

# HOMESCHOOL IT

By Bruce Buckfelder

**W**hen employees at a company have issues with their computer hardware or software, they call the help desk for assistance. Ditto for a college student who may be overwhelmed by procedures when visiting the computer lab. When the students at our home school academy (student body: two) have issues, they call "DAD!!!"

That's okay; I knew it was part of the deal when we decided to school our two girls – a fourth- and a ninth-grader – at home. That's a point that I don't want to gloss over. We decided that home schooling would be a family project even though we knew that my wife would get the day-to-day responsibility of teaching the lessons and kicking the girls in the butt to stay on track as needed while I tend to my full-time job. My job would be to support the operation and to give out some bigger kicks here and there, not to mention occasionally starting dinner on evenings when the school day is running long. It could be summed up with that famous last line in every job description: "other duties as needed."

Our first foray into schooling at home was last year when we enrolled both girls into a virtual private school, initially because my older daughter was having some health issues that caused her attendance to suffer. In this setting, all lessons, assignments, and tests are completed online. This year, because of the break-neck pace of the virtual public school, and our disagreement with the expansion of the Common Core, we decided to leave and become traditional homeschoolers. Here's what you should know if you're new to this or thinking of taking the plunge.

First and foremost you'll need to buy computers if you don't have them. While it is possible to homeschool completely offline, you would be missing out on a great deal of resources and support available online. Buying a computer need not be a daunting task, nor should it be a rushed decision. Do some homework. One recommendation: go to the big box stores only to look at

the computers available – to compare screen size, weight of laptop, layout of ports and buttons, etc. Don't buy your computer from a "big box" retailer. They purchase large quantities of computers from manufacturers that are generically configured to appeal to the masses that walk through their stores.

I believe you'll fare much better using a local computer shop or by shopping online. There are many online retailers that are geared to technology. Even some better known for photography have computers for sale. Another



advantage is the ability to compare features side-by-side when online. Once you decide on a model, do a search for that specific model number for a more accurate comparison.

How do you decide on a model? It helps if you know your curriculum already. We combine books and online learning materials for our girls. Know the system requirements for any online work you will be doing. Will you need to install software from a disk? Don't get a

-- next page

computer without a CD/DVD drive. There are lots of those out there – especially lower-priced models. Will your online classes require a recent version of Windows? Don't buy a used computer with Windows XP because it's a bargain. It'll be an expensive door stop.

If you haven't settled on a curriculum, or if it's subject to changes, don't feel like you have to buy a top-of-the-line computer to get by. A machine with Windows 7 (less buggy and more familiar looking than Win 8) with a 4 gigabytes (GB) of memory and an optical drive (CD/DVD drive) should do fine.

One last word on hardware, especially for laptops: Buy the extended warranty that covers drops and spills – especially if your students are elementary or middle school-aged. It's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when they will drop it. Online warranties are much lower in price than what the big stores offer and the piece of mind can't be beat.

Now you have your computer. Let's set it up. The parent should have an administrator account on the computer, giving them the ability to install software and make system changes that the student might not be equipped to make. Anyone that has been around computers has probably heard the phrase 'I know enough to get into trouble.' That describes a nine year old installing programs on a computer to a tee.

Of course the student needs their own user account. I would recommend two. One for school only and one for after school. They'll be less likely to get distracted if the icons for their favorite games and music are on the "other" desktop.

Your student will need some basic software if they are doing any of their work online. Don't be sucked in by the versions that may come with your computer. In most cases, these are trial versions that will only work for thirty days before you have to pay what could be a pretty steep bill. Microsoft Office and pre-installed anti-virus software are common examples. I would uninstall these immediately, just to create a clean slate onto which I can install the programs I want. Luckily, there are many other options.

How about free? Now there's a good option! First, install a firewall and anti-virus software on your computer. Your Internet service provider likely offers these for free. If you don't want to use their software for any reason there are many other free options available, from Avast to Zone Alarm and countless others in between.

If you need to create documents that are compatible with Office (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint presentations) there are two free options. Google Docs is an online service that allows you to create and save documents to the Google Drive. Another free option is Apache Open Office. This is a full suite of programs, like MS Office, that

you download to your computer. Open office also creates Office-compatible documents, and it includes a program called Math that allows mathematical formulas to be entered on the screen. This is a very useful program for those with higher-level students (algebra, trigonometry, etc.) that might not have the best penmanship. No more points off because the instructor couldn't read something!

If you need to create PDF files, compatible with Adobe Acrobat reader, there are many options, too. Search sites like Download.com or Tucows.com and look for 'freeware.' Pay attention to the reviews and pick one that has a positive user rating.

So, you think free is worth what you paid for it? OK, there are reduced-price options for software as well. Anyone who has gone to college in recent years probably knows about this, but you may not know that it is available to K-12 students as well. I'm talking about academic software discounts. Google that term and you'll receive page after page of resellers who offer full versions of popular software titles (like MS Office, Adobe Acrobat and Photoshop, etc.) at discounted prices. These are, in most cases, fully functional versions of the software – not trials. One common limitation is that you cannot use the software for commercial purposes. Most of these deals are available to homeschoolers, too, and all require documentation of some sort. Proof of eligibility and pricing can vary from site to site – so shop around for the best deal.

Now that you're up and running, a word about keeping the computer in tip-top shape: Unless you feel comfortable reviewing and selecting updates, configure your computer to download and install updates automatically – at least for Windows Updates.

Like every rule, there's an exception to this. Many online classes require Java, in order to display graphical content among other uses. Many of these programs have been around for years, and they don't get re-written for every new release. Know which Java version is required and don't update beyond that until your provider tells you that his software will work with the newer version of Java. Without belaboring the point any further, I can tell you we found out about this the hard way.

Hopefully this will make you feel a little more comfortable in acquiring, setting up, and maintaining the technical side of your home school. When you're comfortable with your computer systems, you and your kids can concentrate on the tasks at hand. Pythagorean Theorem, anyone?

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