



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE SYNTHESIS ON THE SELECTION AND USE OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

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The use of technology in education can have a significant impact on the delivery of services to students with disabilities, yet its potential cannot be fully realized unless it is implemented appropriately. In an effort to examine implementation issues more closely, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs commissioned the American Institutes for Research to produce a synthesis report on this topic. This report gathered and analyzed information from 47 assistive technology projects. The final report recommends a set of seven, best practice principles that reflect lessons learned about how to implement effective strategies and reduce barriers to selecting and using assistive technology. (See sidebar.)

In the accompanying video, students, their families, their teachers, and administrators reveal how assistive technology has bettered their lives, both inside and outside of school. In the materials herein, we provide tips to help guide consumers, such as yourself, in better integrating assistive technology within effective programs and services for children with disabilities. The seven principles, described in greater detail below, are recurring themes in the stories of the children in the video and are illustrated in the vignettes that follow.

### Principle #1: Providing leadership

One of the most critical contributors to the success of any educational intervention is the presence of strong leadership. Leadership, whether at the Federal, state, district, or building level, establishes and

- 1. *Providing leadership;*
- 2. *Supporting stakeholder collaboration;*
- 3. *Monitoring impact;*
- 4. *Building capacity;*
- 5. *Reducing fear and becoming comfortable with technology;*
- 6. *Acknowledging diversity; and*
- 7. *Focusing on supporting student learning.*

gains acceptance for an overarching vision, fosters a common set of goals and objectives, and cultivates a sense of commitment and excitement about the intervention among students, families, teachers, and staff.

### Principle #2: Supporting stakeholder collaboration

Teamwork involving teachers, students, family members, administrators, researchers, and policy-makers plays an important role in the success of any intervention. Assistive technology is no different and requires collaboration among several different groups of stakeholders in order for it to realize benefits for students with disabilities.

### Principle #3: Monitoring impact

Monitoring impact helps schools constantly evaluate and improve their services. Monitoring also provides a means for compiling tangible indicators of results, which can generate credibility and enthusiasm for the intervention. Finally, monitoring helps focus the stakeholders' attention on issues of effectiveness in service provision.





### **Principle #4: Building capacity**

The most effective way to reach every child who is in need is to work to build the capacity of service providers all over the country to provide needed services. Effective capacity building involves four essential elements: (1) acquiring the necessary infrastructure and skills to deliver assistive technology services, (2) assuming ownership for implementation of assistive technology services, (3) devising plans for effective implementation and follow-through, and (4) creating sustainable mechanisms for continued services.

### **Principle #5: Reducing fear and becoming comfortable with technology**

Assistive technology is not common terminology for families or educators, and the thought of it can make people feel uncomfortable. People often do not feel like they know enough about what is available, how to learn about it, how to access it, how to use it, and how to pay for it. This type of discomfort and lack of confidence regarding assistive technology tends to make people hesitant about using it. They may not be willing to take any risks in trying a new tactic that could open up scores of opportunities for their child or student.

### **Principle #6: Acknowledging diversity**

Students in need of assistive technology represent a variety of backgrounds, including diverse racial-ethnic groups, language- or cultural-minority groups, rural, inner city, or other hard-to-reach areas, low-income groups, and other traditionally underserved populations. Given this range of stakeholders that could benefit from assistive technology, it is important for service providers to proactively reach out to such a broad base. More importantly, service

providers need to be sensitive to the different cultural values and norms that characterize specific groups. In many cases, cultural barriers can limit the ability of users to truly benefit from otherwise successful services and programs.

### **Principle #7: Focusing on supporting student learning**

It is important to remember that assistive technology is merely a tool and that perhaps the most critical principle is to keep the focus on the ultimate goal—which is to use technology to support student learning and high achievement. It is too easy to lose this focus quickly and to get caught up in the complicated technical, legal, and financial aspects that can make accessing technology challenging. Current and potential users of assistive technology should always be thinking of how these tools can support the specific, unique needs of a student with a disability; and if the tool doesn't support those needs, then it is not a solution.