

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY (AT) AND AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION (AAC)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team “consider” whether the child requires assistive technology and services (20 U.S.C. Section 1414[d] [3] [B] [v]). Each IEP team will therefore need to balance the degree of technology assistance with the student’s learning rate, motivation, chronological age, developmental level and goals/objectives. It is important to note that assistive technology (AT) is a tool for access (e.g., school environment, curriculum) and for independence (e.g., communication, mobility), it is as much a process as a product.

Tiered Approach to the Consideration of Assistive Technology

Assistive technology can be viewed as a progression of interventions required to assist students with disabilities access the curriculum and achieve their individual educational goals. Lack of response to an intervention requires that new interventions of greater intensity be implemented. Assistive technology devices can fall under simple, low tech “accommodations” to more elaborate, high tech devices. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) falls under AT as it addresses devices that attempt to compensate, either temporarily or permanently, for the impairment and disability patterns of individuals with severe expressive communication disorders.

It is important to use a collaborative school-based team approach in education settings for considering, planning, and providing needed assistive technology, which includes individuals who are knowledgeable about the student's disability, needs and strengths in the area of AT. When considering the need for assistive technology at any level, the IEP team should focus on the educational tasks of the curriculum and the daily routines that the student is required to perform, not on a particular piece of AT. Emphasis should be on the student’s needs and the features of the technology/intervention required to perform the tasks; not necessarily on specific brand names. Services needed to implement the use of assistive technology must also be included in the IEP. The IEP should support the student’s inclusion in all environments (home, school, community, or job).

In considering AT in Tier I, the focus lies in recognizing learning differences and enhancing access and performance of students. Instruction is aligned with state standards and includes ongoing and effective assessment in the classroom. The IEP team must discuss accommodations, interventions, and program modifications provided to the student in the classroom. The discussion must also address access to assistive technology currently available at the school site or district.

The IEP team should utilize the available resources within the team, conduct trials with existing materials or acquire systems and/or devices through creating them, borrowing or renting devices prior to the purchase of any new equipment when possible. Only after it is deemed appropriate based on trials and documentation that additional materials or equipment is needed should the team document that the materials and/or equipment are “required to benefit” for the student to succeed in the current educational program. The Special Factors page of the IEP provides

information about whether the student requires AT and whether or not additional information is needed before proceeding. If the IEP team identifies the necessary AT, the IEP should indicate that and no further outreach steps are required.

The IEP team may determine that more targeted interventions are necessary for the student to access the curriculum, so they advance to Tier II. Tier II involves mid-tech solutions available at the district level. District Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Pathologists, Psychologists, and Behaviorists might be among those implementing Tier II interventions. These are more targeting interventions, explicit instruction of the AT tool and ongoing progress monitoring. The IEP team may also decide to seek consultation from the COE AAC Specialist or the SELPA AT/AAC Expert panel to discuss a variety of resources and tools available for the IEP team to move forward; however, Tier II supports are provided by district specialists.

If the IEP team determines that Tier II (more intensive and individual interventions) might be required for the student to access the general curriculum, the COE AAC Specialist is available for AAC assessment. Following the assessment, the COE AAC Specialist, along with the IEP team, will meet to determine the need for Tier III AAC solutions.

If you are moving forward with a COE AAC Specialist to complete the assessment, Please DO NOT SIGN AN ASSESSMENT PLAN until this packet is submitted and approved by the COE Special Education Director.

In summary, when the student's IEP team communicates a desire to expand the level of knowledge of AT/AAC to support the team in determining the student's strengths and needs, there are three options available within the Contra Costa SELPA.

1. A referral to the Contra Costa County Office of Education AAC Specialist for consultation only via the COE Consult Request Form (found in SEIS Document library) specifically for augmentative and alternative communication only.
2. A referral to the Contra Costa County Office of Education AAC Specialist for an AAC evaluation via the AAC-Augmentative and Alternative Communication Assessment Request Packet (found in the SEIS Document Library) specifically for augmentative and alternative communication only.
3. A referral to the AT/AAC Expert Panel for consultation only via the Contra Costa SELPA Assistive Technology and Augmentative & Alternative Communication Consideration Packet (found in the SEIS Document Library) specifically for augmentative and alternative communication and assistive technology.

AAC District Specified Services

One option is to request individual consultation through the County Office of Education's (COE) Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Specialist. Once the referral packet is complete (incomplete packets will be returned and may delay the process) the COE administrator assigns a Specialist to contact the case manager of the student and provide consultation. The CCCOE AAC Specialist collaborates with site-based SLP to help the student's IEP team by:

- Working with the team to develop and/or modify an AAC system

- Training team members in AAC philosophies and methods (staff and parent-specific training)
- Modeling the use of the AAC system with the student (to train staff and parents)
- Creating and helping teams implement AAC Participation Plans

Consultation may consist of:

- Obtaining pertinent information from the IEP team
- Observing the student
- Providing recommendations for next steps in relation to the student's communication needs

Some examples of when a consultation is appropriate:

- Student has an AAC system or device and the IEP team needs guidance or training
- Class has group of kids who require AAC and SLP/Teacher are unsure about whether they are implementing correctly or if they should do something differently
- SLP has several AAC users and is unclear how to incorporate all devices into the group activity
- Team needs guidance about programming new vocabulary
- Specific details and referral forms are available in the SEIS Documents Library.

The second option is to request an AAC Assessment from the COE AAC Specialists. Augmentative and alternative communication is the use of different modalities of communication to support speech that is unintelligible or non-existent. Many students benefit from the addition of augmentative communication modes, which include picture communication symbols, photographs and other visuals, as well as speech generating devices.

Tier I and Tier II supports and interventions must be implemented by school based teams prior to submitting this packet. If teams feel they need additional support with Tier I & II interventions, they must complete and submit a Consultation Request (see form in SEIS). Alternatively, teams may want to consider the AT/AAC Expert Panel: A neutral multidisciplinary, Multi-Agency Panel Consultation to determine tools and strategies for implementing AAC and/or Assistive Technology. Specific details and referral forms are available in the SEIS Documents Library.

AT/AAC Panel

The third option is to request support from the AT/AAC Panel. This panel offers IEP teams a multi-agency collaborative effort of the Contra Costa, Mt. Diablo, San Ramon and West Contra Costa Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), including the COE AAC Specialists along with representation from the California Children's Services (CCS) and other agencies as needed. The panel is comprised of professionals with special expertise in working with students who have disabilities that interfere with their ability to access the curriculum thereby requiring the use of assistive technology to access the curriculum or who are unable to use speech as their primary or sole means of communication.

The AT/AAC Panel uses a multidisciplinary approach; team members hold certifications in speech/language pathology, occupational therapy, psychology, and education. This team meets

monthly to offer expertise through collaboration to staff and parents and is scheduled through the Contra Costa SELPA office. They provide facilitation, direction, recording and an action plan to assist the IEP team in narrowing options and developing next steps outside the IEP team process. Outcomes may include a direction for gathering more specific information, loaning equipment for trials using devices or programs prior to purchasing devices for a given student, or educating staff and/or parents during the decision-making process.

Panel Meeting

If an AT/AAC Panel meeting is the desired direction, a meeting will be scheduled by the Contra Costa SELPA contact person who will contact the LEA service providers and parents.

At the meeting, a process is utilized to assist the school site staff and parents to identify the student's communication priorities and to strategize methods for addressing them. These meetings are informal and are not IEP meetings. An action plan is developed. The AT/AAC Panel does not make specific recommendations for services, equipment, or placement. Through implementing the action plan developed, trials may be conducted to help determine if a device is required for the student to benefit from his/her educational program.

Referral Process

The district service provider or case manager can access the referral packet in the SEIS Document Library. The AT/AAC Consideration Packet, including the release of information, most recent IEP and psychological report as well as all relevant related service provider evaluations are forwarded to the contact person at the Contra Costa SELPA, in order to move the process forward.

Through these processes, information is presented in the referral packet which includes: identifiable information (name, medical history, medical diagnosis, treatment history, and reason for referral), sensory status (vision/ hearing abilities & limitations), postural, mobility and motor status (seating, positioning, motor abilities and limitations, and access), and speech/language/communication. Current levels of functioning will be reviewed and recommendations made.

These options will identify the student's strengths and challenges and question the referring team about any AT/AAC system or device (including any low or high technology) which has already been considered or tried, to help in the delineation of features and/or specifications for an AT/AAC system or device. The intent of the panel is to review AT/AAC interventions that have already been explored and deemed ineffective for the student.

Following consultation or assessment through one of these processes, the IEP team may begin trials with various systems or devices that match the recommended features/specifications. If, and when, an AT/AAC system or device is determined appropriate to meet the student's needs, the IEP team will describe the specific AT/AAC features needed in his/her IEP.