

Assistive Technology Fact Sheet #3: Assistive Technology for Children with Vision Impairments and Blindness

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1. What is assistive technology?

Assistive technology (AT) is any item, piece of equipment, or product system whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability (IDEA 2004, PL 108-446 Section 602).

2. What are some examples of assistive technology appropriate for students who are blind or visually impaired?

Assistive technology for a child who is blind or visually impaired may be used to either supplement or replace the visual event depending upon the needs of the child. Assistive technology for a child with a vision loss falls into four categories: magnification, voice output, Braille, and tactual graphics. Magnification equipment includes such things as simple bar or dome magnifiers that are placed on a document and magnify print or computer programs and electronic devices that that enlarge on-screen fonts, diagrams etc. Voice output programs verbally read information on computer screens. Tactual graphics are used to raise lines and surfaces to re-create maps, drawings, graphs etc.

3. Why may assistive technology for students with vision impairments be needed in the schools?

Assistive technology may be needed in the school to support a student's independence for functional life tasks such as using a monocular, talking clock or calculator. Other items such a scanner, digital or tape recorder may benefit the student by assisting with accessing text or note taking. Videotapes and television programs that are descriptive provide addition auditory information, allowing the student access to the program.

4. Which Wisconsin students with vision impairment will benefit from assistive technology?

Any student with vision impairment may benefit from assistive technology if it makes it possible for them to access their education, progress in the general education curriculum, gain independence, or achieve a specific educational standard. Individual need and potential benefit of the assistive technology are determined by the child's IEP team.

5. How do I find out about assistive technology?

You can begin by talking with your teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI). If you are not currently working with a TVI, then contact the Special Education Director in your local school district. In addition, the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually

Impaired (WCBVI) employs consultants who are available for evaluations and recommendations. You can find the names and addresses for them on their web site, <http://www.wcbvi.k12.wi.us>. General information about assistive technology can also be obtained from the Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative (WATI), which has a consultant at each CESA. Their names and address can be found on their website, <http://www.wati.org>.

6. Where do I get assistive technology for a student with vision impairment?

Your school district and Teacher of Students Visual Impairments are involved in procuring assistive technology for students with a vision impairment. They work with a variety of resources in Wisconsin. Some larger school districts may have an assortment of assistive technology devices. Many of the Cooperative Education Service Agencies (CESAs) have assistive technology lending libraries. In addition, WATI, a statewide project of the Department of Public Instruction, operates a lending library that is open to every school district and Birth to Three Program in the state. Assistive technology devices may be borrowed at no charge from their lending library. The Wisconsin Center for Blind and Visually Impaired (WCBVI) may have devices available for loan through their Outreach Program. Some vendors will lease their products prior to purchase to help determine if they provide the necessary help and many have limited use product demonstration disks available from their websites or product representatives. Finally the Independent Living Centers throughout the state all have assistive technology for individuals with vision impairments. These can be borrowed for children as well as adults.

7. How does the IEP team determine which assistive technology is needed?

The determination of when assistive technology is appropriate and necessary is based on the needs of the child. It involves consideration of the student's unique needs related to the vision loss and should also include age, social interests, physical abilities and needs, maturity, and cognitive ability. For example, the academic needs of one child may be met through use of a closed circuit TV (CCTV), while another may require the use of a Braille embosser and voice output computer program. Each IEP team must think about all factors and then should try the specific assistive technology in the environment in which it will be used, before committing the school district to provide it on a permanent basis.

8. Is the school district required to pay for assistive technology?

The school district is required to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE). If the IEP team determines that assistive technology is needed in order for a child who blind or visually impaired to access the regular education curriculum, then the school district will need to provide it at no cost to the child's parent. "Provide" however, does not always mean "pay for". They may borrow an item, lease it, or receive it as a donation from some other source, as long as they provide it at no cost to the parent when needed to implement the student's IEP.

9. Can just anyone decide to use it?

Federal and state law specifically empowers the IEP team to determine what is needed

in order for a child to receive FAPE at school. Therefore, they are the group that must decide if assistive technology is an appropriate part of the child's program at school. Every IEP team is required to consider the need for assistive technology during the IEP meeting. During this consideration, any member of the team can suggest specific assistive technologies. If it is decided to try assistive technology, a trial period of use is recommended. The trial period can determine if the assistive technology is appropriate and has the desired outcome, before the school district commits to the long-term provision. The IEP team may also want to consider whether the specific piece of equipment would benefit the student academically by having the equipment in the home as well as at school. Families may independently decide to use assistive technology at home for activities that take place there and which may not be part of their child's IEP, such as use of a voice output program for the recreational use of a computer, a talking alarm clock, or a digital talking book player.

10. How do I include assistive technology in the IEP?

Assistive technology can be part of the specially designed instruction, a related service, or a supplementary aid or service. There is no one right place to document the need for assistive technology. Rather the task is to write it where it best fits and best explains what the IEP team intends to have happen.

11. What is the school district's responsibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?

The ADA has a different standard than IDEA. It requires effective communication and consideration of consumer preference. School districts are impacted in two ways by the ADA. They must meet ADA requirements in making information and events accessible to the community and to their staff, in addition to considering it in the provision of services to their students with disabilities. Safety and access to information are general provisions for all students and others entering the school building. For students who are blind or visually impaired, this could include providing Braille labels on doors indicating room numbers and restroom genders and a tactile map of the building captioned TV programs whenever possible and visual fire alarms in isolated areas where a student might be left alone, such as the rest rooms, study carrels, etc. All safety information and diagrams depicting emergency exits must be made available to students in accessible format.