



Top Assistive Technology Products for Schools

By Ellen Ullman

You may hear the phrase “assistive technology” and think of high-cost robots or high-tech wheelchairs, but the term refers to any device, software, or equipment that helps people work around their challenges. In a school environment, assistive technology can run the gamut from simple adaptive tools such as timers (for students who have difficulty pacing themselves) to automatic page turners, mobility aids, and voice-recognition programs.

Assistive technology provides a bridge to allow students to access the curriculum—without these aids, students won’t be able to meet goals in reading, math, or any other subject. Thus, these tools are designed to level the playing field.

“Eyeglasses are assistive technology; without them, you can’t see,” says Cassie Frost, an assistive technology specialist for the Stevens Point Area School District. “Many tools that are beneficial, such as pencil grips, are assistive technology. There’s a breadth of tools out there. Look for ones that hit on a wide area of needs and will cover a broader base.”

Assistive technology is also about equity, says Luis F. Pérez, an educator and author of several books, including *Learning on the Go: How to Personalize Education with the iPad* (2016, CAST Professional Publishing). “As we move into more of an information-based economy, we don’t want certain learners to be left behind. We need all the talent we can get.”

One of the best things about assistive technology is that all students can benefit from it—whether or not they have an IEP. “We really ought to call it inclusive or universally designed technology,” says Karen Janowski, an assistive technology consultant. “At its heart, assistive technology is about promoting independence. Let’s identify the strategies and resources that will help students access grade-level content independently so they can demonstrate what they know.”

Here are nine assistive technology products (plus a list of helpful resources) that all districts should know about.

1. Texthelp’s Read & Write

www.texthelp.com/en-us/products/read-write/

This all-around-useful tool includes text-to-speech, speech-to-text, picture dictionaries, digital highlighters, and a grammar, spelling, and confusable words checker. Exam Mode lets teachers turn certain toolbars off during tests so that students can focus. Extremely helpful for English learners as well as students with dyslexia or learning differences. Frost calls it “a catch-all tool that our entire district can use.”

2. Co:Writer

learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/cowriter/

Lauded by many in the assis-

tive technology field as the best for word prediction, it also does speech-to-text, flexible spelling, and translation. “Co:Writer truly understands the spelling mistakes made by a child with dyslexia,” says Jamie Martin, an assistive technology specialist for the New England Assistive Technology Center and a consultant for Understood.org. “Even better, its topic dictionaries bring in vocabulary related to a specific topic.”

3. The Pip

thepip.com/en-us/

A handheld device that teaches students how to manage stress by helping them recognize the internal feeling of being calm. One of Frost’s students struggled with emotional regulation; nothing seemed to help. When he held The Pip, he saw that laughing brought down his stress line. Some of Frost’s other students will hold on to The Pip all day to see which parts are the most stressful.

4. iOS 13

www.apple.com/ios/ios-13/features/

“It lets you do just about anything with voice control: open an app, perform gestures such as swipe, or write and send a message,” says Pérez. Martin says the iPad is especially helpful for students with learning disabilities. “It’s a true multisensory platform, with built-in word prediction, switch access for people with motor difficulties, and hearing and sight accommodations,” she says.

5. Adapted board games, toys, instruments, and sensory products

Everything from a version of Hungry Hungry Hippos with wider pads (instead of the tiny levers) to special mice, to aromatherapy fans is available at websites such as Enabling Devices (enabling-devices.com) and enablemart (www.enablemart.com/).

6. Voice Dream Reader and Voice Dream Scanner

<https://www.voicedream.com>

Voice Dream Reader is an iOS app that offers text-to-speech, with more than 200 voices and 30 languages. Pérez recommends using it with Bookshare (www.bookshare.org/cms/), a massive ebook library that’s free for qualified students and schools. Martin likes the extensive customization: You can speed it up, slow it down, and change the colors, font, size, and spacing. She says it helps with comprehension, focus, retention, and decoding. Voice Dream Scanner uses artificial intelligence-based text-recognition, works offline, and lets you export to the cloud. Students can take a picture of a handout or worksheet and Voice Dream Scanner will read it out loud.

7. Learning Ally Audiobooks

learningally.org/

“Because Learning Ally lets students see the text as it is read to them, my students can take time to understand and enjoy the story,” says Jenna Ponx, a special education teacher at the Richard Ira Jones Middle School. “They get excited about reading and learn to read for fun. It does wonders for their self-confidence.”

8. uPAR (Universal Protocol for Accommodations in Reading)

learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/upar/

A personal precision diagnostic that shows the text level a student can comprehend with a reading accommodation, uPAR is important for helping everyone understand who can benefit and by how much. “When students see the data—which we encourage educators to share with them—they see what their ability is and are able to turn everything around,” says Ben Johnston, marketing director for Don Johnston Incorporated, the company that developed uPAR. “It lets schools

“It lets schools connect the dots between state tests and who needs reading accommodations.”

9. Snap&Read

learningtools.donjohnston.com/product/snap-read/
This reading tool translates, offers text-to-speech, and lets students highlight and organize their ideas. The anti-distraction feature removes ads and images and formats text to make it readable, and the dynamic text leveling substitutes really difficult words for less difficult ones.

ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education technology since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Mass., and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.

Additional Assistive Technology Resources

Encourage your team to stay informed about products. Here are some favorite websites and more.

- Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology (QIAT) website – qiat.org/ and listserv – lsv.uky.edu/scripts/wa.exe?SUBED1=qiat&A=1&SUBED1=qiat&A=1
- #ATchat on Twitter, Wednesdays at 8:00 pm EST
- AbleNet University – free professional development (PD) webinars www.youtube.com/channel/UCnqbFTy0VIQ6fVxXY2HiOJw
- The Center on Technology and Disability – www.ctdinstitute.org/
- Closing the Gap – www.closingthegap.com a professional association that offers PD, articles, a database of 2,000+ assistive technology products and services, and an annual conference.

Apple Accessibility for All

From the beginning, Apple has been known for its accessibility features on its computers and devices. A recent Apple workshop event, “Access Abilities,” demonstrated to a room of educators just how powerful, and sometimes life-changing, these features really are. Visit <https://www.apple.com/accessibility> to learn more. How can technology assist your special needs students?

Here are just a few of the tools highlighted at this Apple workshop that could help your students ...

Voice Control

Voice Control lets users who can’t use traditional input devices control Mac, iPad, and iPhone entirely with their voice. <https://youtu.be/aqoXFCCTfm4>

Guided Access

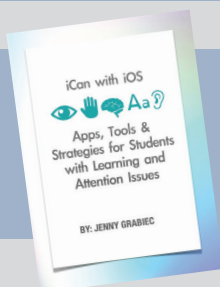
Allows parents, teachers, or therapists to limit iPad or iPhone to one app at a time, and limit the amount of time spent in an app. A powerful tool for those with autism or sensory challenges.

Speak Screen and Speak Selection

Speak Screen allows users to read text from newspapers, books, web pages, or email on their iPhone or iPad by swiping down the screen with two fingers. Speak Selection can read highlighted text. <https://youtu.be/6GB-VntNWbY>

itunes.com/speciald

A collection of apps that “help with everything from language development to life skills and daily planning.”



For more ideas, get the free downloadable book, *iCan with iOS: Apps, Tools & Strategies for Students with Learning and Attention Issues*.