Guiding Document for Consideration of Assistive Technology Needs

The requirement for each IEP team to consider the child's need for AT is mandated in IDEA as one of five special factors that each IEP team is to consider.

Consideration of special factors. The IEP Team shall-

(i) In the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior;

(ii) In the case of a child with limited English proficiency, consider the language needs of the child as those needs relate to the child's IEP;

(iii) In the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP Team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the child's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child;

(iv) Consider the communication needs of the child, and in the case of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, consider the child's language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communications with peers and professional personnel in the child's language and communication mode, academic level, and full range of needs, including opportunities for direct instruction in the child's language and communication mode; and

(v) Consider whether the child needs assistive technology devices and services.

© The QIAT Leadership Team (2015), **http://www.qiat.org**.   Citations listed in Reference document

(emphasis added) Authority: IDEA Sec. 614(d)(3)(B)

While the first four special factors refer to very specific areas of need or disability, the last one which addresses AT consideration has no such limitation. Rather, every IEP team must consider whether the child needs AT devices and services. While most education agencies have a question about AT on the IEP form in order to comply with federal law, this is often only paper implementation (Wallace, Blasé, Fixsen, & Naoom, 2008). In other words, few actually implement consideration. Many education agencies across the United States continue to struggle with performance implementation (i.e., actually doing it well)(Paine, Bellamy, & Wilcox, 1984). This has created an AT consideration environment fraught with inconsistencies.

The law does not define or describe what constitutes "consideration" for any of the special factors or provide any guidelines on conducting a consideration process. Best practice suggests education agencies develop their own procedures for consideration. The Quality Indicators for Consideration of Assistive Technology Needs address the core components that must be present and can provide guidance and organization to education agencies as they do so.

Indicator 1:

1. Assistive technology devices and services are *considered for every student with disabilities* regardless of type or severity of disability.

Intent: Consideration of assistive technology (AT) need is required by IDEA and is based on the unique educational needs of the student. Students are not excluded from

consideration of AT for any reason. (e.g., type of disability, age, administrative concerns).

As a part of the required deliberation of the special factors in IDEA, it is the responsibility of every IEP team to consider the student's need for AT. Each team's decision about a student's need for AT in educational settings is to be based on the student's abilities and the tasks they need to accomplish across environments. The need for AT does not depend on a specific type or level of disability. As IEP teams develop goals, objectives and benchmarks for students, AT is explored as a potential support for all areas addressed in the IEP. Perhaps the most common error in the consideration of AT need is the practice of considering it only for students with severe disabilities. IDEA is very clear in stating that consideration must be completed for all students who qualify for special education. Failure to do so is caused by a lack of knowledge of the legal mandates of IDEA and of the education agency's responsibilities.

Example:

   Charmaine is a fourth grade student with a specific learning disability in reading. On previous IEPs, AT was not recommended because the school district procedures did not include consideration of the need AT for students with mild disabilities. There had been no training for team members about AT and the team did not know that there were AT tools that could help students like Charmaine. After attending a regional training focusing on AT, the team learned about technology that supports reading (e.g., devices with features such as adjustable spacing, highlighting, text-to-speech) and wondered if

any of this might be of benefit to Charmaine. While talking to other teams about AT

regulations, the team realized that their district practice did not comply with the law.

They met with their special education director following the training and began to plan

how to bring their district procedures into compliance. In the meantime, Charmaine's

team arranged trials with technology that supports reading.

Key Questions Indicator 1

- How does the district ensure that all IEP teams appropriately consider AT for their students?
- What training is provided for IEP team members to ensure they are aware of appropriate AT?
- What processes, including forms or other documentation, are used to guide IEP team members through an effective consideration process?

Indicator 2:

During the development of the individualized educational program, the IEP team

consistently uses a ***collaborative decision-making process*** that supports systematic

consideration of each student's possible need for assistive technology devices and

services.

Intent: A collaborative process that ensures that all IEP teams effectively consider the

AT needs of students is defined, communicated, and consistently used throughout the

agency. Processes may vary from agency to agency to most effectively address student

needs under local conditions.

Procedures improve the decision-making ability of groups (Pavitt & Curtis, 2001). Using a formal process increases the likelihood that team members think about the same thing at the same time, helps curb powerful or overly talkative team members, and helps the team deal with conflict (Poole, 1990). Specific decision-making procedures to be used by IEP teams during consideration are identified at the agency level and training on those procedures is provided. Once teams are trained, the process is used consistently during every IEP meeting. Steps and criteria for the process are well defined and understood by all IEP team members. Critical information that the team should gather and review in order to make good decisions about AT is identified. This information might include the tasks that are most difficult for the student, the specific problems and frustrations the student experiences and specific accessibility features that may benefit the student. The agency may develop a form or adopt a form such as the *QIAT Planning Document: Consideration of the Need for AT* to support the process. Questions such as those in Table 2.1 help to guide the discussion. The agency also defines the steps that the team will take if more information is needed (e.g., observation of the student, referral for further assessment, gathering information about strategies and tools).

Discussion Questions for Indicator 2:

- With what curriculum areas and specific tasks is the student struggling?
- What strategies, accommodations or modifications have been tried and with what success?
- What AT has been tried and with what success?
- What assistive features are needed by the student?
- What AT tools have those features?

Team members collaborate to ensure that the student's needs are thoroughly analyzed and decisions are not based on a single subject or situation. All team members, including the student and family, provide information and have input into the decision-making process so that they understand and value the decisions that are made regarding AT.

Example:

Teresa is a middle school student with mild cerebral palsy that impacts both her ability to produce legible written work and her organization skills. She has had extensive occupational therapy and recently the occupational therapist (OT) raised the question about using AT to help Teresa cope successfully with the increased academic demands of middle school. The team had little experience with AT but were used to working together to problem solve. They used a decision making process that focused on the student to help them collaboratively identify the problem and potential solutions.

They met briefly after the AT question was raised and decided that they needed to identify the specific tasks that were difficult for Teresa and also to learn more about AT that could help her with those tasks. They all agreed to collect data about Teresa's written work and organizational strategies for two weeks both at home and at school. At the same time one member volunteered to investigate AT tools in preparation for the IEP meeting that was scheduled at the end of the month. They came to the IEP meeting with a list of specific tasks that seemed to be most difficult for Teresa, including keeping track of assignments, taking notes in the two classes where the teachers lecture, and completing written assignments that were legible and readable. Early in the IEP

meeting the resource teacher explained what AT devices and services are to Teresa and her mother. Together the team members agreed that trials were needed with several of the identified tools to help determine if any of these tools made a difference in Teresa's independence and legibility of written work. The team documented the need for AT in the IEP and planned for the trials with the identified tools.

Key Questions for Indicator 2

- How does the district define a collaborative process for AT consideration?
- How are new employees informed about the collaborative process that is used in AT consideration?
- How does the district ensure that the appropriate team members are involved in the collaborative process?
- How does the process ensure that everyone has input?

Indicator 3:

IEP team members have the ***collective knowledge and skills*** needed to make informed assistive technology decisions and seek assistance when needed.

Intent: IEP team members combine their knowledge and skills to determine if AT devices and services are needed to remove barriers to student performance. When the AT needs are beyond the knowledge and scope of the IEP team, additional resources and support are sought.

No one person on the team knows everything that is needed to make informed AT decisions. The most effective teams work collaboratively to identify their own strengths and deficits and to determine how to gain the knowledge they need. Parents and

students know about the student's interests, strengths, weaknesses and long-range goals. They also know about strategies used successfully outside the school setting. The teacher(s) who work with the student on a daily basis know about the schedule and the student's performance and preferences at school. They are also aware of the specific tasks for which supports may be needed, the times in the day that lend themselves to implementing AT use, the steps in the curriculum that will be required in the future and many other details that are critical to sound decision making. If team members are unsure about which AT tools to consider, additional information is gathered and/or support is sought from someone who has the needed knowledge and skills. It is critical to have information about the AT (e.g., stand alone AT devices, hardware, and software) available within the agency, other AT that should be acquired, training that may be needed, and ways in which any of these AT tools may integrate with the school network. Administrative support may be needed to bring in additional resources when the student's team needs more information or training.

Example:

Mary is a 9th grader who is reading at the 5th grade level. Due to her reading level, Mary is not making adequate progress in her content area classes, all of which require extensive reading and application of information gained from text. Mary and her teacher agree that when Mary does not have to decode every word she can successfully recall and apply the information in academic activities. Mary's parents have also noticed this and frequently help Mary with her homework by reading complex material aloud to her. Recently Mary's mother saw an ad for an e-book reader and wondered if it could

help Mary become a more successful and independent student. As a first step to exploring this possibility, the team discussed the assistive features Mary may need and text-to-speech was at the top of their list. One team member had personally used the e-book reader that Mary's mother had seen on television and described its features and limitations to Mary and the rest of the team. All were disappointed that text-to-speech was not an option on this e-book reader but they knew there were other options.

Another team member mentioned that he had also heard that not all content could be read aloud even when the device had that capability. The team thought that an e-book reader with accessible content could be really useful to Mary but they realized that they did not have enough information about AT that supports reading and accessible content to make a decision. So they requested an AT consultation to learn more about e-book readers and similar technology and an appointment with the curriculum director to learn more about accessible content in the agency's curriculum.

Key Questions for Indicator 3:

- How does the team gain input from all team members, including the parent and student?
- What resources do IEP team members use to increase their knowledge of AT when additional information is needed?
- If the team needs additional information, who could be contacted either inside or outside of the education agency to provide needed skills and knowledge?

Indicator 4:

Decisions regarding the need for assistive technology devices and services are ***based on the student's IEP goals and objectives, access to curricular and extracurricular activities and progress in the general education curriculum.***

Intent: As the IEP team determines the tasks the student needs to complete and develops the goals and objectives, the team considers whether AT is required to accomplish those tasks.

After establishing the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance and developing the student's goals, the IEP team discusses and identifies tasks that may be especially difficult based on the student's past performance and any concerns the student, parents, or educators express during the consideration process. The team considers whether AT devices might be needed. Across all settings and grades IEP teams consider a range of factors including academic, non-academic, social and personal issues as they develop IEPs for students with disabilities. While a student's academic progress in the curriculum is the starting point, other communication and social needs (e.g., requesting, protesting, negating) are also typically discussed across environments (e.g., the lunch room, the playground, physical education classes, or sports).

The decision to provide AT devices or services does not mean that the student will not receive instruction in the area of concern. High quality instruction is always the key to continued progress in the curriculum. AT is specifically used to overcome one or more barriers to that progress. If an individual team member does not understand the role of AT or expresses concerns that its use will mean the student will stop learning new skills

in the area of concern, that team member needs supportive and informed discussion about what AT can do for the student. For example, research shows that the use of augmentative communication has a positive effect on language acquisition, and does not impede natural speech production (Millar, Schlosser, and Light, 2006). The team describes in the IEP, the ways that AT may combine with effective instruction to help the student make progress in the curriculum and attain learning goals.

Example:

Audrey has a hearing loss and uses American Sign Language (ASL) as her primary means of communication. She has severe motor involvement that impacts her ability to use her hands resulting in sign approximations that are not easily understood by an unfamiliar communication partner. The team agreed that Audrey was able to communicate within her classroom at this time, but the team is aware that Audrey will be in more demanding settings in the future. As the discussion continued, Audrey's mom expressed concerns about her ability to communicate outside of the classroom with unfamiliar communication partners. Audrey's mom asked about ways that Audrey could communicate more effectively with her Girl Scout troop and during other afterschool activities. Discussion led to a decision to seek more information about communication needs in outside environments, potential strategies and AT tools that might help Audrey in the wider school environment and in other settings. The team agreed to meet again in two weeks to discuss the information gathered.

Key Questions for Indicator 4:

- How does the team identify the student's curricular and extracurricular needs?

- How does the IEP team identify specific tasks for which AT may be needed?
- How does the IEP team address issues about the use of AT to support the achievement of identified IEP goals?

Indicator 5:

The IEP team *gathers and analyzes data* about the student, customary environments, educational goals and tasks when considering a student's need for assistive technology devices and services.

Intent: The IEP team shares and discusses information about the student's present levels of achievement in relationship to the environments and tasks to determine if the student requires AT devices and services to participate actively, work on expected tasks, and make progress toward mastery of educational goals.

In preparation for the IEP meeting, the team gathers data about the student's performance from multiple environments using sources such as observations in the classroom, portfolios, test data, parent's observations, rating scales, response to past interventions, student self-report and other formal and informal sources. Data related to all primary area(s) of concern are gathered and brought to the IEP meeting for use in the consideration discussion. All aspects of the environment are included (e.g., classroom arrangement, available tools and supports, lighting, noise level).

Analysis and discussion of the data provide the team with the information to identify barriers for the student and the tasks that are most difficult. This is the basis to determine whether AT devices and services are needed to support the student in achieving IEP goals.

Example:

Chaz is a 5th grader with difficulty in the area of reading as evidenced by low comprehension scores. As they developed the IEP, the team looked at the effectiveness of previous intervention strategies. Performance data showed that when Chaz used a portable electronic dictionary to identify unknown words, he was slower completing reading assignments and his comprehension did not increase. After further analyzing the data, the IEP team determined that Chaz had trouble retaining information, making connections with background knowledge, and answering comprehension questions. The team realized that, although Chaz was using AT, it was not adequate for his current needs and additional tools or strategies were needed. They decided to complete an AT assessment that would look at his abilities and needs as well as other tools and strategies with a focus on helping connect to background information and expand his vocabulary.

Key Questions for Indicator 5:

- How does the IEP team determine what data is relevant and appropriate to identify student needs?
- How is the data analyzed?
- How does the team use data to determine next steps?

Indicator 6:

When assistive technology is needed, the IEP team *explores a range* of assistive technology devices, services and other supports that address identified needs.

Intent: The IEP team considers various supports and services that address the educational needs of the student and may include no tech, low tech, mid-tech and/or

high tech solutions and devices. IEP team members do not limit their thinking to only those devices and services currently available within the district.

IEP teams use a process to explore a number of AT devices when they consider a student's need for AT. They understand the concept of features and use it to help them make AT decisions. Features are aspects of a device that help a student overcome barriers and are components of a product that make it particularly suited to a student's needs. Examples might be portability, device size, sound production, background to text contrast, text re-sizing, text-to-speech, range of digital voices with changeable speed or pitch, etc.

After identifying the needs and abilities of the student and analyzing the data they have available, the team generates a list of features that the student needs. The team then identifies devices with those features. This is called a feature match. Due to requirements of different learning environments, the team may need to consider creating an AT system with more than one tool. They discuss AT services and other strategies or supports that the student may need for success.

The team reviews a range of devices that have the prioritized features. Teams that are not aware of current technology contact someone outside of the team to inform and support their consideration. They know and use resources inside their agency and contract resource or assessment services when necessary. In some instances a new device may be needed for the student. In other instances, technologies with those features may be currently available within a student's school building or agency.

The team also determines the services that will be needed to support the use of the identified AT. This can include coordination among staff, training for staff, student, and families, as well as other services identified in IDEA.

Example:

Pablo, a 7th grader, has a congenital deformity of his right hand. Although he has received occupational therapy (OT) services for many years, he continues to struggle with written assignments. He tires quickly so he tends to write shorter, less complicated responses on tests, essays, and homework. His teachers report that his oral presentations are more comprehensive and complex than his written reports.

After exploring a range of AT, the IEP team considered a system that included a special pencil grip for short answers, as well as an audio recorder that can be used as an alternative for note taking and lengthier assignments. They will introduce both things immediately. The team also determined that he needed a trial with a portable word processor, tablet, or computer with word processing. All three devices were available in their school and a trial with each of them was planned and written into the IEP. They discussed that he may also be a candidate for voice recognition software for some writing assignments. Since the members of the IEP team were not familiar with voice recognition technology, they decided to request support from a teacher in the agency who does have this experience.

Key Questions for Indicator 6:

- How do IEP team members find information on the AT devices that have already been considered?

- How do the IEP team members learn about AT devices that have the identified features available to students with this type of need?
- How does the education agency ensure that IEP teams explore a full range of AT devices and consider a range of services and supports?
- When supports and services are needed, how do IEP team members know who within or outside of the school system can be a resource?

Indicator 7:

The assistive technology consideration process and ***results are documented in the IEP*** and include a rationale for the decision as well as supporting evidence.

Intent: Even though IEP documentation may include a checkbox verifying that AT has been considered, the reasons for the decisions and recommendations should also be clearly stated. Supporting evidence may include the results of AT assessments, data from device trials, differences in achievement with and without AT, student preferences for competing devices and teacher observations, among others.

While a simple "yes" or "no" answer verifying consideration of AT on the IEP document may indicate that AT was considered, documentation of the rationale or process is helpful to the individuals who are implementing the IEP. Clearly explaining the tasks that were identified as most difficult and the AT devices that were considered to complete those tasks is valuable for both immediate implementation and for future IEP teams who will be looking for as much information as possible to help them in their decision making.

There are three possible outcomes to AT consideration:

1. Yes, the student needs AT.

2. No, the student doesn't need AT.

3. We don't know if the student needs AT.

When the IEP team determines that AT is needed, it is then written into the IEP. If the team determines that AT is not needed, there is no legal requirement that they explain why it isn't needed. However, best practice is to write a brief explanation so that future IEP teams know what was considered and why this IEP team decided it was not needed. When the IEP team realizes that they do not know whether or not AT is needed, they then refer the student for an AT assessment. Many districts use a specific form such as the *QIAT Planning Document: Consideration of the Need for AT* (see QIAT Planning Documents at https://qiat.org) to help guide the discussion of the need for AT and that form is attached to the IEP to serve as documentation of the team's consideration. In other districts a simple paragraph is written to explain the data and the discussion that led to the decision that was made about the need for AT. Some states attach meeting minutes pages to the IEP. Meeting minutes also provide a logical place to document the important facts about the discussion that takes place and the decision that is made. When there are no minutes, an explanatory page, chart, or table can often be attached to the IEP. The goal is for IEP documentation to clearly describe the team's consideration process and decisions.

Example:

As he entered kindergarten, Ivan's team was concerned about his extensive communication, behavior, language, and learning needs. He had been identified as being on the autism spectrum. The team discussed several areas in which they thought

AT devices might help him make progress in the curriculum. Research on visual strategies for students on the autism spectrum led them to consider the fact that he might need an individual visual schedule. The team also considered the need for a voice output communication device and the importance of using the same symbol system for both the visual schedule and the device.

The team used the district's one page form to guide their AT decision-making. The team documented their discussion and the specific AT they felt would be needed. The form documented the identified symbol system and included examples of symbols that had been most effective. The voice output device that was appropriate for the symbol system and the settings and activities in which Ivan used it successfully were also included on the form.

Key Questions for Indicator 7:

- How is the AT consideration process documented in the IEP?

- What guidance does the district provide to ensure that consideration is documented?

- What guidance is provided to ensure that the documentation includes the reasons for the decisions and that recommendations are clearly stated?