Assistive Technology for Students with Disabilities: What To Do When Funding is Limited?

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By: Reynolds, J., Gray, T., & Ruedel, K., Center on Technology and Disability (2015)

Assistive technology (AT) comes in many shapes and sizes, and for students with disabilities, it has the capacity to open many doors. Examples of low tech devices include a pencil grip and a moveable surface to ease handwriting, while high tech devices are often electronic and include a digital component, such as a refreshable braille display or a smartpen.

As a student progresses through school, it is likely his or her AT needs will evolve; rarely does one device meet a student's every need. Imagine AT as a process running parallel to a student's educational pathway. It addresses the immediate needs of a student when he or she is initially assessed, but will need to be updated or replaced as the student's needs change or as technological advances occur.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Sec. 300.105 Assistive Technology.

> (a) Each public agency must ensure that assistive technology devices or assistive technology services, or both, as those terms are defined in Sec. 300.5 and 300.6, respectively, are made available to a child with a disabiltiy if required as a part of the child's –
>> (1)   Special education under Sec. 300.36;
>> (2)   Related services under Sec. 300.34; or
>> (3)   Supplementary aides and services under Sec. 300.38 and 300.114(a)(2)(ii)
>
> (b) On a case-by-case basis, the use of school-purchased assistive technology devices in a child's home or in other settings is required if the child's individualized education program (IEP) Team determines that the child needs access to those devices in order to receive FAPE.[1]

This means that local educational agencies (LEAs) must ensure that the AT identified in a student's IEP is provided. Many districts are challenged to find the

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[1] http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/,root,regs,300,B,300%252E105,
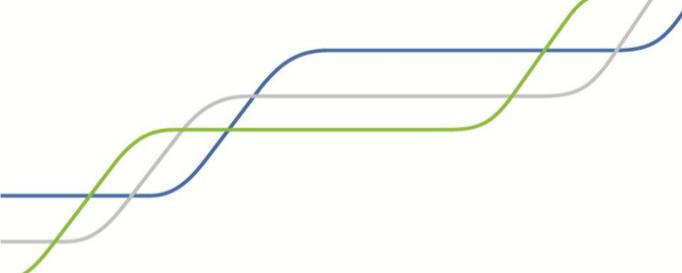
necessary funding for AT tools, despite the availability of funds through [federal and state grant programs.](#) Fortunately, there are a variety of AT online resources, organizations, and technical assistance centers to help LEAs find and receive the necessary support. Below is a list of resources divided by resource-type for LEAs to consider: Online resources and crowdfunding, state grants and technical assistance, collaborative partnerships and private funding, and lower cost purchasing options.

ONLINE RESOURCES AND CROWDFUNDING

There are many benefits to online resources. They are often free and easily jumpstart an AT search by providing a wide-range of information quickly. Crowdfunding is a fundraising process that occurs virtually and provides a platform to collect donations of various amounts by a large number of individuals working toward a big goal.

[AbleData](#). This database provides free access to a virtual library of information. Search for products, product developers and sellers, and AT resources.

[Adopt-A-Classroom](#). Founded in 1998, this program allows public, charter, and private school K-12th grade teachers to identify what kind of supplies they need for their classroom. Donors can search by topic for an area they are passionate about, by teacher, or by school.

[Donorschoose.org](#). This online charity operates in all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, and supports public teachers' ability to provide supplies and other resources to meet the needs of their students. Teachers post their needs for materials and other resources, which are called projects. Then, once a project reaches its funding goal, the charity orders the materials and ships them to the school.

[Kickstarter](#). Kickstarter's mission is to bring creative projects to life. It achieves this by serving as a platform to connect innovative projects with eager donors. However, a project only receives donations if it is 100 percent funded by the deadline set by the project's creator.
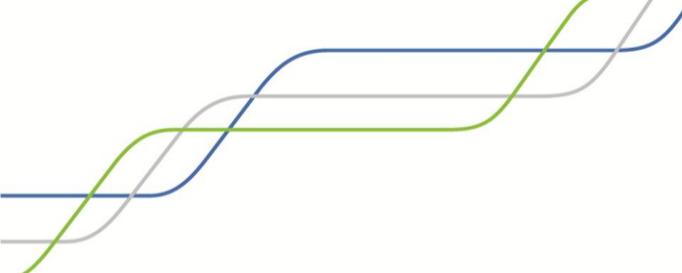
TechMatrix. This site offers free, on-line resource is a one-stop shop for a wide-range of information on AT products. By using this tool, the user can search for and compare AT by keyword, content area, grade level, IDEA disability category, cost, operating system, and Common Core state standard competency.

Wrights Law. This online resource is designed to provide comprehensive legal information to parents, teachers, and special education advocates. The resource includes a wide range of AT materials, from how to approach an LEA that claims there are not enough funds in the budget to provide the proper AT, to guidance on selecting AT, and much more.

## STATE GRANTS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE RESOURCES

Always be aware of grant awards and public dollars to support the AT needs of students. Stay informed of the latest AT research and tools by subscribing to technical assistance websites, attending informational webinars, and participating in discussions on the field.

ADA Technical Assistance Programs. Each state has one, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act, and they provide an array of services, including funding, training, and support. Look on your state government's website for contact information or check the state by state list published by the Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America (RESNA), a professional association of AT specialists and engineers.

Center on Technology and Disability (CTD). The Center offers free, online resource designed to increase the capacity of families and providers to advocate for, acquire, and implement effective AT practices, devices, and services. CTD offers a resource library, virtual learning courses, and webinars events.

EdTechOnline.org. This website serves as a grant directory for SEAs and LEAs to identify U.S. Department of Education technology grants for states, districts and local schools. EdTech Online puts U.S. Department of Education technology grants in one place and includes strategic objectives, appropriations, contact names and telephone numbers, as well as direct links to the government agencies offering specific grants.
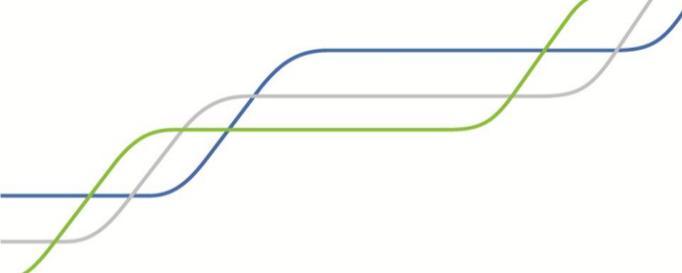
PowerUp WHAT WORKS. This is a free, online resource that provides valuable materials to support educators in their efforts to leverage technology to enhance teaching and learning. PowerUp offers resources for teachers, administrators, and professional development coordinators who are interested in evidence-based strategies that integrate technology to improve student outcomes in English Language Arts and math.

State Grant for Assistive Technology Program. The State Grant for Assistive Technology Program is a federal grant program that supports the states' ability to provide AT devices and services to individuals with disabilities. The goal of this program is to make AT devices and services more readily available and accessible to individuals with disabilities. The program provides one grant to each of the 50 states, including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Some specialized federal legislation may provide funding options as well. For example, Title I (targeted for economically disadvantaged), Title III (targeted for limited English proficiency), and vocational education programs may yield grant funds for AT. Securing AT may involve time and effort, but don't give up. The right AT just might be the academic boost a student needs to be more successful in school.

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS AND PRIVATE FUNDING

Collaborative partnerships are developed in different ways. The examples below highlight a university-charter school partnership, a county-school district consortium, and a federally funded state-led initiative. Cultivating partnerships is a useful way for getting AT in the hands of those who need it most. There is often greater buying power in numbers, and sharing potential of knowledge, software, and devices.

County-District Consortium. Another collaborative example, called the Assistive Technology Consortium brings together Hunterdon County Educational Service Commission (HCESC) and school districts in southwest Ohio. To support schools in meeting IDEA technical assistance requirements, members of the consortium are privy to a host of resources: technical assistance, an AT loan library of devices, professional learning opportunities for school staff, a monthly newsletter
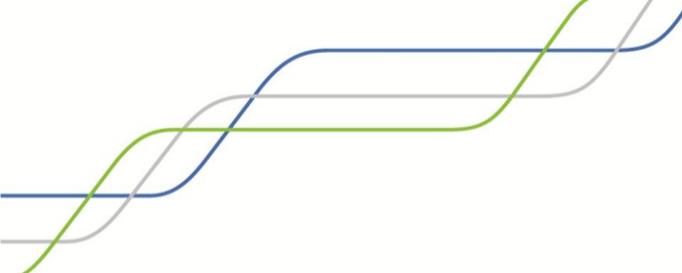
Parent Technical Assistance Centers. Funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education, the [six regional Parent Technical Assistance Centers](#) (PTACs) serve a robust network of Parent Training and Information Centers and Community Parent Resource Centers located around the country. PTACs provide a wide range of supports, for instance, technical assistance on technology, one-to-one consultations and technical assistance, training/webinars, and site visits. Locate the Parent Center in your state [here](#).

Private Funding Sources. It is worth exploring possible private funding sources by researching charitable foundations or other 501(c)(3) organizations, especially if they are affiliated with major industries in your state. Local civic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, Rotary, and Lions Clubs often respond to requests from the community to help provide assistive devices for children. Visit the [Foundation Center](#) to get started.

University-District Collaboration. Through crowdfunding Massachusetts Institute of Technology grads launched [NVBots](#), a startup that developed the world's first fully-automated, cloud connected 3D printer. NVBots launched its crowdfunding campaign on [Fundable](#) and raised over $100,000 to help place these printers in low-income [Boston-area schools](#) through Citizen Schools (www.citizenschools.org).

LOWER COST PURCHASING OPTIONS

Lower cost purchasing options come in a variety of forms and can be valuable for LEAs in providing the appropriate AT devices to students without breaking the bank. Changing student needs and rapid improvements to technology make loaners and used equipment options valuable resources.

Bulk Purchases. Some projects are helping make computer technology more available to schools by arranging bulk purchases of software programs that are especially beneficial for students with disabilities. [Maryland Assistive Technology Cooperative](#) and [Infinitec in Illinois](#) are examples to check out.

Loaners. Loan closets, lending libraries, and demonstration programs are ideal resources to "try before you buy." Many disability-related agencies and organizations operate services which enable schools to borrow assistive equipment. [Regional Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center](#) (DBTAC)
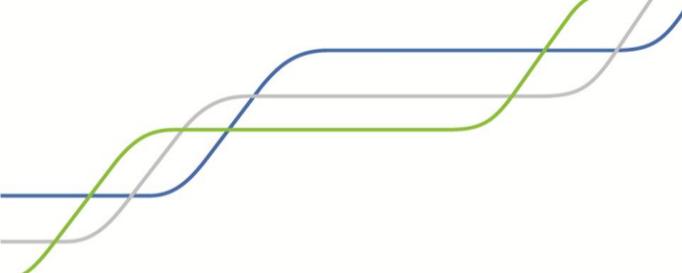
provides links to regional centers that can offer additional information on these resources. For example, information on loaners for the Mid-Atlantic region can be found at the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center. There is also information available by state, for instance, MassMATCH.

Used Equipment. One creative way that schools are stretching AT funds is through used equipment marketplaces, where AT can be sought, sold, or given away. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) offer guidance for recycling equipment on their *Reuse Your AT* program website.