

School offering 'virtual' desktops

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CHAPEL HILL -- Frank Porter Graham Elementary will pilot a "cloud computing" platform to provide low-cost virtual desktops for about 600 students and faculty.

Cloud computing involves placing programs and data found on a computer on a server that can be accessed anywhere using an inexpensive device. Lorenzo Mejia, senior executive vice president of SIMtone, a Durham-based company that is working with the school, said the business will provide a terminal for FPG students and faculty called SNAP, as well as a device called SNAPbook.

A SNAPbook weighs about one and a half pounds and is the size of a paperback novel, Mejia said. It's lightweight and inexpensive, making it an attractive alternative to a PC.

He compared cloud computing technology to using a radio -- users can tune in to a "station" wherever they go, using a device that is more portable and more affordable than a desktop or laptop computer.

Mejia said cloud computing significantly reduces the cost of providing a PC experience for school children -- a big issue for school administrators who are finding they have to do more with less.

Shelia Burnette, principal of Frank Porter Graham, noted that "asking each student to purchase and maintain their own PC is impossible, just as it is impossible for the school to ensure each student's PC is up to date and has all the latest courseware."

The pilot, which will be launched this semester, is part of the SIMtone Education Thunder Program. Education Thunder aims to close the digital divide and provide access to full PCs in the cloud to the estimated five billion people who cannot afford computer technology, without requiring them to own a computer. The program's education content is provided by the U.S. Fund for UNICEF.

Mejia explained that SIMtone chose Frank Porter Graham for its pilot because it's a local school in a well-regarded school district, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools. "It also has a fairly high percentage of needy students, so it met some of the demographics that UNICEF wanted to see in the project," he said.

Mejia said that the company hopes to expand the effort at some point because a number of other schools are interested in participating.

"We've had interest from all over," he said, "[and] one of the things we want to do is learn from this particular pilot so we can understand the process and timing."

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