

Ask OTIS: Assistive Technology and Occupational Therapy

Q: My district is interested in providing more comprehensive assistive technology services and is asking for volunteers to participate in the planning process. Should OT be represented on the planning committee and what suggestions do you have for getting an assistive technology team started?

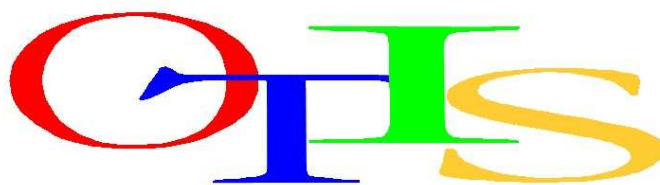
Rose Racicot, OT and assistive technology specialist for Kent School District, was asked to answer this question and share some of her experiences with starting an Assistive Technology Team (ATT) in Kent School District.

I strongly encourage you to have an occupational therapy representative on your district's assistive technology planning committee. To answer your question, I would like to reiterate why occupational therapists should be involved in AT. I am also including some excerpts from a recent paper I wrote on this topic for my post-professional master's degree. My hopes are that you will be inspired and empowered to pursue new ideas to support the use of AT in your own school districts and realize your own important role as an OT in the AT process.

Assistive technology (AT) is a specialty within occupational therapy (OT) that focuses on identifying adaptations in technology hardware and/or software to enable a client's participation in occupations. OTs use AT as a treatment intervention because "these technologies allow us to control our environment more efficiently and enable us to engage in new occupations"(Hammel, 1995). In the beginnings of our profession, we used low-tech technology tools to simplify and give a different way of accomplishing the task. As new technologies have developed, OTs have been able to help clients increase productivity and performance in their tasks of daily occupation in the areas of communication, education, work, ADL, mobility and control of the environment. The new trend toward "universal design" for all technology users is helping to bring accessibility needs of the disabled user into the mainstream of schools and society.

I have worked as an OT for Kent School District since April of 1987, using AT throughout my career and pursuing courses on my own to increase my knowledge and skills in this area. In January 2002, I was selected to be part of the first "Assistive Technology Team" in Kent School District with one other OT and 2 SLPs. I started with one day per week designated to AT and built up to 3 days per week in my current position focusing on AT evaluation, staff and student training, grant administration, equipment selection and promotion of AT use across the district. The key factors that were instrumental in launching our AT Team in 2002 were:

1. A supportive Special Education Director who recognized the assistive technology laws and their implications for our school district:
 - The "Technology Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act" (TRAIDA; 1988, amended in 1994) also known as the Tech Act, Public Law



100-407 that promotes access to AT devices and services for individuals with disabilities and defines an assistive technology device (ATD) 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 improved functional capabilities that individuals with disabilities” (PL 100-407).

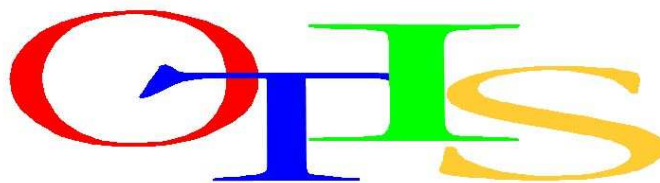
- The AT provisions in IDEA 2004 that require districts to ensure that necessary AT needed for students with disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment is available for the students, and
- Title II part D of the No Child Left Behind Act provides grants for funding educational technology.

2. An opportunity to partner with our general education Instructional Technology Director to write and implement a Title IID Technology grant used to finance AT hardware, software and training for school staff. Our ATT attended AT training at both national and local conferences (CSUN, Closing the Gap, SETC classes, NWACS conferences, etc.) through grant money.

Our AT Team’s mission started with inventorying current AT supplies, researching the best software and hardware to support reading, writing and communication and then learning how to write grants, order equipment, and set-up training opportunities. In addition to the grant administration, our team’s primary responsibility was to evaluate individual students for Assistive Technology needs, then recommend equipment/training and conduct follow up visits with school teams. Finally, I lead the creation of a KSD Assistive Technology website (www.kent.k12.wa.us/KSD/IT/IATT/) to provide a resource for our staff and others on an explanation of Assistive Technology, our AT referral process, AT training opportunities and much more.

AT teams in the schools may include OTs, physical therapists (PT), speech language pathologists (SLP), special education teachers, administrators, nurses and parents. The OT’s role is to assess functional needs in school-related tasks, adapt and position adaptive control systems, analyze skills needed to use the technology device successfully and train students and staff in the use of equipment. When evaluating students in Kent, our AT team chooses to have 2 team members work together on the evaluation (in our case an OT and an SLP) so that both of our specialty perspectives are represented, we are enriched by each other’s professional skills, we’re able to take more thorough notes and collaborate on each case! In looking forward, we would love to add a PT and a special education teacher to our evaluation team. Our Special Education Director oversees all of our AT work, evaluates us directly, provides needed funding and meets with us once or twice per month to hear updates and problem-solve any issues or needs that arise.

In my clinical opinion, AT provides an incredible opportunity to help students with disabilities to perform closer to the level of their peers, be proud of their school accomplishments, and increase both their written and verbal communication output. AT



provides a high interest educational activity that is generally quite motivating for students. The Technology Special Interest Section of AOTA is working hard to develop AT competencies for occupational therapists and to encourage the development of resources and a research base to support evidence-based practice in this area. Other resources that may be helpful include:

- Special Education Technology Center (Ellensburg) www.cwu.edu/~setc
- QIAT - Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology Services natri.uky.edu/assoc_projects/qiat/
- SETT Framwork sweb.uky.edu/~jszaba0/JoyZabala.html
- National Center to Improve Practice in Special Education Through Technology, Media and Materials (NCIP) www2.edc.org/NCIP/
- The Assistive Technology Training Online Project (ATTO) atto.buffalo.edu/
- ABLEDATA www.abledata.com

This article was written by Rose Racicot, member of the Assistive Technology Team (ATT) in Kent School District. It originally appeared in the WOTA Newsletter in February 2008 (Vol. 67 No. 1 p. 6-7)

OTIS (Occupational Therapists In Schools) is a standing committee for the Washington Occupational Therapy Association (WOTA) that was set up to help support therapists in school-based practice.