Wi-Fi Goes to School

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Considering the fact that my first job after college was as an educator in the classroom, I was very disappointed in a statistic I recently read. According to an ABI Research report there are more than 98,000 schools in America that still lack Wi-Fi high-speed Internet access. No doubt school administrators and educators continue to look for ways to make computer technology accessible to all students, promote new ways of teaching and learning, as well as better prepare children and young adults for the high-tech, challenging world that awaits them after their school days are over.

While balancing these goals with obstacles such as tight school budget constraints, historic school buildings lacking the infrastructure, a shortage of trained personnel and security concerns can be a daunting task, there are other significant forces driving Wi-Fi adoption. These include heightened concerns for physical security, the evolution of "anytime, anywhere," on-demand instruction and the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) initiative, designed to empower the children of developing countries to learn by providing one connected laptop to every school age child.

From an industry perspective, the disconnecting of US schools offers a very lucrative opportunity for Wi-Fi vendors. For example, Cisco Systems, Meru Networks, Aruba Networks and Trapeze Networks are very focused on this market, each with its own set of strengths and weaknesses.

Although I am always happy to learn about another segment of the industry that is gaining momentum and acceptance, at this time I'd like to focus more on what the concept of "Wireless Schools" means to children today &#151 the leaders of tomorrow. Studies overwhelming indicate that computers significantly enhance student achievement and productivity, increasing the use of active learning strategies and improving writing skills of children of all ages. Incorporating an anytime, anywhere access to the Internet will help teachers increase class efficiency and student productivity through e-learning opportunities. Children learn in different ways. A more interactive learning environment, including easy access to individualized learning tools, data and academic information could make the difference between a child making the "connection" and grasping a concept and not making the connection.

Companies such as IBM are helping schools bridge the technology gap. Its wireless infrastructure for schools solution allows a school system to leverage existing computers to create a more flexible and collaborative classroom environment with campus-wide connectivity to the Internet and proprietary networks. Government programs, like the federal government's Universal Service Fund (E-Rate), are helping to make the often-pricey wireless technology widely available to all students as well.

Whatever it takes to convert all of our schools nationwide to wireless, regardless of size or geographic location, is worth every dollar invested. After all, education for all children around the world is a priority and not a privilege.

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