

Assistive Technology and the IEP

For parents of children with special education needs, assistive technology knowledge and resources are critical items to have in the advocacy toolbox. Assistive technology will more likely than not be a key component in helping a child with a disability reach their full educational potential in the least restrictive environment.

Assistive technology is often referred to as an umbrella term, meaning it is a term used to cover several things that fall into a single common category. How parents with students who have a disability and have an IEP should think of assistive technology should be in terms of how it is defined in I.D.E.A.

I.D.E.A. 2004 defined assistive technology 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 child with a disability.”

It's important to keep in mind that I.D.E.A. further defines a second element of assistive technology, namely assistive technology services, which are “any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device. Services are broad ranging but include evaluation, provision for the acquisition of devices, selection, training, etc.

Within the public-school setting, under the assistive technology umbrella, we find both devices and services. Put differently, an assistive technology device without the necessary related services is most likely not going to result in adequate access to educational opportunities. It is important that parents understand and advocate for both.

Furthermore, parents should realize that I.D.E.A. also speaks to what are known as Accessible Educational Materials (AEM). These often go hand-in-hand with access to assistive technology.

AEM are print- and technology-based educational materials, which include printed and electronic textbooks and related core materials that are designed or converted in a way that makes them usable across the widest range of individual variability regardless of format (print, digital, graphic, audio, video). Thus, the term “AEM” includes printed materials that have been converted into specialized formats as well as accessible digital materials and technologies. Printed materials, such as textbooks, manuals, workbooks, and paper assessments are included.

The U.S. Department of Education has stated that timely access to appropriate and accessible instructional materials is an inherent component of the obligation of public education agencies to ensure a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to children with disabilities so that they can participate in the general education curriculum as specified in their IEPs.

There is a strong connection between assistive technology devices, assistive technology services and AEM to ensure the provision of FAPE and for participation in the general education curriculum. It is important that parents, as members of the IEP team, be familiar with and consider all three elements when working in tandem with their school to provide the best educational experience possible for their child.