ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY SHARING PROGRAMS STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Background Information

Disability encompasses a range of difficulties that impact an individual's capacity to see, hear, walk, talk, read, write, focus, remember, solve problems, or organize information. With appropriate accommodations, the impact of a disability can be mitigated, providing opportunities for access to typical experiences and a more independent quality of life. Assistive technology (AT) can provide these accommodations for individuals with disabilities. AT includes devices, ranging from low- to mid- to high-tech equipment and a range of professional services such as evaluation, consultation, training, and professional learning opportunities that ensure appropriate utilization of the device for the individual with the disability and the essential people in the person's life.

Children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 are ensured access to the AT devices and services they require under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). Considering which device is most appropriate for a child can involve an extended process in which various AT devices, some of which are quite costly, are tried until the right fit is determined.

AT sharing programs can be an important resource for local and regional education agencies (LEAs) during the AT consideration process. This study was requested by the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) to examine LEA access to this resource and to determine how to create a plan that would make AT sharing programs available to those LEAs that do not have access to them.

Methodology

The research methods used in this study included a systematic process for collecting and synthesizing data representing the perspectives of CT's AT sharing programs and CT LEAs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with AT professionals representing each of CT's AT sharing programs and the director of the CT Tech Act Project (CTTAP), which provides partial funding for some of these programs. The perspective of LEAs was elicited through input gathered via an AT Sharing Programs Survey which requested information about their frequency of use of external AT sharing programs as well as their perceived effectiveness of them and satisfaction with the AT sharing process. Additionally, LEAs were asked to express their need for an online (i.e., Craigslist-style) AT sharing system.

Results of the Study

AT resources, involving device loans, evaluation, training, and technical assistance opportunities, are available in four out of five of CT's educational regions; LEAs in the western part of CT have the least geographical access to these resources, and LEAs in the north central region have the most access. These AT supports include four established AT sharing programs that receive some federal funding through CTTAP. LEA access to these programs can involve a membership fee, or participation in a fee-for-service consortium model, or can be free of charge.

School districts that know about and use one or more of these external AT sharing programs are generally satisfied with the process, and the majority of LEAs expressed a medium-to-high level of overall need for them. Perceived benefits most frequently noted by LEAs participating in an external AT sharing program included improving the AT consideration process by increasing the AT options available for trial and the potential for cost-saving by borrowing a device before purchasing it. Barriers to external AT sharing program use from the LEA perspective included: 1) lack of staff awareness that AT sharing programs exist, 2) the distance to external AT sharing programs that requires staff travel time, 3) the availability of newer AT equipment at the AT sharing programs, and 4) incompatibility between the LEA's Information Technology (IT) system and a student's AT device. The most frequent reason for not accessing an external AT sharing program was the ability of LEAs to provide students with disabilities access to the AT devices recommended by their respective planning and placement team (PPT). Juxtaposed with this reason was the finding that many LEAs were not aware of the availability of CT's AT sharing programs. The primary barrier to offering AT device loans expressed from the AT sharing program perspective was insufficient funding.

The majority of CT LEAs expressed that they were likely or extremely likely to use a CT-based online AT device posting system as long as it was an exclusive service for CT LEAs. Sufficient training and technical assistance provided by professionals with AT expertise was noted as a necessary component of AT device-sharing regardless of the form in which the sharing occurs (i.e., in-person or online).

Recommendations

Development of a plan for a comprehensive inclusive system of AT services for LEAs supporting students with disabilities ages 3 through 21 will require administrative support and oversight from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), Bureau of Special Education (BSE). To coordinate these efforts at a statewide level, BSE will require resources for staffing and the oversight needed for the development and actualization of the plan.

Additional funding may also be needed to support the involvement of agencies in the collaborative effort – for example, to develop requests for proposals (RFPs) for agencies to expand their AT sharing programs, develop new AT sharing options, and provide professional learning opportunities to CT educators. The collaboration of an AT Advisory Workgroup composed of stakeholders representing CT's AT expertise and individuals impacted by the efforts of this group, including representatives from LEAs, families, and students with disabilities, can support CSDE's efforts. Primary deliverables for the workgroup could establish an overarching statewide vision for providing AT supports and services, engage partners who can offer support for maintaining a comprehensive system, create public awareness on the part of educators and families of the possibilities for using AT to support learning and independence, examine the feasibility of re-establishing an online AT sharing system exclusively for CT schools and families, and implement a statewide comprehensive job-embedded model of AT professional learning to build LEA AT infrastructures, policies, and best practices.