



Issue 8

September 2009

## **Assistive Technology Advocacy** **By Dave Edyburn**

A key question, often left unstated during assistive technology consideration, is: Who can benefit from assistive technology? Federal law is silent on this issue assuming that the local IEP team is in the best position to decide if a student's needs can be met through technology interventions or other accommodations.

To-date, school districts have failed to implement systemic screening processes to identify students who could benefit from assistive technology. Rather, the current system is predicated on individual advocacy. In practice this means that someone on the IEP team must raise the issue of assistive technology and advocate on behalf of the student. Anecdotal evidence suggests that only 3-5% of students with disabilities have assistive technology written on the IEP. As a result, it is clear that the vast majority of students with disabilities do not have routine access to appropriate assistive technologies.

Since 5% or less of students with disabilities are assistive technology users, this situation suggests a scenario that in order to receive assistive technology devices and services, one may need to have an advocate who challenges the system on their behalf. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of issues associated with advocating for assistive technology. This information should be useful to students for self-advocacy, as well as parents, advocates, teachers, and IEP teams.

### **Know the Rules: Federal Law Requires the Consideration of Assistive Technology**

School staff may not be familiar with the laws and regulations or may not perceive the need for assistive technology. However, assistive technology consideration is not optional. Federal law mandates the provision of assistive

technology in the following regards:

- Assistive technology devices and/or services essential for a student to receive Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) shall be made available. [Source: 20 USC 1412(a)(1)]
- Assistive technology shall support a student's participation in learning in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). [Source: 20 USC 1412(a)(5)]
- Each public agency shall ensure that assistive technology devices or assistive technology services, or both., are made available to a child with a disability if required as part of the child's (1) special education, (2) related services, or (3) supplementary aids and services. [Source: 34 CFR 300.308]

### **Know What to Say**

Knowing your legal assistive technology rights is only part of the effort. You must also use this information to educate the IEP team about their roles and responsibilities. The chart on page 4 illustrates some ways an advocate can redirect comments that may take the assistive technology consideration process off-track.

### **Clarify Performance Deficits and the Need for Performance Support Tools**

Parents and teachers are well aware of the areas where students struggle. Therefore, define the categories of tools that are needed for an assistive technology toolkit. Some areas you might include: Communication (Oral, Written), Mobility, Visual Access, Auditory Access, Organization, Memory, Reading, Writing, Solving Problems, Note Taking, Test Taking, Homework, and Study Skills.

### **Focus on Performance – Not Stuff**

Finding the appropriate assistive technology can produce a blinding devotion to a specific technology product. However, the key component of the definition of assistive technology is that it enhances performance. As a result, focus on issues of persistent educational failure as evidence that a student is not receiving and benefitting from FAPE. Likewise, emphasize the importance of No Child Left Behind's expectation that all students will achieve grade level standards. Request that assistive technology be provided to close the achievement gap. Don't let the technology blind you to the fact that the purpose of the technology is to enhance performance.

### **Collect Data**

Evidence of a performance problem can be presented anecdotally using

stories, using artifacts like graded papers and report cards, and with quantifiable evidence like the amount of time spent writing a report, number of words generated, number of spelling errors, etc. Struggling students may spend excessive time completing a task with the final result still being unacceptable. To make the case that assistive technology enhances performance, data will be needed that shows performance with and without technology, over time. Use data to tell the story. If possible, graph quantitative data so others can easily understand the trends.

## **Next Steps**

There is little evidence to indicate that all students who could benefit from assistive technology have access to appropriate devices and services. When an IEP team (a) understands the importance and value of assistive technology, (b) has technical resources to evaluate student needs and select appropriate devices, and (c) has administrative support for providing assistive technology support services, the assistive technology outcomes are noteworthy for students and their families. However, when one or more of these critical ingredients are missing, the IEP process can become a battleground regarding the provision of assistive technology. Don't give up. Continue to explore assistive technology possibilities outside of school. Continue to collect evidence. And, continue to advocate.

Source: Edyburn, D. (2009). Assistive technology advocacy. *Special Education Technology Practice*, 11(2), 15-17.

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*Dave Edyburn is a member of the Board of Directors at The Advocacy Institute.*



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**P.O. Box 565 ♦ Marshall, Virginia 20116 ♦ Phone 540.364.0051  
www.AdvocacyInstitute.org ♦ Email: info@AdvocacyInstitute.org**

## AT Advocacy Conversations

If a school official says...	An advocate might respond...
We've considered your child's need for assistive technology and have determined that s/he will not benefit...	...I would like to review the documentation that supports your decision. In particular, I would like to see the data regarding performance with assistive technology and performance without.
Best practice suggests you always begin with no-tech solutions first...	...Consideration should not be a linear process of trial and error. Rather, all possible solutions should be explored as quickly as possible to minimize the impact of persistent failure.
We can't afford that...	...Cost cannot be considered a factor in AT consideration.
We are not sure what types of AT are out there...	...What steps will you take to fulfill the AT consideration mandate?
It's not clear that (the student) actually does better with the AT...	...I would like to see the data that supports such a conclusion. Typically, we need to review performance data over time, with and without the technology, to come to such a conclusion.
We don't want him to become dependent on a text-reader... when will he ever learn to read...	...Since the student doesn't have the independent reading skills and the expectations in grade 4 and beyond are to access large amounts of text, how will you demonstrate that he has access to the curriculum without a text-reader?
Your child is not the only one that struggles with this problem...	...I can appreciate your concern, but my primary interest is the success of my child. As a result, what are you going to do to ensure that my child is successful?
We will provide some specialized technology but there is no need to write it on the IEP...	...I am pleased to hear that assistive technology will be provided. However, to ensure the rights of all parties are protected, our plan for acquiring and using AT should be written on the IEP.
We are not authorized to make a decision about AT...	...I am disappointed to hear that. I guess we will need to adjourn the meeting until an appropriate administrator is here.