

You First Podcast Episode 20: COVID-19 Effects on Assistive Technology in Education

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Announcer: Welcome to "You First," the Disability Rights Florida podcast.

Keith Casebonne: Thank you for choosing to listen to our 20th episode of You First. I'm Keith Casebonne and happy November, or perhaps, I should say Happy Assistive Technology Awareness Month.

Assistive technology, or AT, devices and services can provide vital support to many individuals with disabilities, enhancing access to employment, independent living, community participation, and for our purposes today, education.

AT can be critical for enabling students with disabilities to learn and succeed in both K-12 and higher-ed environments, but COVID-19 has directly impacted the acquisition of AT devices and services. AT is generally highly customized to meet the needs of a specific individual and requires a trial-and-error approach before its right. COVID-19 makes that crucial one on one interaction quite difficult.

I spoke with Ana Nevares, Assistive Technology and Education Specialist with The Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology, or FAAST, about the challenges K-12 students and their parents are facing during the pandemic.

Hey, Ana, thanks so much for joining us today. I'd like to start first just asking, how does assistive technology used by K-12 students with disabilities to help them achieve in school?

Ana Nevares: First and foremost, it's important to know or understand that there's a wide range of assistive technology tools. Some are considered low-tech, or low-technology, tools that can be easily adapted. I'm talking things like adding a pencil grip so that a student can have an ease at writing and handwriting.

To technology, that's considered high tech or more robust or may need more training for a student to utilize, like an ID system that would allow someone to control a computer screen. All these assistive technology tools are also available for many different purposes, depending on what the student needs the AT for.

It can assist with communication, computer access, reading or writing tasks, or adaptations. It's also important to understand that AT is individualized. Not AT is out there for all and that there is a framework that exists or is available to make that consideration for the student. This framework for AT consideration puts the child at the center of the...

Keith: It makes sense.

Ana: ...framework, thinking about the student's strengths, thinking about the student's weaknesses, thinking about the environment in the school or their routine where you're going to be introducing the AT, understanding the exact task that the child is having a hard time with so

that then we can figure out what's going to be hopefully the best AT tool or alternative to introduce.

Keith: It's very tightly customized toward the individual?

Ana: Exactly. AT requires almost a trial period too. It's not like an ABC test. I get all the answers right. I know exactly the AT tool is going to match the student. It's almost like you got to try it in the real environment and doing that task to make sure that is the right fit.

With that in mind, the school's AT purpose is to make sure that the child can access their education. At the school level, what AT is going to help the child communicate at school so they can actively participate? What AT is going to help them read, write, meet their organizational needs, or access the computer?

For that, it's important to also mention that AT is part of a child's IEP. Every parent should be aware that AT is mentioned in the child's IEP that you can request AT to be considered and that there is a process for AT implementation in the school system to determine what's going to be the tool for that child.

Keith: Now, so many other things, COVID-19 has certainly affected, I assume, the availability of AT or at least the ease of which you can get AT in a student's hands, help them, or how to use it. Tell me a little bit more how you're managing that nowadays with COVID-19 and the lack of ability to have a lot of hands-on experiences with the children.

Ana: Sure. I think one of the key points that COVID has brought to light is with regards to how important the lines of communication between school and caregivers or parents have to be open. There has to be almost like synergy between what's happening at school with what's happening at home.

It's brought to light the importance of this approach. When we have an IEP meeting, we always talk about how every stakeholder's input matters, the parents, the teachers, the therapeutic team, the students.

A lot of our children are in that vulnerable population where they may have to stay home and are receiving all these services, educational services, therapeutic services at home, via online school, or whatever it may be. It's put the parents more at the forefront of being the facilitators, or the ones that are helping the student engage in the classroom routine.

It's really made, I think, teachers, therapists to have to almost coach parents on how to use AT strategies or actual AT tools at home, to make sure that the child is paying attention while via Zoom class, or using a communication tool to communicate or participate while the class is going on online.

It's just brought to life the importance that there's a lot of communication of what's going on at school so that parents can mirror that and continue doing that at home, and putting that emphasis now on parents providing that while kids are home.

Keith: I imagine just Zoom classes, in general, can pose a challenge for certain students with disabilities who use assistive technology. Just to be able to access that Zoom class effectively is probably a challenge.

Ana: It is. It is. The participation aspect of it, it is. Again, AT is very individualized, but with the right approach of understanding what is the student's particular needs, we can figure out ways that either an actual tool or device or at least strategies to compensate for what I've heard, so far, a lot of the difficulties rely in sustaining the attention via Zoom.

What can we do? Whether we're using first-hand boards, visual supports, visual schedules to maintain a child on task, these things are available and can be used to improve the outcome of a child being at home. Of course, it is a challenge, but everything has a silver lining.

The fact as I mentioned earlier, that this has opened up more the lines of communication between what the teacher is doing and what the parents can do to help, that can also prove a positive in that now, parents can be more aware and engaged in what's happening, and help each other to make that synergy come to fruition.

Keith: Keeping in mind that it's a trial and error process, and it may take a little time to get it right.

Ana: Exactly. Nothing has to be perfect. That's a great point actually. Nothing has to be perfect the first time around. I understand. It's the student here at stake, so you want to get it right right away, but it's OK. We have to also forgive ourselves, so we're not perfect all the time. We have the best intentions of the child. As long as that's the priority, then it's OK.

Keith: What other advice would you have for parents to help their children acquire AT, or to use it more effectively? What ideas are there that you give to parents to help with that?

Ana: Sure. This is important because AT is something that's going to possibly be with a student for a lifetime, where they obviously can evolve depending on the needs and how the child progresses. First and foremost, is understanding that as I mentioned earlier, there is an AT process in your child's school, in the district, an AT implementation plan that every district has available.

As a parent, knowing how to go about requesting any AT consideration via an IP is priority.

Second, understanding that there are community resources available to parents on supporting AT use such as where I work, the FFAST program.

If there's a state AT program in Florida, and there are in every other state and territory in the United States that it's free and available to the general community to receive demonstrations or trainings on particular at tools and even have the opportunity to borrow assistive technology tools through Wise Lending Library.

Keith: Like a trial run?

Ana: Exactly. A lot of schools, teachers, parents therapist have utilized our assistance for that purpose, to trial something that they may not have the access to because it's not like AT's out there available for anyone to trial everywhere.

At least, through the state AT-run programs like FFAST, there are tools available to trial and the support in the community to increase that awareness of AT and the acquisition of AT. How do I go about now acquiring it if I do like it after the trial?

Be proactive. I would tell parents about learning, about resources regarding obviously AT. Just as an example, there are vendors that are local to different AT companies. Let's take for example AAC, Augmentative and Alternative Communication Company.

They have vendors or representatives in the State of Florida that locally can help parents understand their device, provide technical assistance, just by you tapping into them and saying, "Hey, I'm interested in learning more about your product." There is a resource out there to directly touch base with these vendors to receive the most up-to-date information about certain products.

There are conferences. There's one big one called ATIA, Assistive Technology Industry Association. It happens to be in Orlando every January. This is the conference that brings together all AT developers in the world basically one room, in one place.

Anyone can go, whether you're a teacher, whether you are a therapist, whether you're a parent, an individual with a disability, and get first-hand experience at seeing all the latest technology that's out there, making connections with the companies that create these devices.

At the same time, they have a lot of talks throughout the span of a weekend from leading experts using the AT in the real world -- schools, work, home -- so that you understand how not only acquire the AT but how do I actually use it in real life? I would highly encourage anyone that really wants to learn about AT to give some conferences like ATIA a chance.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to be involved at the school level in the end and what's your child's IEP, because ultimately, that's what's going to dictate exactly the services and supports that your child will receive. The more you know, the more you're aware.

Whether it's by visiting an AT state-run program like FFAST, whether it is to contact an AAC vendor or local rep of AT products in your area, whether it's attending an ATA conference, it's just so that you have the awareness so that you can then be an advocate for your own child when you are at the school or later on in their life when they grow up and enter the workforce or just life in general.

Keith: Great advice and information. Thanks so much, Ana. I appreciate it.

Ana: Not a problem. Just know that we are a resource to anyone that wants to learn more about AT. Anyone can contact the FFAST Program by visiting www.faast.org.

Keith: Excellent. Thanks again.

Ana: Thank you.

Keith: To learn more about AT in a university setting and how it is affected by COVID-19, Disability Rights Florida Communications Team Member, Madeline Crowley, spoke with Gerry Altamirano, the Assistant Dean and Director of the Disability Resource Center at the University of Florida.

Madeline Crowley: Hi, Gerry. Thank you so much for being here. We're so excited to talk with you today. Let's just go ahead and get started and talk about students and access. What accessibility and assistive technology services do you provide students with disabilities on your campus?

Gerry Altamirano: Sure. Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate being able to discuss and bring awareness to access and resources in higher education. We want more students with disabilities. Folks know that. A collegiate education is accessible as possible.

Particularly at the University of Florida, the Disability Resource Center offers a few means for accessing assistive technology. We have a few equipment and software-hardware that we have in-house such as Dragon, Kurzweil, MAGic, JAWS. We have all these software licenses that we purchase through the university and are able to have students having licensed themselves.

We also offer assistive technology scholarships. Students that need unique equipment to supplement their learning or to address any access barriers, and they're going to need it beyond college education, we want to make sure that we're supporting and setting them up to have those resources available.

Let's say, in the past, we've purchased an amplified stethoscope for a healthcare students who started hearing. That will continue to serve them beyond the point of just education. We've had submissions for laptops, tablets. Anything that helps address a barrier, we can provide through our scholarships.

The UF Libraries also offer...We have an amazing accessibility studio in Library West. It's a 24-hour, come-as-you-go studio or that has various equipment there. Students with disabilities that are connected with our office that we give access to are able to swipe their card and go in whenever they need. That's the majority of the equipment on the academic side.

Then, we have a state-of-the-art, accessibility-inclusive residence hall, Cypress Hall, which is built in 2015. That residence hall is a game-changer and allows students that may not have thought it possible to live on campus because of certain mobility diagnoses to have an on-campus experience.

This residence hall, we have rooms that are fully equipped with a SureHands Lift System to help students lift in and out of bed and into the restroom. It comes equipped with an iPad that controls the lights, the blinds, the door access.

All in all, we have quite a bit of resources. I'm not even getting to the tech side on the e-learning piece. Obviously, because of COVID, we've had to advance a lot of the access components with AI proctoring and online proctoring because I think there's a fallacy that technology is an equalizer.

We know that that's not true, right? That there are barriers within technology that we have to deal with.

Madeline: Thank you for that very comprehensive intro, basically, into what UF is offering students as far as accessibility, assistive tech, and all of that stuff.

With that being said, though, have you seen COVID impact your ability to provide services or promote advocacy? Have you been able to adjust to... There are students that, they're still able to receive the services they need?

Gerry: I think that the power in working in an area that supports diverse embodiments, and various conditions, and various walks of life is that you have to be flexible. You have to be fluid in how you deliver services and how you meet students' needs.

And so, we were able to super-easily transition to online services for our students. We have seen, though, that students who learn better in person have experienced barriers with this transition online.

Like I mentioned earlier, some of the technology that is supposed to address physical distancing where we have to be remote and students have to take their exams online, actually when not designed inclusively or have thought of how to implement inclusively create a barrier for some of our students.

For example, one of the proctoring solutions that we use uses artificial intelligence to proctor. It scans your retina, really, and it follows your eye tracking movements. If you're like me and a person who thinks and looks up or moves around, it flags you for potential testing discrepancies.

Some of our students, also, that have idiosyncrasies because of their disabilities -- students on the spectrum, or maybe students with anxiety who fidget a lot, or myself, someone with ADHD who is constantly moving, and moving around, and needs to look around. The proctoring solution interrupts when you're testing and a live proctor will come in to check.

That eats up your testing time. That gets you distracted.

There's definitely been some challenges to moving online, but in terms of the services that we provide, we've been able to address the lack of access in person through having virtual drop-in hours, utilizing Zoom breakout rooms for small group gatherings like you would have.

Also, experiencing isolation is another byproduct of physical distancing and being remote because of COVID. We've had several students share that they've experienced more mental health distress and feeling lonely and isolated.

Madeline: When looking towards the future, what do you hope to see change in education as far as accessibility, assistive technology, disability awareness after COVID has come and gone?

Gerry: I think that's really a question because we have to keep disability and access at the forefront as we are reimagining what education will look like post-COVID. People with disabilities have been asking for opportunities to participate remotely for years and it takes a global pandemic for that to be made available, which is not right.

I think, obviously, it privileges folks who are able-bodied and are able to get around and are able to transport themselves easily without a second thought. That should not be a determinant on whether you have equitable access to a collegiate education.

On the flip side, what we see is that basic human need now, in this age of technology and age of the Internet being so critical to everything, even telehealth. We have to have widespread WiFi access to remote rural communities, low SES communities.

I hope that as we are thinking about from higher education, as we're thinking about students' needs, that we're not only focused on how can we include Internet and how can we include having a functional laptop within how we conceptualize cost for attending college and universities so that students are able to package that within their financial aid and within the scholarships for class.

Oftentimes, all of those basic needs come out of pocket, and so those are secondary. As we know, financial aid's typically just covers your tuition first and anything else is then returned to you. If you don't have additional scholarships, or loans, or grants then that makes it difficult.

I think this pandemic has continued to emphasize that there's levels to inequity. That the most underserved and historically underrepresented populations are going to be the ones who are most vulnerable and at risk of being excluded, of not being considered as we are redesigning how we return to...

Not even return to, in the sense of normalcy, right, because nothing...I loathe the phrase, "If it ain't broken, don't fix it," or something like that. Systems are broken for certain folks. They've been broken. We just sometimes aren't aware of them or the most privileged aren't concerned with a system if it works well for them.

Definitely considering cost of education, of basic needs. Our students with disabilities, there's more and more students connecting to DRCs because they're graduating high school. There's more accountability. There's more students with invisible disabilities in colleges. That's also a trend. We see more students with mental health impairments.

Instructors and education needs to shift that mindset of what disability looks like. That's 101. That's the first thing that you have to know. Disability looks so different.

I think, because of underlying conditions, folks are impacted differently with COVID, too. That helped, I feel, instructors get a sense of awareness of so-and-so might need an adjustment because of XYZ reason.

The importance of not having to qualify that is really critical to keep in mind. We shouldn't have to prove or qualify my experience in order for you to practice access and inclusion principles in your course or in the services that you render in communities. We have to continue to move away from that.

Diverse embodiments and that disability looks so differently. Awareness that folks shouldn't have to justify requests if they are within something that you can reasonably offer and adjust without it being completely altering to your course.

I also think that it's important that we include disabled folks in the conversation on how we are redesigning or reimagining what the next phase looks like. I think that there's such a brilliance and innovation there because of just your lived experience of seeing the world differently.

Madeline: I appreciate all of your insight and hope that these conversations continue to happen and the changes that you've brought up, the changes that you wish to see in the future actually materialize, and access and education in our not-too-far future are seen in a more equitable and accessible light.

Thank you so much for being here. Is there anything else or any takeaway message, main message that you'd like to share?

Gerry: To the disability community listening, I'm thankful that we're able to work together to advocate for inclusion and justice.

I think that in the way we can join the larger conversation of how do we return to normal is continuing to interrupt that paradigm of what normalcy is. That we definitely continue to have this intersectional lens. Recognize that we have so much brilliance and power in our disabled communities.

I think for my students, particularly, that I work with, they've been ingrained with this idea that I want to mirror what my non-disabled peers, what their life is like. I want to mirror that. I want to exist like they do.

I think society teaches us really harmful ideas about our place in the world. We internalize them. Through the process of wanting to exist like our non-disabled counterparts or folks who are not a member of an oppressed group, we continue to center them and we continue to disempower ourselves or discredit how beautiful and how brilliant we are.

I hope that we can galvanize our efforts to claim our brilliance and our power.

Madeline: Thank you so much. Thank you for that beautiful send-off.

Gerry: Awesome. Thanks.

Keith: Thanks again to both Ana and Gerry for their keen insights on this challenging topic. You can learn more about assistive technology on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/at.

Our special education section is at disabilityrightsflorida.org/education. We also have a large section of COVID-19 resources at disabilityrightsflorida.org/coronavirus.

Thank you for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback, questions, and ideas about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.

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