Excerpted from

The Practical (and Fun) Guide to Assistive Technology in Public Schools

Christopher R. Bugaj and Sally Norton-Darr

The Practical (and Fun) Guide to Assistive Technology in Public Schools is a step-by-step guide that leads educators through setup and implementation of an effective assistive technology (AT) team. The many analogies, including practical tips, resources, and strategies, keep the reader turning the page, as do the many pirates and zombies. The book has information and insight for educators with any level of AT experience.

In chapter 6, "Choosing Assistive Technology Teammates," the authors make recommendations on assembling an AT team—who should be on the team, what qualities are best in a team member and team leader, and what to avoid. This chapter provides an example of the practical advice found throughout the book while getting a taste of the authors' unique way of driving home a point—with humor.

chapter 6

choosing
assistive technology
teammates

It's Not What You Know,
It's What You're Willing to Learn

So you've decided to create an assistive technology team, and you've got the backing of your administration! Congratulations! Now it's time to find the right people for the team. Finding the right people to be on the team is like picking your own apples right off the tree. There are plenty of apples to choose from, but only a few you'd want to put in your bushel, and even fewer you'd want to pick if you were making a pie to enter into the county's pie-baking contest. You need to inspect each apple carefully, looking for bruises, rots, and yucky worms.

Choosing the right apples might make all the difference between the pie you'd feed your in-laws and the pie that could win the blue ribbon at the county fair.

Your first instinct when building a team might be to find people who have some knowledge of assistive technology devices. Maybe someone with experience with augmentative communication devices would be appropriate? Maybe someone who has some computer experience? Maybe someone who has actually touched an environmental control unit before? Nah … none of those are actual priorities when it comes to selecting the members of an assistive technology team.

The following is a list of qualities, in order of importance, to consider when deciding who should be on the team:

1. Feels the job they have done is never quite good enough

2. Works hard

3. Is motivated

4. Problem-solves

5. Possesses a willingness to learn

6. Respects others (especially educators) by demonstrating the attitude that other educators are peers

7. Excels at written and verbal communication

8. Works as a team player

9. Is flexible

10. Fears nothing

11. Multitasks

12. Is creative

13. Is knowledgeable in assistive technology (Eek!)

The majority of these qualities are those any recruiter would desire in any employee for any job. It isn't any surprise that "Works hard" is near the top of the

list. However, notice where "Is knowledgeable in assistive technology" comes on the list. In truth, we debated whether this should be on the list at all. It should *not* be a prerequisite that someone have working knowledge of assistive technology to be on the assistive technology team. It is entirely possible for someone to have some experience with assistive technology and be a total slacker. Who would you rather have on your team: the person who knows how to program a device but sits with feet up all day playing solitaire, or the person who busts their hump while still being willing to learn how to program a device? We'll choose the latter every time to be our teammate. The person who is willing to work hard, learn more, and take initiative will quickly gain the knowledge it takes to provide effective assistive technology services. This individual will surely surpass those who already have some knowledge about assistive technology but are resting on their laurels. The person who has even some of the qualities listed above "Is knowledgeable in assistive technology" is far better suited to be on the team than the person who already "knows it all." The truth is, you'll probably know who fits this description and who doesn't, because the star that shines the brightest is the easiest to see.

Slim Pickins: Hard-Working Folks Are in Demand

The first people considered for the assistive technology team are usually related service providers, especially speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and occupational therapists (OTs). And in fact, they might be the perfect choice for team members. Related service providers have proved themselves capable of learning new things, managing large amounts of work, working successfully on teams, and integrating services. As an additional bonus, these individuals have some experience using tools and strategies to help students meet their educational goals. However, a problem exists with using these individuals as team members—they are hard to come by. The shortage of SLPs and OTs makes it hard to reassign them to the assistive technology team. But although the SLP or OT position vacancy might be difficult to fill, the benefits outweigh the costs. The right therapist in the role of an assistive technology team member can decrease the demands placed on all of the other therapists in the school district by providing insights about supports that can be put in place to help that discipline.

Multidisciplined, Schmultidisciplined

There is only one way an assistive technology team should look: attractive. That's right—no ugly people on the team. That is the one and only rule that you should have. Of course beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so you get to decide who's dazzling enough to be on your team.

There is no formula that says each person on the team should have a different educational background. There is no rule that says there should be at least one speech pathologist, one occupational therapist, and one physical therapist. But if you're one of those people who needs a guideline, here it is: Disciplines don't matter … much. It is acceptable to have two SLPs on your team and no OTs, or the reverse. In fact, it would be better to have two people with the same educational background who are hard workers than to have one person from a different background who lacks the qualities of a good team member. Quality of work overrides educational background every time.

Another reason the assistive technology team doesn't need members from every discipline is because those disciplines are already represented in the student's IEP team. And as the assistive technology person, you will collaborate with *all* of the members of the student's IEP team, including the related service providers, to make decisions.

The Dangers of a Multidisciplinary Approach

Moviegoers know how a bad sci-fi monster movie would put together a team to investigate the strange alien creature that crash-landed in the Mojave Desert. You get one of each specialist to describe the attributes of the monster: the biologist with Coke-bottle glasses to tell you how interesting it is, the sharp-as-a-tack medic with more curves than a roller coaster to remind you that it's a living being, the exoteric psychic to tell you what the creature thinks, the tough as nails, ripped to the max ex-marine to tell you how dangerous it is, and the wily veteran to assure you that there is no earthly way the creature could escape.

Building an assistive technology team is nothing like that. There is no requirement that an assistive technology team have one of each discipline on the team. In fact, there is a very real danger when a team is multidisciplinary that people

will get pigeonholed into their specialty areas. When a request for help determining tools for a student is received, there might be a natural tendency to make assignments based on the area in which the student is struggling. For example, if a student is experiencing communication difficulties, it could be assumed that the SLP should be the one on the team addressing those concerns. If a student is experiencing writing difficulties, it might be assumed that the OT should be the one on the team making recommendations. This is a trap—not just an ordinary trap, either. It is one of those Indiana Jones type traps that lops your head off if you aren't careful! What is the likelihood that the number of requests that arrive will be equally distributed among all domains? Will the number of requests to address writing difficulties match, even remotely, the number of requests where communication is the biggest concern? Even if the requests are initially equally balanced, they will not continue in that fashion. That is a promise. These inequalities can tear the team apart because nothing gets under people's skin more than watching someone else sit around doing nothing while they're working their tail feathers off.

The other trap is that responding to requests based solely on the discipline of individual team members is ultimately restricting. If the OT on the team provides all the strategies with regard to writing, how will the other assistive technology trainers learn strategies to address writing challenges? Furthermore, if the IEP team is looking for strategies to help with writing, it is likely that they have already asked the onsite OT for advice. The educator contacting the assistive technology team may be looking for strategies from a team member with a different background or perspective. Keep in mind that an assistive technology team consists of teammates who can each offer different insights and perspectives. When the AT member with an SLP background is asked to address a situation focusing on writing difficulties, that person has teammates to turn to for support. If a particular discipline is not represented in the assistive technology team, the assistive technology trainer still has the related service providers on the IEP team for collaboration. By staying away from pigeonholes and experiencing a multitude of difficulties, each member of the team becomes a better, more well-rounded, and more versatile assistive technology trainer.

Avoiding the Phantom Menace through Equality

If you've been lured to the dark side and decide to distribute requests for assistance based on discipline, then you will have to face the following question: "What do we do when we get a request that does not pertain to a discipline we have on the team?" What if requests come to the team to address concerns related to vision, yet there is no teacher of the visually impaired on the team? How do you decide who responds to that request? Not easy questions to answer, are they? But if you decide to split things up without considering the professional discipline of the trainer, then you no longer have that concern, do you? Adopting the policy that each team member is an equal "assistive technology trainer" capable of handling any request for assistance lets you avoid the problem entirely.

Another strategy to use to keep from falling into the "distribute cases based on discipline" trap is to apply a spin to the concept of person-first language. Rather than saying, "I'm a speech-language pathologist on the team," say, "I'm an assistive technology trainer with a speech background." Even better, just say, "I'm an assistive technology trainer" and leave it at that. Every recommendation is given more validity. The recommendations are coming from an assistive technology trainer rather than from a specific discipline. There should be a general understanding that once people become part of the assistive technology team, they stop seeing themselves solely as experts in their previous discipline and start to see themselves as assistive technology trainers. As Obi-Wan Kenobi said to Luke Skywalker when he first felt the Force flow through him, "That's good. You've taken your first step into a larger world." In this case it is the world of assistive technology!

It's Okay to Say That You Don't Know

You are not the smartest person in the world. You can't know everything. In fact, if you did know everything, I'm pretty sure people would just get jealous and resent you for that fact. Nobody likes a know-it-all (except our spouses—they love know-it-alls), and no one even expects you to know everything. There you go. We just gave you permission to not know things. It is totally, 100% fine to not know the answer. Here's all you have to say when someone asks you something that you don't know: "I'm not sure, but I'll find out!" Say it out loud right now

to practice. Say it often. Parents, teachers, heck, everyone will love you for it. By saying you're "not sure," you're letting them know that it is okay for them not to know it either. By saying "I'll find out," you're letting them know that they have someone willing to go an extra step for them. Then make sure you follow through on your promise, or the phrase will mean nothing.

Stating that you don't know but that you're willing to find out is also the key to eliminating any insecurity you might be having about making recommendations that might be outside of your specialty area. You might be thinking, "I'm not an occupational therapist, so how can I make recommendations about writing?" or "I'm not a speech-language pathologist, so how can I make recommendations about communication?" By admitting you don't know and by being willing to learn, you make yourself a better overall assistive technology trainer.

a robot's story

Robot number PL 94-142 zipped down the ship's hallway on her way to an important job interview, weaving around the other machines that speckled the corridor. Suddenly she hit a major backup along the main thoroughfare of the ship. She couldn't be late. Late was unacceptable. She linked to the ship's network and found out the backup was caused by a containment leak in pod 7. She quickly scanned her vast database of every piece of technology known to machine or biological entity and came up with just the right tool to reroute traffic. PL 94-142 loved solving problems with technology, and in fact that was why she was applying for the new job. One of her subroutines had just discovered that some small organic life forms were having problems learning. PL 94-142 knew she could find just the right technologies to help them, a whole database full, if only she were hired.

But even with traffic cleared, PL 94-142 was running late. She engaged her hyper-core turbo thrust to increase her speed by 17%. The data processed immediately through her circuitry-lined head shell. If no other obstacles impeded her movement she would make it to the interview on time, if, of course, her circuits didn't melt first. "Thirty seconds until lateness" warned a silent digital signal that passed directly through the central processor of PL 94-142's

motherboard. She couldn't be late because then they wouldn't hire her and she wouldn't be able to fix anything. Rounding the final turn PL 94-142's OSA (optical sensor array) locked onto the target destination. Instantaneously PL 94-142 calculated the distance, rate of speed, and time of arrival. Racing toward the door PL 94-142 increased acceleration by another 4%. The friction in PL 94-142's motors caused a low screeching noise to erupt from the chest plate covering PL 94-142's navigation system.

PL 94-142 closed in on the door. Fifty feet. Forty feet. A thunderous clanking noise. Thirty feet. Twenty feet. A pop and a repeated clang. Ten feet! Five feet! The groaning inside the chest plate grew louder, sounding like a wounded animal screaming for mercy. Mercy came swiftly as PL 94-142 screeched to a halt arriving at the door with 11 seconds to spare.

An infrared beam blinked on and scanned PL 94-142's identification engraving located just below her OLFSA (olfactory sensor array). The holographic door disappeared and the force containment unit dissipated. A green light blinked once above the door while simultaneously sending the message "Enter" to PL 94-142's OSA. PL 94-142 rolled into the room slowly.

The room was white, like every other part of the ship. A white kidney-shaped table sat near the far wall. Seated around the table were the representatives from the Council of Health and Educational Well-Being, Assistive Technology division, or C.H.E.W.A.T., as it was known around the ship. PL 94-142 rolled into the empty space in the center of the U and extended her pincer grasper. After complete extension, PL 94-142 rotated the gesticulatory unit right and left to simulate a waving motion while pivoting on her center axis. Each creature nodded acceptingly in succession as PL 94-142 momentarily rested the wave in front of each creature.

"PL 94-142—please engage verbal processing unit: Mary," said Scarlax, the purple creature in the center. PL 94-142 replied, in a synthesized female voice "Affirmative. VPU initiated. Voice: Mary."

"Excellent!" said Zibug, the chubby furry being on the left. "Let's get started, PL 94-142. I received a data stream earlier this week from our personnel office stating that you were seeking employment as an assistive technology trainer? Is that correct?"

"Affirmative," replied PL 94-142.

"This is a big change from your current position. Do you have the necessary qualifications to provide such a service to all of the varied species of creatures residing on this ship?" Scarlax asked, his purple flesh jiggling with concern.

"Assistive technology trainers are supposed to be organic," interrupted Morcor, the slime-covered officer on the right, gurgling with irritation. "No robot is qualified for this position."

"PL 94-142 is familiar with the functions of every piece of equipment in the known universe," responded the robot. "PL 94-142 maintains the ability to analyze student data at 128 million computations per second while simultaneously cross referencing the equipment database to generate equipment recommendations organized by probability of success based on known factors."

"Ha! Is it that easy, PL 94-142? Simply analyze the data collected on a student and poof!, you've got yourself proven recommendations?" gurgled Morcor as slime passed over the lips of her gigantic maw while forming the word "recommendations."

"Affirmative," nodded PL 94-142, circuits blazing in anticipation of being hired for the job.

"PL 94-142, what about brainstorming solutions together with the teachers? Is their data not valuable as well? What about solutions that do not require equipment? Would every solution need a piece of equipment?" inquired Zibug, her orange fur ruffling.

"Affirmative," confirmed PL 94-142. "Equipment will provide solutions to every problem. Brainstorming is not necessary. Teachers will use what PL 94-142 tells them to use because of the expected probability of success."

"Ah, probability of success may be high, PL 94-142," agreed Scarlax. "But providing equipment when it is not needed is not very cost effective, not to mention that it restricts the student to using that device."

"And teachers will want a say in what tools and strategies are implemented with a student. Teachers have shown again and again that 'potential' solutions

become 'used' solutions when the teacher takes part in the decision-making process," added Morcor.

PL 94-142 widened her ocular lens. Solutions that don't require technology? Restrictions on students? Cooperation with the teacher? These were unfamiliar new concepts. She initiated an analyzing subroutine immediately, sensing the job slipping from her pincer-graspers.

"PL 94-142 will help many small organic life forms by providing equipment that will work," she pleaded, core temperature rising by one degree.

"There is no doubt that you want to help," encouraged Zibug, "but PL 94-142, can your programming handle the complex interactions that occur between the assistive technology trainer and the teacher? We believe it takes a, pardon the expression, 'natural touch' to work with a teacher along with the many life forms in an instructional unit. We're sorry, but analyzing data is not good enough. The teachers need to trust their assistive technology trainer and, most importantly, form a bond with their assistive technology trainer."

PL 94-142's metal dome crinkled in disappointment, but only for a moment, as the results from the subroutine lighted her CPU. New circuits formed allowing her to calculate a response.

"PL 94-142 has learned many things during this interview and wishes to make a new request. PL 94-142 requests to join your mentor program and work with an organic-based assistive technology trainer to increase knowledge of forming relationships with teachers while simultaneously building a database of no-cost solutions."

The C.H.E.W.A.T. committee members were surprised. Maybe this wasn't an impossibility after all. Leaning in to discuss privately, the three creatures interfaced about the ramifications of letting a robot participate in the mentor program. Morcor's slimy head-shakes slowly turned into nods. PL 94-142 waited silently for a reply.

"Congratulations, Robot PL 94-142," stated Scarlax. "Because of your desire to help and proven ability to learn, we have decided to allow you to take part in the C.H.E.W.A.T mentor program. This is a first, PL 94-142, an experiment.

We believe that you can prove that working together, robot and life form, or computer and being if you'd rather, can lead to greater results for students than just the life form or just the robot working individually. You start tomorrow."

"Thank you. Thank you," PL 94-142 squeaked as she zoomed out of the room, motors whizzing and turbines humming. Tomorrow was going to be the first day of a new beginning.

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Take Me to Your Leader: The Assistive Technology Team Leader

When the aliens attack, and you know they will, threatening to fry your brain with their death ray unless you take them to your leader, you need to be able to confidently march them down the hall, point to a room and say, "The person you're looking for is in there!" To prevent your disintegration, because these aliens will turn you into dust without even thinking about it, this person needs to be a strong leader. Someone who can talk to the aliens, try some diplomacy on their little green behinds, and, if need be, blast them back to their home world!

We aren't going to try to define every talent a team leader needs to have to keep you from ending up hauling rocks on some orange planet in a distant solar system. However, we will take a shot at defining the roles and responsibilities of the Assistive Technology Team Leader. We've broken the roles and responsibilities into three categories: Shoulds, Coulds, and Should Nots.

The Assistive Technology Team Leader should …

- Be the single point of contact for higher-level administration

- Be the go-to person for team members when they have grievances

- Organize and run team meetings

- Consult with each team member individually at least once a year, but as much as necessary, on any topic

- Attend administrative meetings in the district pertaining to technology and policy

- Foster an environment and culture of innovation and determination

- Advocate for the assistive technology team and students with disabilities

- Be vested in the success of the assistive technology team

- Encourage and promote professional development within the team

The Assistive Technology Team Leader could …

- Maintain the inventory

- Coordinate purchasing so that vendors have one point of contact

- Maintain a full or partial caseload

- Have no caseload

- Collect data on team initiatives

- Collect and analyze caseload data

- Collect data on internal staff development (what the team members are learning)

- Collect data on staff development workshops (what the team is providing)

- Develop the budget

- Coordinate with local, state, national, and international officials

The Assistive Technology Team Leader should not …

- Develop overarching goals of the team

- Construct the team's initiatives

These bullets are items the team should develop collaboratively to shape a unified vision.

Oh Captain, My Captain: Team Leader Inclusion

The leader of the team might have a separate position within the district, or "leader" might just be a title within the team that does not correspond to any monetary or administrative distinction. Either way, the team leader shouldn't be a separate administrator who only sporadically attends meetings or checks in every once in a while. The leader needs to be a part of the team, not a distant figurehead with other responsibilities beyond assistive technology. This person, however selected or appointed, is the face of the team—the one who needs to be able to be diplomatic when the situation calls for diplomacy, humorous when the situation calls for humor, and tough when the situation calls for toughness. The leader should be gregarious enough to win over friends who will support team initiatives.

your social quotient

Your assistive technology team always needs a lot of help from a lot of people. People all over the school district will be assisting the team in making progress and accomplishing its goals. Most people are eager to lend a helping hand the first time you ask—but if you forget to thank them or fail to express your appreciation, the team could rapidly find itself becoming very lonely. As a rule, each year the team should assign at least one person to be the social coordinator for the team. The social coordinator's responsibility is to remember to thank everyone who has gone out of their way to help the team. They can plan birthday parties, organize gifts, buy cards and candy, and send out letters of thanks to anyone who the team deems as needing a big ol' pat on the back for helping out the cause. The social coordinator can also plan special event celebrations, such as baby showers, wedding showers, and birthdays, for individual team members. The team might want to ask everyone to contribute to a "social fund" to cover the costs of these events. Make no mistake: the social coordinator fulfills one of the most important functions of the team. It may seem like a small thing, but honoring someone's birthday can promote team bonding while also greasing the gears for future favors.

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Christopher R. Bugaj, an assistive technology trainer, is a founding member of the AT team for Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia. In addition to his work in Loudoun County, he also works as an adjunct professor for George Mason University and is the host and producer of the award-winning podcast series A.T.TIPScast, a series about implementing AT in public schools. Bugaj holds a master of arts in speech pathology from Kent State University and presents at educational conferences throughout the United States.

Sally Norton-Darr is an assistive technology trainer for Loudoun County Public Schools and a nationally certified speech-language pathologist. After earning degrees from Pennsylvania State University, she went on to work in a variety of settings, including public schools in Utah and Virginia, for the state of New Jersey as a director of speech therapies, and in private practice. Norton-Darr presents on high- and low-tech AT topics both nationally and regionally.

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