

**An Overview of
Education Tech Points for Assistive Technology Planning
Gayl Bowser
And
Penny Reed**

As schools, early childhood special education programs and early intervention programs address the issues involved in providing assistive technology services, two options are available. One option is to develop a separate, parallel track of assessment and planning for assistive technology. This involves the development of a specialized referral and assessment process and the utilization of clinical settings where the special needs of assistive technology users are addressed. While there are many advantages to such a setting for individuals with complicated technology needs, it is not an efficient way to address the needs of students with mild disabilities. In addition, such a system does not take into account the physical and social factors in the user's customary environments.

An alternative to a separate assessment and prescription system is the development of general program policies and procedures that include assistive technology. These identify the times when assistive technology questions should be asked and provide support to existing educational teams to effectively select assistive technology and implement assistive technology services. Such a system has the advantage of including everyone on the IEP/IFSP team in a familiar process and assures that assistive technology will be considered in all the aspects of the child's educational program. We call such a system Education Tech Points. Each Education Tech Point identifies the specific times within the planning and provision of specially designed instruction that the need for assistive technology (both devices and services) should be considered. Education Tech Points offer a way to integrate assistive technology into the thinking of the IEP/IFSP team and the management system that each school district uses to ensure provision of appropriate services to children with disabilities. Key points to assist in making decisions regarding utilization of assistive technology services and resources are identified and incorporated into the regular educational planning system. Figure 1 shows a flow chart of the typical special education service delivery process and identifies these key points. They are referral, evaluation, extended assessment, plan development, implementation and periodic review.

Each Education Tech Point represents a point in the process of referral, evaluation and development of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) when consideration of technology use might occur. This structure provides a way to effectively organize and monitor assistive technology services while enabling programs to tailor activities to match the needs of each student. Initial Education Tech Point questions (Figure 2) guide the IEP/IFSP team through the necessary steps to determine if a child may need an assistive technology device or service. During implementation, the Education Tech Point questions at points five and six can assist the education staff to monitor the program in order to ensure that needed changes are addressed in a timely and efficient manner.

Along with the identification of these key points, potential questions to be asked are suggested (see Figure 2) and implications for school districts are highlighted. The implications for school districts and resources which might prove useful will be the focus of this article.

Education Tech Point #1-Initial Referral Questions

When a child has an identified educational difficulty, assistive technology questions at the referral stage center around the specific problem that the student is experiencing and whether simple, readily available

assistive technology utilized in the classroom might provide enough support that referral to special education would not be necessary. Tools as simple as calculators, talking spell checkers and alternative writing tools such as portable word processors can make a significant difference for many students. If no solutions to the referral problem can be found without evaluation, the child's educational team must be able to clearly identify the problem and know how to request further assessment. Unfortunately many educators are not aware of the assistive technology devices that are available. The implications for the school district here are that student service teams within each school building need to be aware of what assistive technology devices are available today and how they can help students. This requires district wide awareness level training and the purchase of some general resource materials.

Education Tech Point #2-Evaluation Questions

Questions for the evaluation team included whether the student can be evaluated accurately without assistive technology and what types of assistive technology might enhance the student's performance. The implications for school districts here are that evaluation center staff must have the same awareness level training recommended for student service teams, in addition they need specific training on the requirements of IDEA and Section 504 for accommodations and modifications. They also need access to an array of assistive technology devices to use for evaluation purposes and to colleagues with expertise about assistive technology for various difficulties including positioning, hand use, augmentative communication, computer access, and print access. No one person or discipline will know everything about assistive technology, therefore access to several knowledgeable people at the local, regional, or state level is essential. School districts must look not only within their own district, but to other nearby resources to create a network of knowledgeable people who can exchange information and support each other. This requires a commitment to staff development and networking.

Education Tech Point #3-Extended Assessment Questions

Extended assessment is generally understood to mean a trial period. The questions to be addressed at the point of extended assessment of assistive technology needs are related to what specific tasks the student needs to be able to do and what, if any, assistive technology could possibly help. This Tech Point is a critical one for school districts. In order to appropriately consider every child's need for assistive technology, school district staff must be trained in the use of a clearly defined decision making process. This process needs to incorporate a focus on the specific environments in which the student functions and the tasks in those environments that he or she needs to accomplish (Zabala, 1994). All decision making teams in the school district need training in the use of this process. They also need broad awareness level training regarding appropriate strategies and modifications to use with assistive technology devices. Finally, school districts must have access to a variety of assistive technology devices that can be used for trials to determine if they will be an effective component of an intervention plan. Every school district should have an array of devices available to their staff to address difficulties with handwriting, reading arithmetic, written expression, daily organization, positioning, mobility, and self-help and resource materials to help them determine what devices might be useful. In some cases this access may be through a regional or state level lending library, but access to devices for trial periods is absolutely critical.

Education Tech Point #4-Plan Development Questions

After the evaluation and assessment data have been assembled an appropriate educational program must be developed. Some children will be found to need specially designed instruction and be eligible for special education services. Other students who have disabilities may not need specially designed instruction, but may need accommodations under Section 504. In either case the school district must determine

if assistive technology is needed for the child to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Section 504 which covers children with disabilities who are eligible under IDEA as well as those who are not, requires us to ask whether assistive technology is needed to insure equal access to an education. Implications for the school district include insuring that staff members are trained in writing assistive technology into the IEP and that they include appropriate periodic review to identify and deal with unanticipated problems. An effective extended assessment system makes it easier to write the IEP because a trial has already occurred. However, staff members often have questions about how to best include assistive technology in the IEP or Section 504 document. Resource materials and periodic training are needed to answer staff questions as they arise.

Education Tech Point #5-Implementation Questions

Implementation questions focus on responsibility for day to day operation. This area includes questions such as, who will make sure the equipment is up and running, what will happen when it needs repair, and what the district will provide in the interim if they are going to seek outside funding to purchase a device. It is important to identify who is responsible for monitoring each aspect of the implementation of assistive technology plan (Bowser, 1991). A major implication for school districts is the need for time to be set aside for the staff to work together. When staff is encouraged to work together as a team and time is set aside for team members to communicate, the likelihood that assistive technology will be an effective tool is increased (Todis & Walker, 1993). In addition local building staff will need to be aware of and connected with other resources at the local, regional, and state level in order to develop their own professional expertise and the capacity of the organization to provide effective assistive technology services (Garmston & Wellman, 1995).

Education Tech Point #6-Periodic Review Questions

IDEA requires the periodic review of each student's IEP. This review should include evaluation of the effectiveness of the assistive technology solutions in the child's plan. Questions at the point of periodic review center around whether the assistive technology devices and services that were planned and provided have actually had the intended effect. Did they work? Does anything need to be changed? One implication for school districts is the need for a system to insure that review takes place and that it occurs in a timely fashion. The required yearly IEP review may not be sufficient if the assistive technology stopped working one month after the last IEP meeting and nothing was done to fix it. In addition, after a period of use, a new device may become available or a student may master new skills and need to move on. Periodic reviews should be planned into the schedule in anticipation of predictable changes, as well as to prepare for the typical transitions that occur throughout a child's school program. As a child moves to a new setting, the technology he or she uses may not be compatible or staff may not be trained to operate it. Problems and delays can be prevented with planned periodic review.

More information about the Education Tech Points Framework can be found in a manual distributed by the Coalition for Assistive Technology in Oregon (CATO). The manual is entitled *Education Tech Points: A Framework for Assistive Technology Planning*. The manual contains 450 pages of text, resources, and tools collected from numerous school districts. All of these are excellent tools to help you develop an assistive technology process for an individual child or for an entire school district. The cost is \$50 including shipping and handling. The manual can be purchased from CATO, P.O. Box 431, Winchester, OR 97495. Checks or purchase orders are accepted. CATO cannot take credit cards.