

## Chromebooks & Google Apps appeal to schools & consumers

By Larry Magid on April 3, 2015 in [blog post](#), [Featured](#), [SafeKids News Analysis](#)

Chromebooks have been around for four years and are already gaining traction in schools, but Google's newest — and cheapest — Chromebooks make them an increasingly attractive option for budget-minded consumers.

Chromebooks are laptops that use Google's Chrome operating system. Unlike Macs and Windows machines, they don't run off-the-shelf software, but web apps like Google's Gmail and other Google apps that typically run inside a browser. The user interface for Chromebooks is the same as Google's Chrome browser on a Windows PC or Mac.

Chromebooks are already popular in schools because of they are not only less expensive to buy than traditional laptops, but less expensive to maintain because they do not run traditional operating systems or desktop software. The Chrome OS operating system and its web-based apps are automatically kept up-to-date and, unlike Windows PCs, there is essentially no ongoing maintenance to keep them running smoothly.

At an event last October, Google senior vice president Sundar Pichai reportedly said that Chromebooks are approaching 50 percent share of the U.S. education market, and Google reported near the end of 2014 that Chromebooks "are the best-selling device in the U.S. this year."

And with prices of releases announced this week from Asus, Acer, LG, HP, Hisense and Haier starting at \$150, they're actually less expensive than iPads and many other tablets.

One downside of Chromebooks is that they don't run desktop applications like Microsoft Office or other PC or Mac programs. But Google and its partners have developed a large number of apps that do run on these devices. Anyone who needs Office-like software — Microsoft Word, Excel or PowerPoint, for example — can access online equivalents from Google as part of Google Drive. And, unlike Microsoft's products, Google Drive is free. Some of these apps can be run even when the machine is offline, but they are optimized for online use.

Typically, Chromebooks have far less storage than traditional laptops but Google's got that covered too with Web storage. The idea is to store your documents on Google's "cloud" servers instead of locally on the machine itself. In addition to the consumer and business apps, Google offers free apps for schools, including a special version of Gmail with the school's domain name instead of Gmail.com, along with its word processing program, spreadsheet, slideshow program and a product called Classroom that teachers can use to create and manage assignments and communicate with their students.

### **Student privacy**

Not surprisingly, some parents and public officials worry about the privacy and security implications of a private company like Google having access to all this student information. Google says that it does not subject students to advertising, tracking or profiling.

Along with Microsoft, Apple and numerous other companies, Google is among the signers of the Student Privacy Pledge with a promise not to sell student information or engage in "behaviorally target advertising." Signers also pledge to use data for authorized education purposes only, not change privacy policies without notice and choice, enforce strict limits on data retention, support parental access to, and correction of errors in, their children's information and provide comprehensive security standards. You can find the entire pledge and the list of signers at [StudentPrivacyPledge.org](http://StudentPrivacyPledge.org). I believe Google is sincere about its commitment to privacy, but the cynic in me wonders whether the company is looking at this as a long-term investment to rope in kids as lifelong customers.

If so, it's pretty smart. One of the reasons for Apple's early success was very aggressive pricing for education. As early as the 1980s, millions of students were raised on Apple products at school and a significant number of them stuck with Apple long after they graduated high school.

With Chromebooks starting at \$150, it's possible for schools to purchase more of these devices, and all of that free online software from Google makes these devices very inexpensive to use.

### **Ecosystem**

Google has also created an ecosystem around its education apps and Chrome devices, including lots of web resources for educators, access to trainers and deployment tools and advice for school district IT departments. Google also makes it easy to find “thousands of teacher-approved apps, books and videos” in an effort to make the transition to its hardware and Chrome platform as teacher-friendly as possible.

In addition to being cheaper than any iPad and most Android tablets, they also have keyboards, which — for many educational purposes — makes them superior to tablets.

So far, it isn't clear whether Apple plans to respond to the challenge. While the company does offer educational discounts, those discounts aren't nearly enough to make its products cost-competitive with some Chromebooks. But the Windows world is responding. Microsoft is rumored to be working on a \$149 Windows 10 PC aimed at education, price-conscious consumers and the developing world.

While Chromebooks are a reasonable alternative for many users, they're not for everyone. I'm not about to give up access to Microsoft Office and several other programs that only run on PCs and Macs, and I like the ability to store massive amounts of data locally on my machine and to be able to have full use of the machine on an airplane and other places where I may have no or limited Internet access.