

Assistive Technology for Students With Disabilities: A Closer Look at Acquisition and Funding



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Assistive technology (AT) is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 (34 C.F.R. § 300.5) 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” (Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1401(1)). The definition refers to a broad array of possible tools, from the simplest items, such as pencil grips or magnifiers, to product systems consisting of typical or adapted computers, peripherals, and mobile devices, as well as standard or specialized software or apps. AT provides students with the means to access educational curriculum, environments, materials, and interactions.

This guide provides information for local educational agencies (LEAs) in Pennsylvania about the elements of effective AT acquisition and funding for students with individualized education programs (IEPs).

What are the responsibilities of an LEA and the IEP team for provision of assistive technology?

In order for AT to be effective in enabling students with disabilities to access a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE), it is important for local educational agencies (LEAs) to understand that AT provision is not simply the purchase of equipment or software. It is an ongoing process that engages school teams in thoughtful consideration (at least annually), and proceeds with targeted trials in customary contexts, leading to data-based decision-making, acquisition of appropriate AT, and AT implementation with ongoing monitoring and supports, including capacity-building technical assistance when needed.

The LEA is responsible for ensuring that Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams have the information and support needed to comply with state and federal laws in meeting the needs of students with disabilities for AT devices and services. High quality, effective AT services include:

- Consideration of need for AT for every student with an IEP
- Assessment of AT needs, involving the student's team and family
- Access to AT for use in trials, as determined necessary to AT decision-making by the IEP team, conducted in the student's customary environments
- Documentation of AT devices and services in the IEP, reflecting decision-making by the IEP team
- Acquisition of AT in a timely manner
- Provision of training or technical assistance for staff in the use of the AT
- Ongoing monitoring of student AT use to ensure effectiveness

What resources are available for LEAs to try out AT before making a purchase?

Trials with assistive technology (AT) devices assist teams in making informed decisions about the effectiveness of various device features before purchasing devices. AT may be available to borrow from a variety of sources:

PaTTAN Short Term Loan (STL) Program is a library of AT devices available to local educational agencies (LEAs) for trial and assessment. For more information, visit the PaTTAN website at:

<https://www.pattan.net/Short-Term-Loan/>

TechOWL PA (Technology for Our Whole Lives) is Pennsylvania's Assistive Technology Act program (formerly known as PIAT), serving all Pennsylvanians with disabilities. TechOWL provides information about AT and offers a lending library of AT devices. Learn more at: <https://techowlpa.org/>

AT Manufacturers may have equipment available to borrow or rent. AT software may be available as a free 30-day download. Visit the companies' websites to learn more.

Who is responsible to pay for AT?

Once the IEP team determines that a student needs AT, it is the responsibility of the LEA to provide it at no cost to the student or parents. However, the means of acquisition is not mandated by IDEA, so it is possible that AT can be provided using any of a variety of options, including outside funding sources such as grants or foundations, use of equipment already owned by the school, or use of family funding or insurance. Regardless of the source of AT acquisition, it is the responsibility of the LEA to assure that the AT is maintained in operating condition for use by the student as specified in the IEP.

The student's need for AT should be considered by teams as part of IEP development, review, and/or revision. The perceived cost of AT should not be a deterrent to this required special consideration on the IEP.

How can an LEA obtain assistive technology for students?

An LEA may provide assistive technology in many ways:

- Provide access to LEA technology resources, as identified by the IEP team (including, in some cases, access beyond that provided to students without IEPs)
- Collaborate with the student's family to acquire AT using private health insurance or the student's Medical Assistance
- Use the School-Based ACCESS Program (SBAP)
- Coordinate with other resources, such as foundations, charitable groups, service organizations, and loan programs

What are common sources of AT acquisition?

The LEA may use multiple acquisition sources to provide assistive technology:

- **Local, State, and Federal Funds**
An LEA can pay for assistive technology by using local or state funds, state education funds, or federal funds provided for special education and related services under IDEA.
- **Private Health Insurance**
Private insurance companies represent a major source of funding for AT that meets a "medical need." If a student is covered by private insurance, the LEA can ask the parents to pursue funding of an AT device through the insurance

company, if the use of the insurance does not result in any cost to the family. The LEA cannot require the parents to use their health insurance to fund an AT device or make it a condition for the receipt of educational services.

Many manufacturers of AT will guide team members through the funding process. Representatives of funding departments can provide funding documents to help team members and families comply with insurance company requirements.

- **Medical Assistance (Medicaid)**

Students who are determined to be eligible under Pennsylvania’s Medical Assistance Program (MA) can receive certain AT devices. In order for an AT device to be covered by Medicaid, the student who needs the device must be enrolled in MA and the device must be an item that is prescribed by a physician and documented as “medically necessary.”

If a student has both private insurance and Medicaid, the family must apply to its private insurance and be denied before applying to Medicaid. Medicaid will pay the costs of covered items that are not provided by insurance. The LEA cannot require families to file claims for MA services.

Some vendors of assistive technology devices are Medicaid providers, and can guide LEAs through the Medicaid funding process.

- **School-Based ACCESS Program (SBAP)**

If an eligible LEA is enrolled as a Medical Assistance (MA) provider in the School-Based ACCESS Program (SBAP), the LEA may be able to utilize the program to bill Medicaid for partial reimbursement for an AT device. The following criteria must be met:

- The student must receive special education services and be a Medical Assistance beneficiary.
- Signed parental consent is required, along with medical authorization.

- If the AT device is billed to Medicaid, the device becomes the property of the student.

If the LEA does not bill the AT device to Medicaid, the LEA may use SBAP reimbursement monies to buy the device. In this case, the LEA retains ownership of the device.

- **Other Sources of Acquisition**

Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)

A student with a disability who has an IEP may be eligible to receive vocational rehabilitation services, including assistive technology devices, as he or she moves from secondary school to post-secondary education or vocational placement. OVR can assist the student in selecting and acquiring appropriate assistive technology.

Recycling Centers

The newest or latest technology may not be necessary for a student with a disability to complete tasks efficiently. Organizations that operate “reuse” or “redistribution” centers can be a source for previously owned devices at no or low cost. Some organizations, such as the Recycled Equipment Exchange Program (REEP), maintain databases of individuals who are interested in selling or donating recycled technology.

Rental Programs

Many manufacturers of assistive technology will rent AT equipment. Devices may be rented for assessments, to accommodate short-term disabilities, to help gain insurance approvals for funding, and to provide technology for individuals whose own devices are being repaired.

Low-Interest Loan Programs

The Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation (PATF) provides financing opportunities to individuals with disabilities to help them acquire AT. Individuals may apply for low-interest loans from the foundation. The foundation also provides information about other acquisition sources.

Who owns the AT?

When AT for use in school is purchased using a student's medical insurance, even in part, the device becomes the property of the insured student. This does not change the LEA's responsibility for maintaining the AT in working order for the student's use. Likewise, AT that is purchased by a school is owned by the school, and is not likely to transition with the student to a new LEA or upon graduation.

Can school-owned AT be used at home?

The use of school-owned AT in home settings is addressed by IDEA. 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 IEP team determines that the child needs access to those devices in order to receive FAPE. (34 C.F.R. § 300.105(b)). As such, school-owned AT can and should be used at home, if it is determined by the IEP team that the use in home settings is needed for FAPE.

Private and Nonprofit Sources

Foundations, service clubs, civic groups, faith-based organizations, trust funds, businesses, fundraisers, grant programs, wishmaker groups, and service agencies can be utilized as sources of acquisition for AT. These organizations, such as National Easter Seal Society, March of Dimes, Muscular Dystrophy Association, United Way, Lions Club, Masons, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Elks Club, Rotary Club, Kiwanis, and Knights of Columbus, typically have their own eligibility guidelines, and limit the types of assistive technology and dollar amounts that they will fund. To locate more potential funding sources, contact your local library to inquire about accessing *Foundation Directory Online*.

What resources are available to LEAs?

AT Technical Assistance

In Pennsylvania, training and consultation in AT is provided to local education agencies (LEAs) by AT consultants working through the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) and intermediate unit (IU) technical support systems. PaTTAN AT Consultants are available to answer questions and direct LEA staff and families to appropriate AT acquisition resources and to AT consultants at each IU.

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| PaTTAN East | 800-441-3215 |
| PaTTAN Harrisburg | 800-360-7282 |
| PaTTAN Pittsburgh | 800-446-5607 |
| www.pattan.net | |

PaTTAN Short Term Loan (STL)

<https://www.pattan.net/Short-Term-Loan/>

Pennsylvania Assistive Technology Foundation (PATF)

www.patf.us/

Pennsylvania Department of Human Services County Assistance Offices

[www.dhs.state.pa.us/findfacilsandlocs/
countyassistanceofficecontactinformation/index.htm](http://www.dhs.state.pa.us/findfacilsandlocs/countyassistanceofficecontactinformation/index.htm)

Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)

[https://www.dli.pa.gov/Individuals/Disability-Services/ovr/
Pages/default.aspx](https://www.dli.pa.gov/Individuals/Disability-Services/ovr/Pages/default.aspx)

School-Based ACCESS Program–Public Consulting Group

www.publicconsultinggroup.com

TechOWL PA (Technology for Our Whole Lives)

<https://techowipa.org/>

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Tom Wolf
Governor

