

Multimedia INTERNET@SCHOOLS

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HARDWARE

Neo by AlphaSmart

Company: AlphaSmart, Inc., 373 University Avenue, Los Gatos, CA 95032; Phone: 888/274-0680; Internet: <http://www.alpha-smart.com/>.

Description: The Neo is a portable, lightweight, and inexpensive computer “companion” that looks like a keyboard with a small screen attached. The built-in word processor can be used for any keyboarding project such as note taking, story writing, etc. The text can be transferred to any Macintosh or Windows computer via USB cable or to any device equipped with an IrDA (infrared wireless) port, including computers, handhelds, and printers, via IrDA beaming. The Neo is battery-operated and can work for up to 700 hours with three AA alkaline batteries.

Specifications: The unit weighs 2 pounds and is 1.75 inches high, 12.4 inches wide, and 9.75 inches deep. The display is 5.75-by-1.5 inch. LCD screen that can be configured to display from two to six lines of text.

The Neo has 2 MB of storage for SmartApplet programs, as well as room for hundreds of pages of single-spaced text.

Included are 3 AA batteries, a USB cable, both IrDA and USB ports for printing or sending documents, AlphaSmart Manager software, AlphaWord Plus word processing software, a Calculator SmartApplet, and an excellent user’s guide. A rechargeable model is available with an NiMH rechargeable battery pack and an AC adapter.

Price: \$249—list starting price. \$229—education discount starting price. The rechargeable model is available for an additional \$20 per unit. A very nice carry-

★★★★★ REPORT CARD

Installation	A
Content/Features	A
Ease of Use	A
Product Support	A

ing case is available for \$20. Additional cables and equipment also are available.

A classroom set that includes 30 Neo units; a storage cart/cabinet; and other necessary materials to manage, charge, store, and transport the devices is priced at \$7,950.

Additional discounts are provided for volume orders.

Minimum System Requirements: The Neo is complete and usable as shipped. However, since it is considered to be a computer “companion,” a laptop or desktop computer equipped with a USB port and/or IrDA port is also needed.

The Neo can be used with any Macintosh with OS 9.0 or higher, or a PC running Windows 98 (Second Edition) or higher.

Warranty: The keyboard and display are guaranteed to be free from defects in materials and workmanship for 3 years. The rechargeable batteries in the rechargeable unit have a 90-day warranty. A full refund can be obtained for up to 30 days. After that, AlphaSmart will replace or repair problems at its discretion.

Reviewer Comments:

Installation: Installation was very easy; the Neo arrives ready to go out of the box. Soft-

ware had to be installed on the Windows computer I used with the Neo, but that was easily accomplished using the accompanying CD-ROM. **Installation Rating:** A

Content/Features: The Neo by AlphaSmart is an excellent, useful, and practical computing solution, with some limitations. It is easy-to-use and the screen is easy-to-read. The keyboard is a good size and basically is a standard keyboard with a few additional function keys at the top.

I especially like the easy on/off feature. When you press the On/Off button, the Neo is ready to go in a few seconds. Press the button again, and it goes off with far less fuss and muss than with most computers.

Another good feature is that everything typed is saved—even when the Neo is turned off—until specifically deleted. Text can be linked, and the size of the type in the display can be changed from one to six lines, which is helpful when working with students of different ages and reading abilities.

Mini software applications, known as SmartApplets, have been created for the Neo to add and extend functions. The unit comes with the Calculator, AlphaSmart Manager, and AlphaWord Plus SmartApplets.

AlphaWord Plus is a full-featured word processor that includes a thesaurus, dictionary with spell-check capability, a Spanish-English word lookup, and a built-in help system that displays all keyboard commands. Files can be saved by name, users can store more than the eight active files, and files can be large enough to sup-

port advanced writing projects. The files can be linked with teacher-designed rubrics, homework instructions, or reference materials. Online checklists can be generated to guide students through assignments. The applet even includes a find-and-replace function.

Working with AlphaWord Plus will not teach students to use all of the functions found in a large word processing program like MS Word. It will, however, definitely give them the opportunity to learn to keyboard and organize their thoughts while writing on a computer.

Additional available SmartApplets include titles such as KeyWords, a keyboarding program and typing tutor, and Inspiration Outliner, an idea organizer.

The optional AlphaQuiz applet enables the design and storage of quizzes on a PC or Mac system for administration on a classroom set of Neos. The test results can be retrieved for automatic grading, reporting, statistical analysis, and exporting results to grade book software. An AlphaQuiz lab pack (35 licenses) costs \$269; a number of other reasonably priced options are available.

Now that I've said that the Neo is an excellent, well-designed, and thought-out computing device, how exactly could it be used in school?

The Neo may provide a far better solution than a personal computer for students working on word processing and keyboarding skills. The unit is much less expensive than a computer; two to three classroom Neo sets can be purchased for the cost of a computer lab, especially if networking and wiring are included. When the cost of setting up the room is considered, even districts that furnish labs with



Neo by AlphaSmart

rebuilt computers—for less than \$300 each, in our case—would save money.

Configurations could vary in several useful ways. Two classroom sets, in a SmartOption bundle that includes a cart, could bring the units to classrooms several times a week, or the units could be left in one place for the duration of a project.

Five or 10 Neos per classroom would provide lots of opportunities for students to work on word processing or keyboarding, far more opportunity than in a computer lab shared with the rest of the school. This is especially true since younger grades would certainly use the units more, although probably not as much, as older students.

That being said, I don't think the Neo in its current state could ever entirely replace computers in schools. Mid- to upper-elementary and older students will still need Internet access, practice, and interaction with other features that today's Neo can't provide.

All in all, the Neo is an excellent and useful device. I'd love to see a number of them in my small rural district, in addition to the computer lab we have in each building.

The only question or reservation I might have is the same one I usually have when

considering placing laptops or hand-held devices in the hands of students—how tough are the units? Could they take being dropped who knows how many times? The Neo looks sturdy and well-built, but only time can answer that question. **Features Rating: A**

Ease of Use: The Neo by AlphaSmart is easy and straightforward to use. Teachers will need to spend a little more time with the unit when managing it for use with a class. Some processes, such as file maintenance, are a little different than on a computer and may have a bit of a learning curve, especially with elementary students. However, all of the processes tend to be simple and direct once learned. **Ease of Use Rating: A**

Product Support: Customer service is available by phone at 530/528-7200, by fax at 503/528-3906, or by e-mail at support@alphasmart.com. Support posted on the company's Web site at <http://www.alphasmart.com/supportinfo/> includes product-specific FAQs, user guides, and downloads. **Product Support Rating: A**

Recommendation: I think every elementary school should have at least one classroom set of these excellent devices. The Neo by AlphaSmart also has some home and/or homeschooling applications. Some users may even like to use it instead of a laptop or hand-held device for note-taking, as it is smaller and more portable than a laptop and has a nicer keyboard than most handhelds. **Highly recommended.**

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