HELP! What do I Do Now?
Stacy Hunter, Principal, Avalon Adventist Jr. Academy, Port Hardy, BC

For months you have fund-raised for enough money to replace the old 486 computer you have in the corner that nobody uses. You have wanted for years now to have a computer in your classroom/school that can be used by all. But what to do with that money now that you have it? How are you going to find the best computer for the best possible price? What stuff do you need for it anyway?

Is this you? Have you been the one to purchase a computer for your classroom/school and not really know what to buy? You don't want to let your students down because they have worked so hard to get enough money in the bank that you would hate to not find the best deal. Many of us find ourselves in this position. Larger schools are large enough to have a technical guy to take care of it for them but the majority of us have to do it ourselves. So what do we do?

The first thing we all do is go and ask someone who we consider to be the computer geek or guru. You sit down with them and they start telling you all the bells and whistles of a good computer. The problem is they tend to forget you have a budget and can't afford all of what they are telling you. So you are left to filter out the extras and get only what you need. Back to square one.

I, like you, am not a computer geek or guru. I am functional on a computer, can work with most programs, install and create what I need, but when it comes to programming and networking it is out of my league. With that said, I will tell you some of the things that you need to get a good working stable computer for your classroom that you can have for a few years.

First, ask yourself if you want a PC or MAC. Both have their pros and cons. PC's have compatibility problems but the MAC has less software available. Many of you will probably get what has been bought before at your school. Though personally I like Macs, I purchase PC's for the school because that is what we already have. The rest of this article will focus mainly on PCs.

Second, ask yourself if you want a brand new one or one that is a little older. You can find some very nice computers that are a year or two old for a fraction of the price. Companies like CDI (Computer Dealers Inc.) or CommuniTek Inc. that resells computers can get you into a computer for very cheap. They may not be the latest and greatest but for your needs will do just fine. Our school just bought 2 IBM NetVista P3's for $239.00 each.

When you purchase a computer, there are some things you need to keep in mind. Make sure the machine you buy has enough RAM and enough Hard drive space. Minimums according to the guru's in my school are 512 RAM and 40 GB Hard drive space. You will also want to have a video/sound card, USP ports, and a CD ROM drive. If you want to have online access, make sure you have a network card as well.

The other item you will want to have is a printer. For the daily printing most of us do, look for one that the printer cartridges are cheap. I have had an Epson (that I liked) and now have a Canon i350. The Canon cartridges are about half the price of the Epson. I had a BC100 that outlasted almost every other printer in the school. It was a cheap printer but lasted a long time. No it didn't have all the features that some others did but I didn't need a printer that did top quality pictures.

Once you have the hardware all set up, the software you need is as follows:
1. Word processor – Microsoft Word, and Word Perfect are the most common. Many machines have both.
2. Anti-virus program – Nortons and McAfee are good.
3. Spyware program – Spybot: Search and Destroy is free from Download.com
4. Ad protection program – Ad-aware is another free program from the same place.
5. Adobe Acrobat Reader – this is used to read PDF files online.

With these few things, you should be ready to go. You will want to eventually add games, art programs, and other software that you like as well as other hardware such as digital cameras, handheld gadgets, scanners etc . . . as you get more comfortable with your new machine.