



Assistive Technology and Accessible Educational Materials: Top Ten Questions for Administrators

In the last few weeks, I've offered several workshops about the assistive technology (AT) and accessible educational materials (AEM) mandates in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Amendments of 2004 (IDEA). The workshops I have been offering are sessions designed to help AT teams and other groups of special education service providers to understand what IDEA really says about assistive technology and to suggest strategies for implementing the requirements. During the workshops, we talk about the fact that schools are required to consider whether *every* child who has an IEP needs assistive technology or accessible educational materials.

Inevitably, in the course of the discussion, someone asks a series of questions that I can't answer. They ask process questions that are specific to the districts where they work.

Special education providers who are learning about AT and AEM want to know what they should do when certain things happen. Many teachers, related service providers, and general education teachers are relatively new to assistive technology and accessible educational materials and they want to address the IDEA requirements responsibly. They also want to be mindful of the needs of each school district that they serve. I can't answer those questions because I don't know enough about their district.

A supervisor *can* begin to answer many of the process questions that arise. In fact, such process questions can *only* be answered at an agency level. Direct service staff who work with students with disabilities need help from their administrators.

What follows is a list of the top ten process questions I hear from educators. After each question, I have included suggestions for a possible response from your agency. As a program administrator or supervisor, you have the ability to reduce some of the confusion about assistive technology and accessible educational materials among your staff by providing guidance. You can help them to ensure that the services that your agency provides are legal, ethical and cost efficient.

Here are some things your staff members may be wondering about.

1. What should educators do when they believe a child needs assistive technology or accessible educational materials?

Under IDEA, education agencies must have a process for addressing the educational needs of children with disabilities in all areas. Educators need to know how the agency's process applies to questions about the need for AT and AEM. AT and AEM must be considered for every student who has an IEP.

Specific questions for administrators

- If a team wants to try some accessible educational materials or assistive technology tools, do team members have to initiate a formal referral and evaluation process or can they try things without the help of a specialist?
- What should a teacher do before initiating a request for support or for evaluation (i.e. pre-referral strategies) ?
- What data should accompany a referral or request for support that is initiated by a teacher?
- Are the agency's processes different for children with mild disabilities than they are for children with more severe disabilities?
- Are the processes different for commonly available technology than they are for specialized AT?

2. What should educators do when a parent asks for a trial of a specific AT device or a trial of a specific AEM resource during an IEP meeting?

One thing is certain. Failure to respond to a parent request can lead to dissatisfaction, disagreements and sometimes even formal complaints to the state. An initial request for an AEM or an AT assessment is similar to other requests for assessment or evaluation and these requests should receive the same careful attention.

Specific Questions for Administrators

- How should team members help parents re-frame the question to identify the problem the child is experiencing?
- At what point should a referral, permission to evaluate or request for support form be completed?
- When parents request a specific assistive technology device, should that device be listed on the referral or permission to evaluate form?

3. What should educators do when a parent asks for a trial of a specific AT device or a trial of a specific AEM resource during an informal conversation?

Helping staff members know how to handle informal requests for AT or AEM devices or services can create an environment that is responsive to the concerns of parents and the needs of their children with disabilities. Even if the request is not presented in writing or during an official IEP meeting, educators should have guidance about how to proceed.

Specific Questions for Administrators:

- When a parent requests an AT assessment or an AEM assessment during an informal conversation, what action should educators take?
- How and when should the request be documented? (e.g., in contact notes, by filling out a specific form, etc.)
- At what point in the conversation should educators recommend that the parent complete a permission to evaluate form?

4. What are the district's resources to help with assistive technology assessments?

If the AT and AEM that a child needs are commonly used in classrooms, an educational team may be able to assess that child's need for assistive technology without outside help. Almost anyone can help a child try a calculator, a mobile tablet or an audio CD that comes with a textbook. Educators can also collect data about the effectiveness of such solutions and may be able to include them on an IEP without the help of a specialist. On the other hand, if a team needs information about a particular kind of tool or if the AT a child needs is complicated, outside help may be necessary.

Specific Questions for Administrators:

- What information resources are available in the district?
- Who are the specific people who might provide AT and AEM information to an IEP team?
- What outside resources are available to IEP teams in the district?
- What is the process staff members should use to contact outside resources?
- When should administrators be notified or involved of the need for additional assessment?

5. If an educator or an IEP team is considering recommending a particular kind of AEM or AT for a child, how and when should supervisors be notified?

While they cannot make independent decisions that bypass the IEP consideration process established in IDEA, administrators can and should join the team discussions when the team is considering unusual or high cost recommendations. Sometimes a recommendation for high cost AT comes from the IEP team. At other times, those recommendations may come from an outside source such as a medical clinic or expert assessor. The agency's systems for addressing AT recommendations will depend, in part, on resources available.

Specific Questions for Administrators

- What information should the team provide?
- If an assistive technology recommendation will require a small expenditure, do administrators need to know?
- What should educators do if a device recommendation might cost more than \$500?
- Does the agency have a specific budget for assistive technology purchases or are they folded into other budget categories?

6. When an IEP team considers AT or AEM during an IEP meeting, what data should be used to make a decision?

Trial periods are an essential part of any assistive technology assessment. Before an IEP is written to include AT, educators should identify the anticipated outcome of AT use (i.e., the problem the AT will address) and introduce the device to the child. This helps the IEP team to get an initial idea of the possible benefits the AT will provide. Trial periods are a little like test driving a new car. The team needs to see how it might work for a child before committing to using it.

Specific Questions for Administrators:

- How should IEP teams frame an initial AT question so that the role AT will play in helping the student to achieve educational goals can be determined?
- What evidence should teams collect before recommending an AT or AEM solution?
- How should results of a trial period and recommendations be reported to the IEP team?

7. How should the AT and AEM that a child needs be written into an IEP?

Many districts have extensive guidelines about writing IEPs. The guidelines may help to answer questions about AT and AEM in IEPs. However, sometimes additional guidance may be required to answer AT in the IEP questions.

Specific Questions for Administrators

- If the IEP team has decided that a child needs assistive technology, how and where should that decision be documented?
- What is the district's guidance about listing the names of specific devices on an IEP?
- Should devices in the IEP be described by their features? Is it ever acceptable to list the name of a specific AT device or AEM resource?
- Under what circumstances should a child have specific goals for AT device use?
- When should the use of AEM or AT be listed as an accommodation or supplemental aid?

8. If there is conflict or disagreement about AT or AEM at any point in the process of assessment, consideration, or implementation, what should educators do?

It is reasonable to expect that IEP teams will not always agree upon the AT and AEM needs of every student. IEP teams sometimes have difficulty coming to consensus about the needs of a particular child. Most education agencies have processes in place to help teams deal with conflict situations. Already established conflict resolution strategies can often be applied to AT and AEM.

Specific Questions for Administrators

- Under what circumstances should an administrator be informed about an AT disagreement among team members who are professionals?
- Under what circumstances should an administrator be informed that there is disagreement about AT between staff members and a parent team member?
- When conflicts arise, who should be notified?

9. If assistive technology is sent home with a student and it is damaged due to neglect, what is the district's policy?

IDEA requires that assistive technology must be provided at home if the child needs it to accomplish IEP goals. IDEA also says that states may make policy about what should happen if there is damage of the AT due to neglect. Many states have deferred this policy-making responsibility to local education agencies. District loan policies for other expensive things like band instruments, athletic equipment and scientific calculators can also sometimes be applied to the loan of assistive technology.

Specific Questions for Administrators

- Who should be notified of damaged school-owned AT devices?
- When should administrators be notified that AT has been damaged?
- If AT is included on the IEP for home use and it is damaged, how should the team proceed?
- If AT that is sent home is frequently damaged, at what point should the IEP be modified?
- If a change in an IEP that includes AT or AEM at home is needed, what should the team do?

10. What is the district's policy about provision of AT to students in private schools?

To address IDEA mandates, school districts have developed guidelines regarding the provision of services to students with disabilities who attend private schools. Whatever policy the LEA has developed regarding services in private schools should be applied to assistive technology and accessible educational materials. Educators may need help with the specifics of how these policies are applied. Educators who work for education support agencies that serve multiple LEAs should know the policies of *each* LEA they support since the policies may differ from agency to agency.

Specific Questions for Administrators

- What is the overall district policy about provision of services to students with disabilities who attend private schools?
- Is it acceptable for AT devices to be provided in the private school setting?
- Is it acceptable for AT services to be provided in the private school setting?

There are no "correct" answers to these ten questions. Each district is unique. Each district has resources in personnel, facilities, students and budget that can only be identified and utilized locally. Each agency has procedures, belief systems and history that only people close to home can understand. The outside resources that an agency can use to support assistive technology efforts also differ. Even the geography of a district may affect the ways that assistive technology services are provided.



Answers to these ten questions are not all found in one place. They may change over time. There are probably other questions that aren't listed here. However, the answers are important to ensure the provision of legal, cost efficient and ethical assistive technology services. One excellent way to find the answers to these questions is to listen to the stories of the people who develop IEPs. They can tell about the times when they made an assistive technology decision and had concerns about the decision they had made. They know about the current situations involving assistive technology that they fear may develop into problems. They can share their success and the successes of children in the district who use AT and AEM. These stories can suggest answers that lead to an effective and responsive assistive technology process.