

Optimizing Your Personal Computer (PC)

BY JOSE ZAVALA

OVERVIEW

Early childhood leaders already juggle massive workloads—the last thing you need is a computer causing you issues! Learning basic troubleshooting tips and tricks can make a significant difference. By mastering a few simple fixes, you can save valuable budget dollars, eliminate unnecessary stress, and keep your schedule running efficiently and productively.

COMMON PC ISSUES & HOW TO FIX THEM

One of the most common sayings I hear at work is “Have you tried restarting your computer?” Although my colleagues love to joke about it, it is a good thing to do before starting your workday. You should try this when your computer is running incredibly slowly, apps are freezing, or something feels off. This works because rebooting clears out temporary background files and stops processes that are hogging your computer's memory (RAM).

FROZEN SCREEN?

“What happens when my screen freezes?” There is a shortcut to the Task Manager. The Task Manager is the control center for the computer. It gives you a real-time view of what your computer is doing. In Windows OS, the following shortcut takes you to your “control center”: Ctrl + Shift + Esc. If your Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge, or any other program is unresponsive, click the app in Task Manager and select “End Task.” This will force quit the application. In macOS, press Cmd + Option + Esc to open the Force Quit menu, select the frozen app, and click Force Quit.

KEEP UP WITH UPDATES!

Just like phones, TVs, and news, keeping your computer up to date is important. Vital software and security updates patch any vulnerabilities and fix known bugs. Running outdated operating systems makes your computer slower and leaves it exposed to cyber threats. Always try to restart and update your computer whenever possible. Most of the time, your computer will let you know when an important update is available.

STORAGE IS IMPORTANT!

When using your computer, keep in mind that more storage is important. Depending on what you do with your computer, you should buy the storage that's appropriate for your needs. Not having enough storage

can also slow down your computer. A good rule of thumb is, 'If you don't need it, then delete it.' Anything for work that is older than 3 years should be saved elsewhere or deleted.

Leverage the cloud: For large files like program photos, curriculum videos, or years of student records, store them securely in cloud storage (e.g., Google Drive, OneDrive, or SharePoint) instead of saving them directly to your local desktop.

LOOKING TO BUY A BETTER COMPUTER?

If your computer is more than 5 to 6 years old, it might simply be reaching the end of its natural lifespan. When shopping for a reliable replacement that will last, look for these minimum specifications:

- **RAM (Memory):** Aim for at least **16 GB of RAM**. This ensures your computer can smoothly run multiple browser tabs, management software, and background apps all at once.
- **Storage Type:** Absolutely look for a **Solid-State Drive (SSD)** rather than a traditional Hard Disk Drive (HDD). SSDs are significantly faster, meaning your computer will boot up and load programs in seconds rather than minutes.
- **Processor:** Look for at least an Intel Core i5, AMD Ryzen 5, or an Apple M-series chip to ensure your system has enough processing power for the years to come.

RESOURCES

Here are some resources on keeping your computer updated, and some assistant software listed by brand:

- HP Assistant: <https://support.hp.com/us-en/help/hp-support-assistant>
- Dell Assistant: <https://www.dell.com/en-us/lp/dt/supportassist-for-home-pcs>
- Lenovo Assistant: <https://support.lenovo.com/us/en/solutions/ht003029-lenovo-system-update-update-drivers-bios-and-applications>
- Mac: No available assistant

Also, try this questionnaire if you need help selecting a Windows PC: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/windows/help-me-choose>

Try this questionnaire if you need help selecting a Mac PC: <https://www.apple.com/mac/best-mac/#usage>

Register for the McCormick Institute's upcoming free technology training webinar, [Optimizing Your Personal Computer \(PC\)](#), on June 25, 2026, from 1:30 pm – 2:45 pm, CT.

Jose Zavala is an IT Support Specialist II at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University (NLU), a computer science graduate from NLU, and an aspiring cybersecurity professional. Driven by a lifelong passion for technology, he combines hands-on technical troubleshooting experience with an academic foundation in computer science to keep critical digital systems running smoothly. Jose is actively pursuing advanced industry certifications to deepen his expertise in digital defense and data security.