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GPAT

Considering Assistive Technology for Students with Disabilities

With the re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams are required to consider assistive technology devices and services as a special factor in the development, review, and revision of IEPs for students with disabilities.

Definition of Assistive Technology Devices and Services
Assistive technology devices are identified in the IDEA as "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 children with disabilities. An exclusion was added to the definition of an assistive technology device in the 2004 Re-authorization of IDEA to address surgically implanted devices such as cochlear implants. Specifically, it was stated that an assistive technology device "does not include a medical device that is surgically implanted, or the replacement of such device."

The definition of an assistive technology device is very general and provides IEP teams with the flexibility to provide a range of technology solutions to assist students in completing tasks within relevant instructional or access areas. Technology is available to support student performance in academic areas such as writing, spelling, reading, and math. Moreover, assistive technology is available to support student performance and independence in communication, listening, mobility, recreation and leisure, vocational training, and daily living activities.

Assistive technology services include any service is "any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, and use of an assistive technology device". Assistive technology services include but are not limited to evaluation, device acquisition, device maintenance and repair, training for the student, his family, and educators as needed, and technical assistance.

Prior to IDEA 2004, there was some discussion as to whether a school system was responsible for the maintenance, programming, and replacement of surgically implanted assistive technology devices such as cochlear implants and whether or not these would be considered assistive technology. The following excerpt from IDEA addresses this issue: "For a child with a surgically implanted medical device who is receiving special education and related services under this part, a public agency is not responsible for the maintenance, programming, or replacement of the medical device that has been surgically implanted (or of an external component of the surgically implanted medical device)." Although the school system, under the present legislation, is not responsible for maintaining, programming, and replacing surgically implanted assistive technology devices, the IDEA states that the system does have a responsibility to ensure that the external components of these devices are functioning properly.

When considering assistive technology during the development, review, and revision of a student's IEP, the team must consider assistive technology devices as well as services. Often, IEP teams focus their efforts on the identification and documentation of required assistive technology devices, but they fail to address the services such as training and technical assistance which are critical to the student's successful use of the recommended assistive technology. IEP teams must be knowledgeable about potential assistive technology devices and services and use a well-defined decision process to address student assistive technology needs.

Quality Indicators for the Consideration of Assistive Technology
Although the IDEA has clearly mandated the requirement that IEP teams consider assistive technology devices and services for each student, many IEP team members have questioned how this requirement could be effectively implemented for individual students. The Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology (QIAT) Consortium has developed a list of indicators that clearly define the critical elements of effective

consideration. They are known as the Quality Indicators for Consideration of Assistive Technology Needs and are included below:

- Assistive technology devices and services are considered for all students with disabilities regardless of the type and severity of disability.

- During the development of the individualized educational program, the IEP team consistently uses a collaborative decision-making process that supports systematic consideration of each student's possible need for assistive technology devices and services.

- IEP team members have the collective knowledge and skills needed to make informed assistive technology decisions and seek assistance when needed.

- Decisions regarding the need for assistive technology devices and services are based on the student's IEP goals and objectives, access to curricular and extracurricular activities, and progress in the general education curriculum.

- The IEP team gathers and analyzes data about the student, customary environments, educational goals, and tasks when considering a student's need for assistive technology devices and services.

- When assistive technology is needed, the IEP team explores a range of assistive technology devices, services, and other supports that address identified needs.

- The assistive technology consideration process and results are documented in the IEP and include a rationale for the decision and supporting evidence.

These indicators clearly address several critical elements of effective consideration of assistive technology needs.

1. First and foremost, assistive technology must be considered for all students based on the unique needs of the student. Historically, IEP teams have done better in meeting the assistive technology needs of students with severe physical, intellectual, communication, and sensory impairments. In fact, the first assistive technology devices were developed to meet the needs of these students. Moreover, initial professional development activities in assistive technology were focused on educators working with students with the most severe disabilities. Historically, very little attention has been given to the assistive technology needs of students with learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, and behavioral disorders. This may be attributed to the fact that many of the relevant assistive technology solutions have been developed within the past few years and limited professional development training has been provided to educators working with students with what many consider to be "mild disabilities".

2. IEP teams must use a well-defined decision-making process to consider the student's assistive technology needs. Although the IDEA mandates the consideration of assistive technology, it does not define a required process. This means that school systems must develop a process that will be used by its IEP teams when considering assistive technology needs. This process should be relatively brief and should include a review of the student's needs and abilities as well the instructional tasks across environments within the student's curriculum. All special educators must be trained in the use of the process.

3. In order to effectively consider assistive technology, IEP teams must be knowledgeable about the student's needs, abilities, and curriculum. Moreover, one or more members of the IEP team should be knowledgeable about potential assistive technology solutions that can be used to enhance the student's ability to meet the goals, objectives, and educationally relevant tasks required in the student's educational program. If members of the IEP team are not knowledgeable about assistive technology solutions that are available to address the student's needs, it will be necessary to involve other individuals that are knowledgeable about assistive technology in the decision making process. Assistance may be obtained from other professionals

within the school, within the school system, from a regional support agency, or from a statewide agency.

4. Decisions regarding the consideration of assistive technology should be based on the student's access to the general education curriculum as well as the individually defined special education program. IEP teams should consider whether or not assistive technology is required to accomplish the educational tasks required of the student within his or her curriculum. The need for assistive technology in extra-curricular activities should also be addressed.

5. When considering a student's assistive technology needs, the IEP team should analyze the information available to them about the student, the environments in which the student functions, the tasks that are required within each environment, and the tools that are currently being used. The need for analyzing student, environments, tasks and tools is the foundation of The SETT Framework developed by Joy Zabala. After gathering information in each of these areas, the IEP team can then determine if the currently available solutions are meeting the student's needs or if additional devices and services are required.

6. When considering assistive technology needs, IEP teams must consider a continuum of assistive technology devices. This encourages teams to consider low technology solutions as well as high technology solutions. When considering the range of assistive technology tools available, IEP teams should consider tools that are readily available to the student as well as tools that may be need to be obtained outside the school or school system. Teams should also address the various types of assistive technology services that are required.

7. The decisions regarding the consideration of assistive technology should be documented in the student's IEP. The various methods for documenting the consideration of assistive technology are addressed later in this document.

Consideration Checklist and Resource Guide
Shortly, after the Re-authorization of the IDEA, assistive technology specialists from the Georgia Project for Assistive Technology (GPAT) started to develop a decision-making process that could be used by IEP teams to consider the assistive technology needs of students with disabilities. When developing a process that could be used to consider assistive technology, the GPAT staff determined that the following critical elements must be addressed:

- The process should be applicable to students with all types of disabilities and ability levels. Therefore, it would be applicable to students in preschool special education programs, students in school-based academic programs, and students with more severe disabilities participating in a functional instructional program.

- The process should be applicable to students of all ages. This would include students in preschool programs as well as students transitioning from the school system to post-secondary environments.

- The process should include an analysis of the instructional and access areas that are relevant to the student.

- The process should also include a review of the educationally relevant tasks with each of the appropriate instructional access areas.

- The process should include a review of the different environments in which the student is required to produce the relevant tasks referenced above.

- The process should include a review of the standard classroom tools, accommodations, modifications, and assistive technology solutions that are currently in place and a determination as to whether these strategies are adequate to meet the student's needs.

- The process should include a generation of potential solutions, including assistive technology, if the student's needs are not being met.

GPAT's work on a decision-making process resulted in the development of an Assistive Technology Consideration Checklist that could be used to assist IEP teams in considering assistive technology. The checklist provides a framework for considering assistive technology that is appropriate for students of all ages and ability levels and serves as documentation of the procedure used to consider assistive technology. It addresses all instructional areas in which assistive technology may be required. The Assistive Technology Consideration Checklist also addresses a continuum of assistive technology solutions as well as standard classroom tools, modifications, and accommodations that are currently in place to address the student's needs. The checklist is available in this document and on GPAT's website at http://www.gpat.org.

GPAT also developed an Assistive Technology Consideration Resource Guide in order to assist IEP teams in identifying potential modifications, accommodations, standard classroom tools, and assistive technology solutions that may be in place or to identify modifications, accommodations, and technology solutions that may need to be implemented. This document is designed as a companion to the Assistive Technology Consideration Checklist and is included in this document and on GPAT's website at http://www.gpat.org.

When completing the Assistive Technology Consideration Checklist, IEP team members are asked to identify instructional or access areas that are relevant for the student (Column A). After all of the instructional and access areas have been identified, IEP team members completing the checklist are then asked to identify the required tasks within the instructional or access areas. For example, taking notes in class, completing written tests and worksheets, and writing in a daily journal may be identified as relevant tasks in the area of writing for a student with a learning disability participating in the general education curriculum. For a student with a more severe disability, required tasks such as asking for assistance when needed and expressing desired choices might be identified in the area of oral communication.

After identifying the required tasks within the relevant instructional areas, IEP team members are then asked to determine whether or not the student can complete the identified tasks independently using standard classroom tools (Column B). Standard classroom tools are defined as technology solutions that are typically available in the general education curriculum. If the student can independently complete the required tasks within an identified instructional area using standard classroom tools, then the consideration process for that area is completed. If the student cannot complete the identified tasks independently, then the educators must determine whether or not the student's needs are currently being met with modifications and accommodations that are in place or with currently available assistive technology tools (Column C). If the student's needs are being met in one or more of these ways, then the consideration process for this particular area is completed. If the student's needs are not being met, then the IEP team must identify additional solutions (Column D) that may be needed. These solutions may include additional accommodations and modifications that may need to be implemented, trial use of an assistive technology device if the IEP team is aware of technology solutions that may be appropriate to meet the student's needs, or referral for an assistive technology consultation or evaluation if potential assistive technology devices are not known to the IEP team.

Assistive Consideration Outcomes

Regardless of the process used for considering assistive technology, there are a limited number of outcomes. The possible outcomes are listed below:

- The student independently accomplishes required tasks within the relevant instructional or access areas using standard classroom tools. Assistive technology is not required.

- The student accomplishes the required tasks within the instructional or access areas using standard classroom and modifications and accommodations that are currently in place. Assistive technology is not required.

- The student accomplishes the required tasks within the relevant instructional or access areas with assistive technology that has been determined educationally necessary and is currently in place. Assistive technology is required. Document required assistive technology devices and services in the IEP. Monitor the use of the assistive technology and make changes as needed.

- The student cannot accomplish the required tasks within the relevant instructional or access areas with modifications, accommodations, and/or assistive technology that is currently in place.
    - If potential assistive technology solutions are known to the IEP team, trial use of the identified assistive technology solution may be documented in the IEP and implemented.
    - If potential assistive technology solutions are not known to the IEP team, the IEP team may choose recruit consultants who can assist the team in addressing assistive technology or refer the student for an assistive technology evaluation or. A trial use period may be recommended at the end of the consultation or evaluation.

Documenting the Consideration of Assistive Technology in the IEP

As required in the IDEA, IEP teams must document their consideration of assistive technology in the IEP. The section entitled Consideration of Special Factors is the required component of the IEP in which to document the consideration of assistive technology. This section includes the following statement:

> Does the student require assistive technology devices and services? _____Yes _____No
> If yes, describe: _____

If the student does not require assistive technology, the IEP team should check "No". If the student does require assistive technology the IEP team should check "Yes" and describe the assistive technology that is required by the student. Typically, it is recommended that features of devices be used rather than name brands and models. For example, the statement of assistive technology needs for a student who is using assistive technology to support writing skills may be written as "Johnny uses a portable word processor with a spell check feature when completing longer writing assignments".

Checking yes or no to the above consideration question (and if yes, describing the technology required) is considered minimal compliance to the requirement for considering assistive technology. However, it is best practice to document the decision making process used to consider the student's need for assistive technology. For example a statement regarding the discussion of assistive technology needs may be documented in the minutes of the IEP meeting and may be included in other components of the IEP as described below. For example, a statement such as "An analysis of the required tasks within the relevant instructional areas revealed that Steve can independently accomplish the tasks; therefore, assistive technology is not required." could be used to document that assistive technology assistive technology was considered but not required. For a student requiring assistive technology, a statement such as "An analysis of the required tasks within the relevant instructional areas revealed that John has difficulty completing math calculations; therefore, it is recommended that he have access to a hand held calculator to complete math calculations in all classes." could be used to document the consideration process for a student who requires assistive technology.

Assistive technology required by the student may also be addressed in other components of the IEP including the present performance levels, the listing of special education and related services, the listing of supplemental aids and services, the listing of required accommodations and modifications, the listing of modifications and accommodations required for participation in district-wide and state-wide assessments, and in the annual goals and benchmarks.

Resources

Quality Indicators in Assistive Technology Consideration: The Quality Indicators in Assistive Technology Consideration Consortium, 2007.

The SETT Framework: Region IV Educational Service Center, Houston, TX.

Using an AT Checklist to Facilitate Consideration, Assessment, and Planning: Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative, 1997.