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How to be a leader with assistive technology

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How to be a leader with assistive technology
Two AT trainers recommend easy in-class solutions -- and share their strategies for success
By Meris Stansbury, Associate Editor

Primary Topic Channel: Assistive technologies

Finding the right assistive technology (AT) to help students with special needs can be a daunting task -- but two leading AT trainers say the simplest tools often are best.

During an Oct. 21 webinar hosted by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), titled "The Building Blocks of a Successful Assistive Technology Team," Sally Norton-Darr and Chris Bugaj, both AT trainers for Virginia's Loudoun County Public Schools, offered their expert advice on how to evaluate assistive technology products for use in schools.

The good news for educators: Their most commonly recommended solutions are technologies that already can be found in most classrooms.

The pair said their experience with AT training started 10 years ago, when an "AT team" was a just a volunteer assignment.

"If you wanted to know more about AT and ... find a way of implementing helpful strategies and tools, it was on a volunteer basis," explained Bugaj, who also hosts the "A.T.TIPScast"--a podcast covering the implementation of assistive technology in public schools.

As awareness of AT's importance in helping special-needs students grew, and procedures became less haphazard, Loudoun County recruited two full-time AT team members, as well as three part-time members.

Bugaj said the team's "every goal, every action," revolves around a special-needs student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). "Basically, the AT team exists because of the IEP," Bugaj said.

As the team evolved, it tackled challenges such as how to develop AT evaluations, how to handle staff development, and how to keep an inventory of available AT products in the district.

Evaluations, team members decided, should be IEP-based. The team also uses the SETT (Student/Environment/Tasks/Tools) Framework to guide its evaluations. The SETT Framwork is a guideline for gathering data in order to make effective AT decisions. It considers first, the student, then the environment and the tasks required for active participation in the learning activities, and finally, the tools needed for the student to complete those tasks.

Once these elements are defined, team members can begin to conduct IEP-focused evaluations for individual students. In doing these evaluations, however, Bugaj and Norton-Darr began to notice that many of the recommendations they were making for teachers and students were similar across the county.

"We noticed that, not only were a lot of our recommendations similar, but 90 percent of the time the suggestions we gave for help could already be found in the classroom," said Norton-Darr. "The problem was that educators just didn't know [the

technology] was there."

Here are some of the recommendations their AT team frequently makes:

- For students who have problems with composition, spelling, or organization, Microsoft Word has a "record sound" feature, which is included in all Word versions 2000 and later. Using this feature, said Norton-Darr, students can record their thoughts as they write, and teachers can record direction for students.

- Look for text-to-speech capabilities in the computer, because many devices have this feature built in.

- Inspiration Software's Inspiration program, which is a visual learning tool, has built-in text-to-speech capabilities, as well as a graphic organizing template feature and the ability to record your voice. The software also comes in a web version, called Webspiration.

- Pacing boards, while not software, are "extremely effective for language development," said Bugaj. Pacing boards are a series of different colored circles on paper that can be tapped as you speak to help young children learn to speak. For example, as the teacher says "It is green," he or she would tap the red circle for "it," the yellow circle for "is," and the green circle for "green." Circles can correspond to any sentence.

- Communication notebooks are also useful for communicating graphically what can't be understood by a student through speech. These notebooks use pictures or graphics to represent different words and understandings. They can be made by the educator or purchased for a low price.

- Visual schedules work well too, said Norton-Darr. For example, make a schedule for a student using pictures to symbolize the activites of the day.

- ReadPlease, WordTalk, and PowerTalk are software programs that can help students read. ReadPlease, a text-to-speech program, is available for downloading free of charge, and WordTalk is a free text-to-speech plugin for Microsoft Word. PowerTalk is a free open-source program that automatically speaks the text on any PowerPoint presentation. "Any of these tools would be a great editing tool for students, to hear the mistakes they made if they can't recognize them as they write," said Bugaj.

Both Bugaj and Norton-Darr said it's often these simple suggestions that turn out to be the most helpful.

Both also said that when it comes to AT, educators and students need the least restrictive technologies and the least restrictive environments possible.

"You should ... always coordinate with the IT people in [your] school or district to help implement your solutions, and make sure these solutions meet the needs of all learners, not just special-needs students," said Norton-Darr.

One of the AT team's most important jobs is leading staff development on the use of assistive technology. Norton-Darr said AT teams should conduct both "traditional" and "alternative" professional development for educators, using strategies such as workshops that let educators experience what AT tools are available to them and their students; a web site that lists hand-picked AT resources and frequently asked questions; and DVD-based training. Loudoun County offers a series of "AT Tonight" DVDs, which teachers can check out to watch, return, and answer questions to receive staff development credit.

All of this information and more soon will appear in an ISTE-published book titled "The Practical (and Fun) Guide to Assistive Technology in Public Schools: Building or Improving Your District's AT Team," written by Bugaj and Norton-Darr and scheduled for release in April 2010.

Links:

Sally Norton-Darr

Christoper Bugaj

AT tips resource

International Society for Technology in Education

Loudoun County Public Schools' AT

Inspiration Software

Webspiration

ReadPlease

WordTalk

PowerTalk

AT Tonight DVDs