How to Advocate for Assistive Technology Tools and Services

What is Assistive Technology?

Assistive Technology (AT) refers to both tools and services that facilitate access to grade-level curriculum for students with disabilities. *Access to the curriculum* means that students are able to take in and understand the material being taught in school, understand and complete assignments, and demonstrate what they have learned.

An AT *tool* is a physical device that "is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities." It can be a device that is available commercially "off the shelf," and it can also be a device or software that has been modified or customized to meet the specific needs of a student. An AT *service* is "any service that directly assists an individual with a disability in selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device" (https://ectacenter.org).

AT is the bridge that provides an entry point to the content (the information that students need to understand and learn) that cannot otherwise be accessed. AT tools and services are used when a student cannot access the traditional curriculum independently. Until a student with dyslexia has received sufficient intervention to be reading and writing at grade level, he or she will need assistance in accessing grade-level content. This access is essential, as it minimizes gaps in knowledge that will result if grade-level content is too difficult for the student to read and comprehend without the technology.

AT **tools** can include specialized physical devices and equipment as well as computers and software. Examples include the following:

- text-to-speech devices that read text to a student;
- speech-to-text devices that allow students to dictate what they want to write and then types it for them; and
- spelling, grammar, and vocabulary support options (part of most word processing programs) or web extensions or "plug-ins" that can be added to a web browser that can assist with grammar, word choice, and sentence structure.
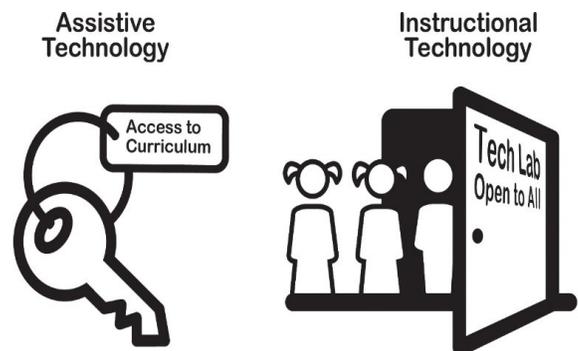
AT **services** should be provided along with AT tools to select and use the tools effectively. Examples of AT services include the following:

- evaluation procedures;
- selection and customization of devices;
- the development of plans to integrate AT tools with other aspects of the student's educational program; and

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- training for students, parents and professionals who work with the student.

How is AT different from Instructional Technology?

Instructional Technology (IT) is technology that is designed to provide additional practice and exposure to educational content, and it's often available for all students. An example of IT is an app that provides additional practice for a particular skill, such as learning the states and capitals or reviewing multiplication facts. IT can be very useful for students with learning disabilities, but it is often available to students without disabilities as well. AT is uniquely critical for students with disabilities, to provide the same access to the curriculum that other students have.

How are AT services obtained?

The consideration of AT services for a student with an active IEP *is required by law.* The laws have been rewritten and reworded since 1975 and have had a variety of names. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally created in 1997 and last updated in 2006, explicitly stated "school districts were required to consider the need for assistive technology whenever a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was developed." As of 2011, IDEA applies to children ages birth to three years old, as well as

school-aged children (https://ectacenter.org/top- ics/ atech/laws.asp). For more details on AT and the law, please go to www.gpat.org/Georgia-Project- for-Assistive-Technology/Pages/Legal-Mandates- for-Assistive-Technology.aspx

The forms associated with an IEP vary from state to state, but the wording that relates to AT will generally be a variation of the following:

Present Levels of Educational Performance

B: Other Educational Needs

General Considerations

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Adapted physical education
- ☐ Braille needs (blind/visually impaired)
- ☐ Extra curriculum activities
- ☐ Social/emotional needs

- ☐ Assistive tech devices/services
- ☐ Communication (all students)
- ☐ Language needs (LEP students)
- ☐ Travel training

- ☐ Behavior
- ☐ Communication (deaf/hard of hearing students)
- ☐ Nonacademic activities
- ☐ Skill development related to vocational preparation or experience

☐ Other_____

OR

Assistive Technology: The student _____ needs _____ does not need assistive technology.

Before an IEP meeting, the parent and/or caregiver should find the section referring to AT in the IEP and highlight it. During the IEP meeting, if the team does not offer it, insist that an AT evaluation be

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conducted to determine if AT services are needed for the student to access grade-level curriculum.

Implementation of AT services

Once the AT evaluation has been completed, the team must reconvene to determine appropriate tools and services and plan for their implementation. It is essential that these steps take place only after the SETT framework has been considered.

SETT stands for Student, Environment, Tasks, Tools (Zabala). The order of this acronym is essential as the following three factors should be considered first: 1) S: the strengths and challenges of the student; 2) E: the environment in which the student needs to complete the work; 3) T: the task the student needs to complete. Only after considering the first three factors should the team decide on 4) T: the tools or services needed. At times, a school district may want to suggest a specific tool because it is available within the district already, but it is essential to start with the student's specific needs and only decide on tools and services after discussing the student's strengths and challenges, the environment and the tasks to be completed. The types of tools and services that are readily available within the district may be different than what the student needs.

- In addition to using the SETT framework, the tools chosen must "support achievement of goals and progress in the general curriculum (www.qiat.org)."

Each tool must take into consideration the unique needs of the student, and it is important to identify a way to measure and observe whether the AT device is working as intended (www.qiat.org).

- It's also critical to ensure that use of the tool is helping the student meet his or her IEP goal(s). The IEP should be written with specific, measurable criteria to assess whether this is occurring.

  - Advocates should insist on transparent data collection and set a date to review this data to assess the effectiveness of the tool.

  - Rather than requesting a specific brand (for example: an iPad) make sure to write the features that are needed within the technological tool to support the learning goal.

Next steps

- Engage a qualified AT specialist to do the AT evaluation.

- If the school does not have an AT specialist employ, they must contract with an outside provider.

- The school district pays for the evaluation and any tools or services needed as determined by the AT evaluation. The law states in Section

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300.105 "that the school system is responsible for addressing assistive technology when it is required as a part of the student's special education services, related services, or supplementary aids and services. Use of school-provided assistive technology is not limited to the school setting" (www.gpat.org).

- Follow the SETT framework.

- Determine who will capture data about the effectiveness of tools and services, when the data will be collected, and the environments in which the data will be collected.

Once an AT plan has been put into place, it is important to set a time to reconvene to discuss how the tool(s) are working. Make sure to get feedback from the student, as well as the teacher(s) and parent(s). Make sure to discuss whether proper training for use of the tool was provided, review the data on effectiveness, and alter the AT plan as needed.

If a school states that it cannot provide an AT evaluation or any type of AT support, refer to the resource entitled "Strategies for Assistive Technology Negotiations" by Dave Edyburn, Ph.D. If the building principal will not comply, go directly to the director of special education at the district level.

Access for all

AT provides an access point to the curriculum that is essential for students who have learning challenges. All students, including those with disabilities, have the right to access the information being taught in school and to demonstrate what they have learned, and AT can be the key to making that happen.

When advocating for AT, it is essential that communication is open, clear, and transparent. Although advocating for a student can be stressful and challenging, obtaining services that will facilitate access to grade-level curriculum is vital.

Resources

https://osepideasthatwork.org/node/121

https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/assistive-technology/assistive-technologies-basics

https://www.edutopia.org/article/assistive-technology-resources

https://www.atia.org/at-resources/what-is-at/

http://www.joyzabala.com/

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