A remote access protocol allows an organization to host an application on a remote server and transfer what amounts to screen shots back to the user. Once set up, staff members can work remotely with the hosted software solution from their laptop, classroom desktop, or home computer as though they were in the office.

A virtual private network (VPN) is another way to create remote access. With this method, the user creates a session with the VPN server, which is a secure "tunnel" directly into the network. Although secure, this technology option passes more data and, therefore, requires more bandwidth than a remote access protocol. It also requires savvy information technology (IT) staff to maintain the server hardware and security updates.

## Flavors of Remote Access

If your school has a solid IT department, with the skill sets necessary to manage an application server and keep it secure, you may be able to host your own solution. Locating the server and equipment you purchase in a remote data center that provides the network access, power, and sometimes firewall configuration is a great option for schools that have an established and experienced IT staff, but lack a secure data center, reliable power, or enough Internet bandwidth to host internally.

## If your hardware infrastructure is older, or needs replacement, consider hosting.

If your hardware infrastructure is older, or needs replacement, consider hosting. With hosting, vendors provide the equipment, including the power and bandwidth, for a fee. Generally, the vendor is responsible for keeping an organization's servers up and running and adhering to a service level agreement to maintain the server's operating system.

Although the vendor does not generally support any software that resides on the operating system, hosting is still a good opportunity to alleviate some of your IT staff's burden and possibly reduce costs.

Managed service takes hosting to the next level. Here, you get everything a hosting provider would normally supply, plus management of the common services needed to run your business application, including the database, Web server, and the remote access technology itself

## VALUE OF REMOTE ACCESS

- Lessening of considerable and possibly all IT burden
- Removal of complex hardware considerations and updates
- Partnering with someone who truly knows IT
- Security
- Compliance
- Disaster recovery
- Accessibility
- No more worries about backing up a server or your data
- Ability to focus on your true mission

(remote access protocol or VPN). Managed services are an ideal choice for schools that have few or inexperienced IT staff or are looking to reduce IT burdens. However, even with managed services, some IT staffing is required to run your application.

Application service providers (ASPs) pick up where managed service providers leave off. ASPs offer Web-enabled remote access to popular applications. They generally charge a monthly fee for access, and possibly a licensing fee for the application itself.

Partnering with an ASP generally eliminates the need for IT staffing for the particular application you wish to use, making it an attractive option for schools with few or no IT staffers. The drawback is that you must find an ASP that offers the application you want. For niche software, this can sometimes be an issue.

Software-as-a-service (SaaS) applications typically use a standard Web browser interface and are built to be exclusively sold by the software developer as SaaS. Although it is simple to begin using a SaaS product with no IT staff at all, the most significant drawback of SaaS is that the vendor owns your data. You can get a data export, but you cannot buy the software and run it yourself. To do that, you would need to transform and import the data to another package, so making the switch to another hosting model would incur high costs.

## Security and Compliance Considerations

Security is serious business. There is no quicker way to give your school district a "black eye" than to have a security breach that results in a loss of personal information. Before hosting your school's applications, you must consider general security best practices, such as using a properly configured firewall, virus protections, automated patching of operating systems, and security policies and procedures.

In addition to IT security considerations, your remote access solution may also need to satisfy compliance regulations, including the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard, the Health

Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or the Statement on Auditing Standards No. 70.

If executing a solid security plan using your school's existing resources is prohibitively expensive, then it may be a good idea to seek professional help.

## Getting More for Less

Hosting not only reduces overhead for both staff and infrastructure, it may also make accurate budgeting of IT costs more straightforward.

Many schools evaluate the purchase of a software solution based only on the cost at the time of purchase. However, the total cost of upgrades, maintenance, infrastructure, and IT staff resources can add up quickly. Licensing fees and maintenance and support costs are approximately the same. But over the first five years of ownership, hosting can save as much as 70% over on-premise solutions in infrastructure, staff, consulting, and implementation costs.

## Application service providers (ASPs) pick up where managed service providers leave off.

Partnering with a hosting service provider not only reduces total cost of ownership but can also simplify expense and cash flow budgeting, because you have regular, predictable payments. Equipment replacement and upgrades are included in most service agreements, so you will not have to absorb the cost of emergency server repairs.

## Evaluating Your Options

When evaluating remote access options, ask these questions:

- What application(s) do we need hosted?
- Do users need remote access when working from home or traveling?
- What type of compliance do we need? (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, etc.)
- How many personnel hours are spent each month maintaining servers, workstations, connectivity, software updates?
- What is our price tolerance for monthly hosting fees?

To further improve the success of your decision, avoid lowest-cost providers or vendors on the cutting edge of technology and read your service level agreement, looking for 99% plus uptime. Hosting providers should strive to understand your needs, not simply prescribe a solution they want to sell.

## REMOTE ACCESS VOCABULARY

**ASP (application service provider):** A business that not only manages the hosting but also provides the business application remotely using a remote access protocol or similar tool.

**Managed hosting:** Hosting services plus management of common server administrative tasks, but not specialized applications.

**Remote access protocol:** Software tool that allows you to connect to a remote server securely with a reasonable amount of bandwidth.

**SaaS (software as a service):** Business application that uses a standard Web browser interface to connect users with their data.

**SLA (service level agreement):** Legal document detailing what is included (or not included) with your services. Read it carefully!

**VPN (virtual private network):** A very secure and more bandwidth-intensive method to connect to your remote server.

## Value of Remote Access

School administrators must constantly search for new ways to save money that do not cut into the primary mission of educating students. Remote access can be a valuable tool for reducing overhead expenses and improving productivity.

Education administration is complicated enough without also having to be an IT specialist. Look for critical software applications, such as your accounting or fund-raising solutions, that offer remote access options and partner with a hosting provider who offers the level of service you need to focus on your true mission—your students.

**Grant Howe** is vice president of research and development for Sage North America's Austin, Texas-based Nonprofit Solutions business.

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<b>MetLife Resources</b>	.....	page 3
<b>MilkPEP</b>	.....	page 21
<b>Schooldude.com</b>	.....	page 15
<b>Sungard</b>	.....	page 1
<b>Tyler Technologies</b>	.....	page 9
<b>Virco Mfg Corp</b>	.....	back cover
<b>Windsor Management Group</b>	.....	page 5