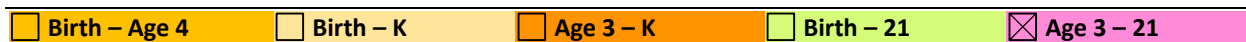200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Technical Assistance Bulletin

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Supporting the use of Assistive Technology in a Virtual and/or Distance Learning Environment

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to support the continuity of learning for students who receive Assistive Technology (AT) devices and/or services as a part of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) delivered through specially designed instruction (SDI). This TAB includes:

- Legal Drivers
- General Considerations
- Instructional Best Practices
- Special Considerations
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Resources

This document is a supplement to Technical Assistance Bulletin (TAB) #20-01, *Serving Children with Disabilities under IDEA during school closures due to the COVID-19 Pandemic* and TAB #20-03: *Providing Continuity of Learning to Students with Disabilities during COVID-19*. Please refer to these TABs for additional information and guidance on the provision of special education services to students with disabilities during this unprecedented time.

Legal Drivers

In addition to the general FAPE requirements for all students with disabilities, the law provides additional requirements for AT. IDEA defines an **assistive technology device** 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 a student with a disability," not including a medical device that is surgically implanted or the replacement of such a device [34 CFR §300.5 and COMAR 13A.05.01.03B (4)].

An *assistive technology service* means a service that directly assists a student with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device. Assistive technology services include:

- Evaluating the needs of a student with a disability, including a functional evaluation of the student in the student's customary environment;
- Purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing for the acquisition of assistive technology devices for students with disabilities;
- Selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, applying, maintaining, repairing, or replacing assistive technology devices;
- Coordinating and using other therapies, interventions, or services with assistive technology devices, such as those associated with existing education and rehabilitation plans and programs;
- Training or technical assistance for a student with a disability or, if appropriate, the student's family; and
- Training or technical assistance for professionals, including individuals providing education or rehabilitation services, employers, or other individuals who provide services, employ, or are otherwise substantially involved in the major life functions of a student with a disability, [34 CFR §300.6 and COMAR 13A.05.01.03B (5)]

IDEA requires that IEP teams consider several "special factors" that impact the development of the student's individualized program. The need for AT devices and/or services is one of these factors [34 CFR §300.324(a)(2)].   The IEP must consider whether the student requires AT devices and/or services and document that decision in the IEP. If devices and/or services are required, they are documented in the appropriate section(s) of the IEP document. Please note that consistent with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and as defined in State regulations, Assistive Technology Services are not considered a Related Service [34 CFR §300.34(c) and COMAR 13A.05.01.03(65)].

General Considerations

Assistive Technology (AT) devices and/or services are an essential component of an IEP for many students with disabilities in order to access the curriculum and environment, mitigate the impact of the disability, and support the demonstration of skills and knowledge. The access to, and use of, AT to support continuity of learning for students with disabilities (who have it as a documented part of their existing IEP) will help to provide equitable access in the virtual and/or distance learning environment to meet the individual learning needs of the student. As the school staff reviews all current IEPs, they should consider, as appropriate, existing AT devices or services required by individual students and if they can be implemented to the greatest extent possible remotely to support continuity of learning. Ways in which AT may be used to support students remotely may include:

- **Instructional and Testing Accommodations**. Some AT tools are "presentation accommodations" and/or "response accommodations" in this section of the IEP. Any accommodations which the student requires for equitable participation in assessment must also be implemented during on-going instruction. Note that certain accommodations, such as the use of text-to-speech for the English-Language Arts Assessment, require additional documentation within the IEP.

- **Supplementary Aids and Services.** Assistive Technology devices and/or services needed by the student may be documented in Supplementary Aids and Services. The team considers the student's

access and participation to both academic, non-academic, extra-curricular environments and activities. Training and consultation for the members of the instructional team, including the family when appropriate to support the student's access and progress, are documented under "Supports to Personnel." If the student's IEP does not currently include personnel supports for the use of AT devices and/or implementation of AT services, this may be a consideration for the virtual and/or distance learning environment.

- **Secondary Transition Services**. The student's need for AT devices and/or services in postsecondary environments (including educational, employment, and community settings) are considered during transition planning. The team identifies strategies to ensure that the student will have access to needed technology after leaving school.

- **Goals and Objectives**. The student's use of AT to master content standards and/or participate actively and independently in the school environment is reflected in the IEP goals and objectives. In some cases, the development of the technical skills required to operate a system and/or device may be included as a goal or objective. Maryland's IEP goals and objectives contain five components to eliminate ambiguity and allow for and goals and objectives to be consistently implemented and measured. These components include Conditions, Behavior, Criteria, Method of Measurement, and Timeframe. The use of AT may be a "condition" for the performance of academic and/or functional skills.

- **Special Education and Related Services**. Assistive Technology devices and/or services must be considered for each student with a disability. On an individual basis, the use of school-purchased AT devices in a child's home or in other settings is required if the child's IEP Team determines that the child needs access to those devices in order to receive FAPE and as part of their special education services. Time spent supporting the student and team in the use of AT is considered when determining the amount of special education and/or other services (e.g., occupational therapy, speech-language service) the student needs to achieve IEP goals and access and progress in the curriculum.

Instructional Best Practices

Factors such as accessibility, providing AT in the new learning environment, type and quality of materials, and the duration of distance learning may be considered by school staff as they plan for how AT devices and/or services may look during virtual and/or distance learning. The following key strategies can support educators as they implement AT to promote continuity of learning during the extended school closure:

Strategy 1: Consider Accessibility

Not all students have access to the internet, phone lines, TV, or radio. It is important to provide a variety of methods of distance learning that offer accessibility features for a wide range of needs, and/or hard copy alternatives for assignments. All online educational learning materials must be provided in alternate formats, such as digital textbooks.

Every LSS/PA has guidance regarding Learning Management Systems (LMS) to be used to support remote learning. Understanding the accessibility features of their chosen LMS and other popular

programs (e.g., Microsoft Word, PPT, Apple Products, etc.) provide effective learning opportunities for all students, including students with disabilities. In order to provide specially designed instruction (SDI) in the home, educators should understand and know how to enable accessibility features already embedded within the LMS. Teachers can share and store instructional materials, including assignments, worksheets, calendars, and assessments; grade work; send messages and notifications to students; facilitate discussions with students, conduct online class meetings; and much more. Instructional materials must also be made accessible. Microsoft and Apple products have embedded accessibility features to support the development of accessible educational documents. Assistive technology personnel can be an important support to provide training and answer questions about accessibility for students as teachers and families access and use these online learning management systems.

Strategy 2: Implementation tips for using assistive technology in virtual and/or distance learning environments

To determine how best to meet a student's specific needs during virtual and/or distance learning, many of the same rules and strategies from the classrooms apply. Consider the following guiding questions:
- What is the assistive technology that is currently available for the student? Is it operational?
- How does the student's disability impact access to the learning environment?
- What specific element or elements of instruction are inaccessible to the student that they were previously able to access in the brick and mortar setting?

When creating or providing online learning for students, the technical requirements of AT devices should not interfere with learning activities. These requirements are considered during instructional planning and explained to the teacher, student and family, as appropriate. Consider the following questions:
- Does the instructional content allow students with disabilities who use assistive technology devices to readily navigate the lesson?
- Can the student navigate through graphics, images, and tables with a keyboard only?
- How does the AT device interact with any technology platforms to allow for student participation and, when necessary, collaboration with peers?

Students and families may not be versed in using AT devices in the home. In this instance, consider the following guiding questions to support family and student training:
- How is the purpose of the AT device explained to the family to support authentic use in the home setting?
- Do families know who to contact if there is a question about the use of an AT device or the implementation of a particular AT service?
- Are expectations clearly explained about how AT devices and/or services support the student in different types of learning activities?

Strategy 3: Consider Low-Tech Solutions

Educators and families work collaboratively to review AT solutions and may identify a low-tech "plan B" to meet the student's needs if a higher-tech device is unavailable or breaks. Remember, those students who have AT devices and services as a part of their IEP rely on them to help support learning and skill development; their use, especially during this unprecedented time, may help to minimize regression.

Special Considerations

Throughout the period of school closure, consider how ongoing collaboration with families can inform the collaborative team of student progress and response to learning activities. The use of AT devices and delivery of AT services may be documented and regularly reviewed so that data-informed instructional adjustments can be made when necessary. The collaborative team may wish to establish a data collection and analysis schedule to support student and family engagement and student progress.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Will distance learning platforms include access for students with disabilities?

A: Many commercial tools, such as apps, online learning activities, conferencing platforms, and learning management systems, have built-in accessibility features that can be enabled as needed for individual students. Educators should reach out to LLS/PA IT supports to ensure they are using distance learning tools effectively. If a tool is not accessible for an individual student, alternative solutions (such as printed assignments or assistance from an adult to access the content) should be identified.

Q: How can the need for assistive technology devices and services be addressed during virtual and/or distance learning?

A: Assistive technology needed to access educational services and activities during distance learning should be discussed during the conversation to amend the IEP for the student. In some cases, the tools and devices the student uses at school may be picked up by or delivered to the family for home use. Some students may be able to use an alternative tool (such as a downloadable screen-reading or speech-to-text software). In this case, remember to plan for instruction and support in the use of the tool. If neither of these solutions is appropriate, consider additional ways for the student to access the content and engage in the learning activities, such as listening to an audiobook or having the material read aloud over the phone.

Q. What funds are available to support AT devices and services during the extended school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

A. Flexibility has been granted to LSSs/PAs as they implement their continuity of learning plans for all students, including students with disabilities. Federal IDEA pass-through and discretionary funds can be used to support AT needs. For SFY 2019 and SFY 2020, the DEI/SES has increased the cap on supplies and materials that can be purchased through Local Implementation for Results (LIR) grant funds. LSSs/PAs should discuss their proposed amendment with their assigned programmatic and fiscal liaison to support system programmatic alignment. Federal guidelines for the use of IDEA funds remain in place and have not changed for the purchasing equipment.

Resources

Accessibility for Web Conferencing

- Accessibility Features in Zoom Meetings. Accessibility features include closed captioning, keyboard accessibility, automatic transcripts, and screen reader support.- https://zoom.us/accessibility

- Protect Your Zoom Meeting-Security & Safety-https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/27/best-practices-for-securing-your-virtual-cl assroom/?fbclid=IwAR3KVFa_bPdtmSu242X-PriODyfn0Jx1w5-mTKjMVNK-02lflFU2XSLUy L4

- Accessibility in Google Meet. Accessibility features include live captions, screen readers and magnifiers, keyboard shortcuts and spoken feedback: https://support.google.com/meet/answer/7313544?hl=en

Translation Accessibility Tools

- Microsoft Translator-Translate real-time conversations across all devices and platforms-https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/translator/

- Microsoft Translator Parent Conference Template-A parent-teacher conference letter template to communicate with parents in their native language so they can download the app before your scheduled meeting: https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/translator/education/parent-teacher-conference-letters/

Closed Captioning

- Streamer Solutions -Provide captioning and/or language translation for remote classrooms: https://streamer.solutions/covid-academic/

- Captions for Google Slides- automatic captions to display the speaker's words in real-time: https://support.google.com/docs/answer/9109474?hl=en

- YouDescribe: Create Audio Descriptions for YouTube Videos: https://youdescribe.org/support/tutorial

- CLIPS App for Creating Videos with Captions: https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT207849

Educational Resources

- Touch Typing - Keyboarding http://www.typingclub.com/

- HW Buddy – Step-by-step directions for HumanWare products (Android and iOS) https://apps.apple.com/us/app/hw-buddy/id1503313942?ls=1

- Helpful gestures to use with VoiceOver on iOS devices
  https://drive.google.com/open?id=0BwWD6cZN8iWUeXIwazJQN05scjA

- Accessible games for students - *Free of charge through the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Requires school district or administrative approval.*
  https://www.objectiveed.com/distance

For more information, call 410-767-0249

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