



# DIRECTIONS

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## School System Assistive Technology Teams Share Trade Secrets

By Denise C. DeCoste

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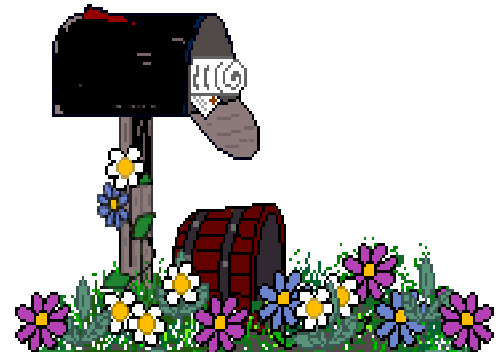
It is a common sensation, returning from a Closing The Gap Conference, to experience a sense of information overload from which it may take a week or two to recover. However, many people also return with a new sense of commitment to the improvement of assistive technology (AT) services in their organizations. Teachers, therapists, and parents of school-age children might return to their districts wondering how to get assistive technology services going and how to develop school district AT teams.

Currently, there is no national-level organization that tracks school system assistive technology (AT) teams, and there are few publications that focus on school-based AT. While conferences and workshops provide opportunities to learn about a wide variety of AT topics, there is little time to network with established AT teams from around the country. Between-sessions, in-the-hall discussions among AT specialists commonly suggest that while methods of service delivery differ, we have many issues in common. But how do other school system AT teams provide services? Are we dealing with similar policy and practice-based hurdles? And, more importantly, what strategies have been found to be effective in promoting the growth of AT services in public schools? At a Closing the Gap Conference, a group of assistive technology (AT) specialists serving public school systems assembled from across the United States and participated on a panel that discussed their "trade secrets" for success.

### The teams

We used the Internet to gather information and assemble the conference panel of school system AT teams representing a range of delivery models. Eileen Pracek from the Florida Instructional Technology Coordinating Unit and Kim Hartsell from the Georgia Project for Assistive Technology represented statewide AT service delivery. Sherry Purcell from the Los Angeles Unified School District and Diana Carl from the Houston Region

## Think Spring



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IV Education Service Center represented AT teams that provide services to large numbers of school districts. Scott Marfilus from the Milwaukee Public Schools and Cynthia Weitz from Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland represented AT in medium-sized school districts. John Philps from the Green Bay Area Public Schools in Wisconsin represented AT service delivery in a small district, and Terry Lankutis from Montana represented rural AT service delivery. Via the Internet, each team representative completed a survey that provided information on demographics, factors that influenced the growth of AT services, and current issues affecting AT teams. Table 1 outlines major demographics for each of the schools systems.

### Survey results

Significant differences in vital statistics were immediately apparent. Population size, geographic area, and funding streams appear to be key variables that affect the design of service delivery. The survey showed that there is no one model of service delivery, although most AT teams are multidisciplinary, have an established system for requesting AT support, and provide ongoing consultation and training. At the state level, Florida's population density differs by about 1 million students as compared to Georgia; however, both states focus much of their resources on training. The need for knowledge about AT devices and services in keeping with federal legislation has been a key issue in the development of both states' training models. Distance learning and replicable AT training modules were important innovations.

The Houston regional service center and the Los Angeles school district constitute large AT service delivery areas. The Houston regional service center provides services to 54 school districts, while the LA Unified School District serves one large school district. For these two agencies, student population is roughly the same; however, their primary methods of service delivery are significantly different. The Houston regional service center focuses on developing and training AT teams and provides 30 to 40 training workshops per year by local and national speakers. The Los Angeles Unified School district AT team focuses on providing student AT assessments with about 1500 referrals per year. AT team training at the local school level and AT apprenticeship training were just two of the AT innovations found to be successful for these AT service providers.

Milwaukee Public Schools and Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools represented medium sized AT service delivery issues. While the number of schools within each school district is similar, the density of schools across square miles differs. In Montgomery County, schools are spread across a geographic area roughly five times that of Milwaukee, a densely populated city. In both districts, AT services originated in individual departments, but over time, centralized, multidisciplinary AT teams were created. For both districts, consultation with school staff is the primary responsibility of the team, and both districts are working to enable IEP teams to manage functional AT evaluations as part of the AT consideration process. Training is

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provided in computer lab formats and on a one-to-one basis as needed. AT is a line item in their budgets, and devices are available on short and long term loan. AT purchasing programs to secure the lowest cost for AT devices and software licensing are common to both districts.

Terry Lankutis contracts directly with schools and state agencies to provide AT assessment, consultation and training across the state of Montana. While the overall student population is about the same size as that of Montgomery County, Maryland, the amount of territory in Montana is 300 times greater and includes more than 50 one-room schools. To cover such a wide geographic area, Terry partners with other organizations. Few schools in Montana have a line item budget for AT, so state-level resource centers are crucial for AT equipment loans. Regional training, interactive video, and Internet training are used to bridge hundreds of miles and severe winter weather. Awareness of assistive technology devices and services, as well as how to teach students with severe disabilities, are still issues in rural areas, particularly in schools where the introduction of AT devices may be overwhelming to staff who have limited experience with students with multiple disabilities. General education teachers in one-room schools typically welcome AT solutions and come up with creative solutions of their own. In these situations, the AT becomes a tool for all the students in the class.

John Philips and the Green Bay Area Public Schools district assistive technology committee represent a smaller district consisting of 39 schools. Unlike large geographic areas which can afford full time AT

specialists, a portion of staff time was allocated from six school system departments to form an AT committee. The AT committee set up an Assistive Technology Designee training program whereby one member from each school building volunteers to serve as the AT designee. Designees receive AT training and provide basic on-site support for teachers in their buildings. While AT equipment loans are available from within the district and through state AT lending libraries, equipment is often purchased and assigned to individual students. The use of AT designees within each school and the use of "traveling AT trunks" equipped with AT devices that rotate among schools for training purposes were Green Bay innovations.

### Common issues

Although AT service delivery differs among the eight school systems on this panel, there are many common issues. Common, unresolved issues reported by the participants include the following:

\*Providing ongoing training to a growing number of staff with limited release time.

\*Staff turnover.

\*Promoting site-based management of AT services and getting AT information down to the level of individual school teams.

\*Accountability and outcome measures.

\*AT purchasing responsibility. When is the local school responsible for providing more generic AT equipment and software.

\*The use of AT with students with high incidence, less severe disabilities.

### Top ten trade secrets

And what about their trade secrets? Each of the AT team representatives on the panel presented his or her "Top Ten Trade Secrets" at a well-attended, two-hour Closing the Gap conference session. At times humorously presented, the trade secrets nonetheless provide some serious advice:

\*Think big, but have a clear vision of what your team can realistically accomplish. Build a solid reputation for providing good services.

\*Network, network, network. Identify your supporters and develop relationships with administrators, school board members, policy and decision makers.

\*Align your AT objectives with state-level initiatives and district technology plans.

\*The more training you provide, the more AT equipment will be obtained, and the more training you will need to continue to provide.

\*Training will always need to be presented across multiple levels, from beginner to expert, within and across disciplines.

\*A range of training models is needed to support AT service delivery: group training, one-on-one training, distance learning, web-based training, videotape training, local television training, video conferencing, pre-service training, mentoring, consortium and list serves.

\*Decentralize expertise in order to build the AT capacity of local IEP teams.

\*Build people resources as well as equipment resources. Identify and train

natural leaders in assistive technology.

\*Do not overwhelm staff. Share information relative to AT on Web sites and in hard copy using short, readable fact sheets, lists, and charts.

\*Maintain a focus on the needs of students in their respective educational environments.

\*Be creative in seeking funding, e.g., bulk purchasing arrangements, lottery funding,

\*Medicaid reimbursement.

\*Anticipate problem issues.

\*Document, document, document. Keep data on services provided and progress made.

\*Develop partnerships with regular education, outside agencies, colleges, manufacturers, and parents.

\*Above all, smile, laugh, and celebrate your success.

### Summary

So if you have just recently returned from the Closing The Gap Conference, be assured that, like you, many people arrived home with feelings of fatigue mixed with enthusiasm for AT. Focus that enthusiasm. Most AT teams start small and work their way forward one step at a time. Due to demographic and funding variables, no two teams are likely to be the same. Focus on the possibilities within your district, document a pattern of need, provide substantive AT support to those who need it, and above all, network and collaborate. We all have a long way to go toward providing the AT services we envision. Special thanks to Terry Hammon and Kelly Fonner for their collaboration with this presentation. § Tables mentioned in this article can be obtained by contacting DREAMMS for Kids, Inc.

## ERIC Educational Resources Information Center

In last month's issue, we talked about EROD (Education Resource Organization Directory) and how its resources can help students, parents, teachers and administrators better equip themselves to meet the challenges of a special needs environment. This month, we would like to discuss another great resource with the U.S. Department of Education – **ERIC**.

A national information center, **ERIC** (Educational Resources Information Center) is an impressive system that provides 16 subject-specific clearinghouses, as well as a variety of services and products, all with a broad range of education-related issues.

One of the premier services of this site is *AskERIC*. *AskERIC* is a personalized Internet-based service that is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year! *AskERIC* is a component of the Information Institute at Syracuse University, encompassing the resources of the entire ERIC system – and beyond.

The format of the site is very user friendly. Clicking on 'About *AskERIC*' gives you a short synopsis of areas, such as Questions & Answers, Resource Collection, Question Archive, Lesson Plans, the **ERIC** Database, and Mailing Lists - where archives of several education-related lists are maintained by the *AskERIC* Virtual Library - as well as providing the links.

A feature that has been added recently to the site is the *AskERIC* Update. This is a monthly electronic newsletter that keeps you informed of the latest additions to the web site and services

offered. New issues are made available on site on the first of each month, or can be sent via e-mail if requested.

Another highlight is 'Ask an **ERIC** Expert'. If you have an education question, the *AskERIC* staff will respond with personalized resources relevant to your needs. They also have a question archive that you can access – after all, it's possible that it's been asked before! The responses include ERIC citations, Internet sites, discussion groups, and print resource information. And if that wasn't enough, they also offer the chance to chat with an *AskERIC* Librarian weekdays from 1 – 4pm!

**ERIC** continues keeping pace with the increasing emphasis on the role of parents in their children's education. For more information you can call their Toll Free number at 1-800-464-9107, FAX them at 315-443-5448, or send an e-mail to [eric@ericir.syr.edu](mailto:eric@ericir.syr.edu). Explore **ERIC's** resources by visiting their site at <http://www.ericir.syr.edu>. §

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# How to Thrive as a Special Education Teacher

Source: *CEC Today*, Council for Exceptional Children, Vol. 8 No. 5, November/December 2001

Overwhelming paperwork, high caseloads, lack of administrative support, dealing with unappreciative - and sometimes belligerent - students or parents. All the ingredients for burn-out are there. But some special education teachers not only do not burn out, they thrive, no matter what obstacles are thrown their way. How do they do it? To find out, *CEC Today* spoke with some of our Teachers of the Year. What we found was that teaching special education today is not easy. And these teachers, whose experience in the classroom ranges from 6 to 30 years, do not see their jobs through rose-colored glasses. They are aware of the many challenges special education teachers must overcome to do their jobs - challenges that threatened their own tenure in the field. Many of our teachers flirted with burn-out at some point in their careers. But, in the end, special education, not burn-out, was the victor. Here's how they maintain their enthusiasm for teaching and keep burn-out at bay.

## Keeping the Excitement Alive

Talk with our teachers of the year, and their excitement about their students and what they do is almost palpable. Perhaps one reason is that not one of these teachers is stuck in one mode of teaching. They have developed innovative programs that keep their students enthused and interested and meet their needs. But, don't ever expect to walk into their classrooms and see the same thing, because these teachers constantly seek to improve, to innovate, and excite their students and themselves.

Second, they have a vision for their students, and that vision keeps them going. Often, they see a system that isn't working, and they decide to do something different. Their vision enables them to take chances, to risk failing, to weather the disapproval of the administration. And it keeps their enthusiasm high, as they, and their students, move from one success to another. As a result, our teachers of the year have conceived and implemented the "I Can Work" program for high school students with moderate and severe disabilities, a conflict resolution program for elementary school children with disabilities (which was adopted by the whole school), a full-inclusion pre-school program, a sensory classroom for students with behavior disorders, and much more.

"When I started my 'I Can Work' program, I was revived," says Nancy Barnett, CEC's 2000 Teacher of the Year. "Then I found that one idea begets another. Now I'm looking to extend the program to students who have graduated from high school."

How do they keep the ideas coming? These teachers are always searching for new and better ways to instruct. They make it a habit to attend continuing education courses at universities and professional conferences. They trade ideas with colleagues. The third factor that keeps our teachers going is the fact that they truly believe in special education and the role of the special education teacher.

"I have confidence in the program and the support we give children," says Larry Statler, a Disney and *USA Today* Teacher of the Year and member of CEC's California Federation.

"Most general education students will learn no matter who is teaching," adds Ann Welch, CEC's 1993 Teacher of the Year. "But if a student has a disability, you personally have made a difference."

Put these attitudes together, and you have teachers who believe in themselves and their students, stand up to obstacles, and see their students achieve. They are special education teachers who thrive, and their students thrive right along with them.

## Pure Stubbornness

Okay. Maybe a little stubbornness and a lot of creativity. Whatever the qualities, these teachers are determined to do what's best for their students; and when they are told they "can't do something," they just find another way to do it.

Statler is a prime example. He put together a model inclusion program that won a statewide award. His administration decided to decline the award. Statler's response? To "keep coming back, to rise from the ashes."

"Don't get mad, get even," he says. "I decided to do something even better. The model that next evolved was a thousand times better!"

Barnett showed this same mettle. When she came up with the idea to have a dog in her classes for high school students with moderate to severe disabilities, the administration said no.

"I'm not dead yet," Barnett

rebutted. “I know of an organization you can apply to in which you help train service dogs, and they (the administration) can’t deny them access to the schools.”

Stubborn? Yes. Creative? Definitely. Doing something innovative that will help their students, even when it’s risky, even when they’re told no? You bet.

### Getting the Goods

By now, it will come as no surprise that these teachers won’t let something like lack of resources get in their way. If the school can’t fund their projects (and most of them can’t), the teachers find the money on their own. Almost all of them have become competent and frequent grant writers.

They also ask for funds for their programs. Karen Voytecki, CEC’s 2001 Teacher of the Year, says there are a lot of resources that are not tapped into, even within school districts. Being involved in CEC and assisting with district training and projects allows her to meet people at all levels in her district, share her classroom activities, and express her concern about a lack of resources.

“They provide or direct me to an avenue where I can go to get the item,” she says.

Our teachers also do not shy away from asking for resources from the community. In addition to working with her district, Voytecki also gets sponsors or donations from local businesses. Barnett, too, has received a lot of community support. She says speaking to groups such as Rotary

Clubs and networking are critical to getting needed funds or supplies. In fact, after one such presentation, an audience member, came to her with an idea for her students to make and sell paperweights, which her students are successfully doing.

Though she used to be shy about seeking funding, Barnett says now that “I have no problem asking for anything.”

### The Dreaded Paperwork

While paperwork may be said to be the bane of special education, our teachers have found ways, both practical and philosophical, to keep it from destroying their enthusiasm for teaching. One way to lasso the multitude of paperwork is to engage technology. While there are now computerized IEP programs available, not everyone has them. No matter. Martha Shields, the 1998 Ohio Federation Teacher of the Year, took matters into her own hands. Before digital IEPs even existed, she replicated IEP forms on the computer to use as templates. (She continues to make templates of new forms that emerge in her school system). Shields also keeps her files on the computer, so she has all student documentation in a computer folder, which makes it fast and easy to locate information.

Voytecki recommends being very organized to keep up with paperwork. She works on paperwork during her planning period and lunch time and even carries it with her. Stolen moments can be used to get a little more done. As a result, she usually manages to stay on top of the paperwork and doesn’t have to spend

precious time at home completing IEPs.

“I make the most of every minute and get as much done at school as possible,” she says. “The more socializing I do at school, the more work I have to do at home that interferes with my family.”

Others see paper work as part of the job and try to keep it in perspective. Statler adds a different view.

“Since I work in a full inclusion setting, I see how much general educators have to do. I’m not going to kick about paperwork.”

### The Kids that Drive You Crazy

Sometimes even the students can get special education teachers down. When we are near the brink, their behavior and/or attitude can seem too much to bear. At those times, Welch tries to imagine what made the student that way. When she uses this technique, it brings back her core of empathy for the student.

Voytecki acts on the same principle. Once she learns what is causing the misbehavior, she works to solve the underlying problem. Thus, she may spend time helping the student with reading skills or coordinate social services the child may need to cope with home life. She also calls on her core values as a teacher.

“I look at the most severely disturbed children as my biggest challenges and reasons for going into teaching.”

### What about Parents?

Our teachers show the same sympathy for parents who seem overbearing.

Welch says that she must understand that it is the parent's job to fight for the best for their children, even when the law only offers a "Chevy" education. You can't take personal offense when parents are upset and angry, she says. For example, when parents and teachers disagree, she gets everyone to try a plan for a couple of weeks (which is usually easily accomplished). Once there is data to show what works best for the student, often parents and teachers can agree on an action plan.

Shields adds that teachers must have honest, open communication with parents. When meetings seem to go in circles, she asks what the parents really want. That often stops the negatives and cuts through to the real issues, and that's when teachers and parents realize they are on the same page.

Voytecki adds that she sees parents

who are "pains" as some of the best parents, because they care about their children - enough so that they will go to school and make their voice heard.

### **Administrative Support? Maybe Yes, Maybe No**

All the teachers agree that administrative support helps. With the support of your administration, you can more easily get needed resources, your students are more likely to be included in the school, and you will feel valued as a professional. But, according to our teachers, there will likely be times when you will not have the support of your administration. That lack doesn't have to tarnish your teaching experience.

If you don't have a supportive administrator, talk with him or her and see if the problem can be solved, recommends Shields. Statler further recommends that you find out what

issues your district is dealing with. That way you and your administrator can have open, honest discussions, even when you disagree. Welch suggests that special education teachers work with their administrators to gain their support. That is, the teacher should volunteer to serve on district committees, assist them when they need someone to fill in.

If that doesn't work, the teacher must decide if he or she should move to a more supportive environment or if working with the students and parents are enough to make them feel good about their jobs. Our teachers that thrive have a couple of other tactics to deal with non-supportive administrators.

"Sometimes it's okay if the administrator just leaves me alone," says Welch.

Our teachers also pointed out an

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additional reality — administrators come and go. Often you are at your school longer than an administrator and will be there after he or she leaves. “Why turn your life into turmoil because you have a non-supportive principal for a while?” asks Statler.

### Getting Respect

Another factor can erode the special education teachers enjoyment of his or her job - a lack of respect from one's peers. However, this is not an issue for our teachers of the year. Shields has gained the respect of her colleagues by taking the lead teaching role in co-teaching situations. She is the lead teacher for 8th grade science.

“I figured I had 100 hours past a masters,” Shields says. “I ought to be able to pass 8th grade science.”

Our teachers also give presentations and participate in district projects. Not only does this give special education teachers exposure to other adults and professional dialogue, it also helps them become respected for what they know, according to Voytecki. In fact,

sharing with adults is critical to our teachers' ability to maintain their enthusiasm for teaching. Being with others who share your values and professional background, to be with a core group dedicated to special needs provides wonderful camaraderie and support, says Shields. Being involved with a professional organization also yields ideas and furthers your skills, adds Frances Dibble, CEC's 1997 Teacher of the Year.

“While it is more work to seek that affiliation, the rewards are immeasurable,” she says. It gives you an opportunity to practice skills that make you better and more efficient on the job,” Dibble states. She says she can trace people, ideas, and skills that have enhanced her professional and personal life to being involved in a professional organization. Finally, some of our teachers reap great rewards by mentoring new teachers and/or teaching upcoming teachers at local colleges and universities.

“It keeps me fresh. They are so excited. I get a different perspective when working with them,” says Barnett. §

## HalfthePlanet News

### What's New This Month!!

Enable America is the only political action committee (PAC) working to reduce the nearly 80% unemployment rate among people with disabilities. [http://www.halftheplanet.org/departments/new\\_content/enable\\_america.html](http://www.halftheplanet.org/departments/new_content/enable_america.html)

The 2002 Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) database on CD-ROM will be available on March 20, 2002. Visit [www.wrpjobs.org](http://www.wrpjobs.org) for further information on the WRP and the CD-ROM.

For these and more stories visit <http://www.halftheplanet.org/>

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