

# Handhelds and TSSA: Using Handheld Computers to Improve Productivity and Professional Practice in School Administration

by Bruce Benson, VSTE Journal Editor-at-Large

**T**oday's handheld computers are much more than yesterday's personal digital assistants. They are so powerful that school administrators can easily use these ultra-portable pocket devices in meeting many of the Technology Standards for School Administrators, particularly in focus areas related to productivity and professional practice, support, management and operations, and assessment and evaluation.

What do administrators need to get started? School leaders will need a handheld device, a cradle that attaches to their desktop computer for synchronizing information (generally included with the device), and a collapsible keyboard for ease of entry in already familiar desktop-like applications. There are technical considerations in choosing a platform (Pocket PC or Palm), but similar productivity applications are available on both, so administrators should make sure to check with local tech support staff regarding what is best for their particular environment.

Handhelds can be used to model routine, intentional and effective use of technology by giving administrators a very visible and reliable tech tool that can be used to improve productivity in a variety of settings. Handhelds allow administrators quick access to schedules, tasks and contact lists.

Tom Nash, Director of Special Education and Student Services for Albemarle County Public Schools, is a relative newcomer to the world of handheld computing. However, he has been quick to incorporate many of the basic applications into his daily routine, stating,

*I enjoy my handheld. I have easy access to my schedule, contacts and email, all in one place. And it was easy to learn. Press a button and the data in Outlook on my desktop is copied to my handheld.*

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## Handheld Computers, continued

As a result, Nash has purchased Palm handheld devices for all of his central office administrators.

Administrators can use handhelds to improve communication and collaboration with colleagues, staff, parents, and students because they can draft and respond to emails at any time in any location. The messages are sent the next time the device is placed in its cradle.

Handhelds can provide administrators immediate access to data and information to support instructional practice. Kevin Castner, Superintendent of Albemarle County Public Schools, carries school performance data on his handheld Pocket PC. Castner comments:

*When I visit schools to discuss progress during the current year, I can access that school's student progress data on my handheld. We are a data-driven school division. Having school performance data at my fingertips elevates the level of conversation with principals. We are going to make this technology available to all of our principals with funding available through principal participation in the Virginia Initiative for Technology and Administrative Leadership.*

Handhelds can also be used to help administrators manage documents and resources. Regina Kirk, Albemarle's division Coordinator for Health and Physical Education, remarks about her handheld Pocket PC:

*It's my brain. It keeps me organized. I don't have to search through a thousand papers looking for a certain document. I have a spreadsheet on my handheld that I use to track special PE equipment loaned to schools. Wherever I am, I know where our equipment is as well.*

For some administrators, handheld computers have become a critical component of their administrative toolkit. Vicki Crews Miller, Principal of Murray High School in Albemarle County, uses her handheld Palm device throughout the day, in many different capacities:

*I carry it with me wherever I go. When I'm in the hallway and a student asks to schedule a meeting, I do it right then and there on my handheld. I have a senior checklist and SOL verified credit information on my handheld for every student at my school. I also have student contact information, so if I need to contact a student while I am at home, I have all the information I need.*

Miller also uses her handheld to take notes during teacher observations. She has a spreadsheet on her handheld with all of her school's financial information. Miller even has her school's entire school improvement plan on her handheld. When the superintendent visits with his data in hand, she has her data in hand as well.

According to Miller, using her handheld during meetings has really increased her productivity.



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## Handheld Computers, continued

*I use the word processor on my handheld and a collapsible keyboard to take notes during meetings. If I am asked to do something during a meeting, I simply add it to my task list on my handheld. If there is something that comes up during the meeting that I need my office associate to do, I write the email on my handheld and it is automatically sent when I put my handheld in the cradle back in my office. I don't have 20 sticky notes to follow up on after meetings anymore. I take my handheld everywhere. I have a case that holds both my handheld and keyboard. It fits easily in my purse. I even took it on vacation with me. Not bad for someone who had never used a handheld until six months ago. It was just so easy to learn how to use.*

The notion of what is a computer is going to be challenged in the next couple of years. Devices like handheld computers have a lot to offer administrators, and they hold great promise in improving productivity and professional practice, putting communication tools and data in the palms of administrators' hands.

### Article Resource URLs

Technology Standards for School Administrators  
<http://cnets.iste.org/tssa/>

Palm

<http://www.palm.com>

(various companies make handhelds with the Palm operating system, such as Palm and Handspring)

PocketPC

<http://www.microsoft.com/mobile/pocketpc/default.asp>

(various companies make handhelds with the Pocket PC operating system, such as Compaq and HP)

### About the Author

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