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Challenges and Opportunities by Joy Kniskern, Program Manager

Each new year brings the opportunity to glean from experiences of the year with renewed commitment toward one's goals for the next year. Admiral Rickover once said, "good ideas and innovations are put into practice by courageous patience" (from Tom Peters and Nancy Austin, 1985, A Passion for Excellence). Peters and Austin describe "a passion for excellence" in even plainer terms as, "It's hanging in there long after the others have gotten bored or given up; it's refusing to leave well enough alone; ...sticking your neck out;...to wear your passions on your sleeve; one person sees a mountain as a mountain; another takes it personally as something to be climbed."

Reflections on these statements brings back memories of Benjamin, my son, now nine years old, and his "passion for excellence" in his relentless pursuit of the invisible "big bass". His passion for excellence is in fishing, an activity he became fascinated with at the age of two while discovering the joy of "fishing" for toy fish magnets in the bathtub. Since that time, he has spent countless hours studying lures (every kind imaginable), fishing videos, books and casting (yes, real lures and hooks in the bathtub and on the front lawn), and fishing at lakes all hours of the day and night. His store of information is astounding, and marks his passion for fishing and for excellence in fishing. For me, to be still and quiet for such a length of time is pure torture - I see visions of post-it notes dancing through my head. Benjamin sees the vision of catching the most great bass, even when, for the better part of a lazy afternoon, he gets not a single bite.

How we perceive our "mountains" and "visions" can make the critical difference in the passions we pursue. I am struck by the parallels between a small boy fishing like there is no tomorrow, and our small and dedicated staff, who, over this past year, worked like there was no tomorrow. We achieved noteworthy accomplishments in 1997, ones that would not have been possible without the concerted efforts of our staff. These include:

- The 1997 Touch the Future Conference and Expo;
- The first edition of Learning Disabilities and Technology guide;
- Second editions of two other guides, Dollars and Sense and Making and Difference;
- An award of a contract to provide consumer empowerment training to adults with learning disabilities from the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities;
- Excellent teamwork among the seven Technology Resource Centers to plan for the future;
- Retooling and production of the Tools for Life News Brief;
- Technical assistance and partnering with various groups to recycle computers;
- Training and technical assistance for consumers, service providers and educators.

For the coming year, we look forward to many challenges and opportunities; those things Tom Peters and Nancy Austin say we face because we choose to stick our necks out. We are excited by these opportunities of 1998:

- Finding private and public funds to support purchasing more assistive technology for short-term loans at seven regional Technology Resource Centers

- Closer work with vendors and others to find approaches to solving training and technical assistance issues associated with use of assistive technology
- Technical assistance and a search for funds to support statewide computer recycling efforts
- Continued production of special topic news briefs addressing assistive technology, resources, and a calendar of technology-related training events and other "happenings".
- Subsequent additions to Tools for Life resource guides
- Continued efforts to establish a revolving, guaranteed, low interest loan fund so that people with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities can secure loans to purchase assistive technology, home modifications and adapted vehicles
- Technical assistance to the Division of Rehabilitation Services and the Division of Exceptional Students regarding more customer-friendly ways of handling transition issues affecting use of assistive technology.

Regarding the last project, many states have already established or are working toward establishing policies that allow for smoother transition of students with disabilities and their assistive technology to other agencies and settings. This is an issue that must be addressed in Georgia to promote the most effective transition of school age children to other settings. This issue of A Closer Look focuses on Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as amended in 1997. If you would like additional information concerning IDEA or this issue of A Closer Look, please contact Tamara Rorie, Tools for Life Attorney at (404) 657-3080. 20 09 Legislative Watch Listed below are the legislative issues that Tools for Life is tracking. If you have questions about the bills listed, or any laws and acts relating to assistive technology and people with disabilities, contact Tamara Rorie, Esq., at 404-657-3080.

- HB1277 - Basic Bathroom Standards Act of 1998 This bill was defeated in February 1998. A similar bill that included requirement for at least one ground level accessible entrance failed last year.
- HB 512 - Long Term Care Choice Act Remains in the Health & Ecology Committee.
- SB 110 Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Trust Fund This bill passed the Senate last year and will be considered by the House this year. It is in the Health and Ecology Committee.

A Closer Look: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by Tamara Rorie

THE REAUTHORIZATION OF IDEA: BRINGING SPECIAL EDUCATION INTO THE YEAR 2000

On June 4, 1997, President Clinton signed into law the long awaited amendments to The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA.) IDEA is a law that requires that students participating in Special Education curricula be given a free appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive Environment (LRE) possible. The law also required that all school systems develop a Individualized Education Program (IEP) for every Special Education student. The 1997 amendments provides some significant changes to the law. Some of these changes will enhance opportunities for students with disabilities while others appear to be restrictive. However, on the whole, the amendments appear to increase services for children with disabilities. This article will focus specifically on those changes that have a direct effect on assistive technology.

THE IEP: One area that has undergone major revamping is the Individualized Education Plan that schools are required to prepare for each student with a disability receiving services mandated by IDEA. First, the law now requires that at least one regular education teacher be included on the IEP team if the student is or is likely to be participating in any regular education activities. Also, the school system must ensure that at least one parent participates in any decision that involves the student's placement.

Evaluations must now occur before any services are begun and before a student is declassified thereby withdrawing services. They must be designed to determine whether the student has a disability and, if so, what the student's educational needs are. By law, students must be reevaluated at least every three years if the teacher or parents requests it or the conditions involving the student warrants it.

IDEA now requires that the IEP list all supplemental aids and services, program modifications, and supports for school personnel which will aid the student in attaining his/her annual goals as well as participating in both regular curriculum and extracurricular or nonacademic activities with students who are disabled and non-disabled. IEPs' of students who are visually impaired must specifically reflect the consideration of the use of Braille. IEPs' of students who are hearing impaired must specifically reflect the consideration of educational instruction in the student's language and mode of communication. Finally, the law requires that the IEP reflect the consideration of assistive technology for any student with a disability.

OTHER CHANGES SIGNIFICANT TO AT: The amended law now specifically states the role of policy letters issued by the U.S. Department of education commonly known as OSEP Letters. These policy statements are to be used as informal guidance. They are not binding and can not be used to establish rules for compliance. While this is not significantly different from the status of policy letters issued by any agency, the fact that it is stated in the law could serve to limit the use of these policies by advocates. Traditionally, there have been many policy letters issued on the many issues surrounding the use and provision of assistive technology. IDEA now requires that the Secretary of Education publish a summary of the policy letters issued for that quarter. If any of the issues are of national significance, then a statement must accompany the summary to that effect. Within one year of the issuance of the policy letter, formal written guidance must be published.

IDEA now requires that all states have an interagency agreement with all other agencies responsible for providing services that overlap with special education services to fulfill their responsibilities. Further, the school system may take the position of payer of last resort. However, the school system must provide the device or service if the other public agency does not. The school system may then pursue reimbursement from the agency. The law makes it clear that this new policy applies to Medicaid, as well as to Vocational Rehabilitation Services as applied during the student's transitional period.

Finally, a new provision of the law is that every state establish and make available a mediation process for parents and guardians seeking to resolve conflicts. The process must be offered as an alternative to a hearing but must be voluntary and must not serve as a means to deny the right to a hearing in a timely manner. The mediator must be certified, trained and impartial and have knowledge of special education laws.

There are many other changes not covered in this article. Some of the areas not covered are student discipline, private school placement and attorneys' fees. If you have any questions about the information presented or any other area regarding IDEA or Special Education, please contact Tamara Rorie, Tools for Life Attorney, at (404) 657-3080.

Q & A about IEPs

Q: My child needs a more sophisticated communication device than the one he currently uses. Is the school district responsible for providing my child with a more appropriate device?

A: If the device is needed for a student to benefit from his/her educational program as determined by the team developing the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP), it must be provided at no cost to the parent. In addition, the new law says that assistive technology devices and services must be considered when developing an IEP. Since evaluation is considered an assistive technology service, the school district is obligated to consider whether a student needs an assistive technology evaluation or reevaluation.

Q: Is reevaluation of a student still required every three years?

A: Yes, reevaluation is required at least once every three years and more often if the parent or teacher requests it. However, under the new law an IEP team or other "qualified professionals" can decide that no additional data is needed to confirm eligibility and therefore, not conduct a reevaluation. The school district must notify the parents of this determination and the parent has the right to request an evaluation. If the school district refuses to conduct the evaluation, the parents may get an independent evaluation at the school district's expense.

Q: My child has been diagnosed with a learning disability. In addition, he has some behavior problems which keep him from learning as well as I think he can. The teacher wants to move my son to another classroom, but I think that if his behavior problems were dealt with properly, this wouldn't be necessary.

What can I do?

A: You should request that your son be evaluated for any possible social or behavior problems. After such an evaluation is completed, the IEP team should reconvene. According to the new law, IEP teams must consider, when behavior impedes learning and other strategies, interventions and supports to address that behavior.

Q: I want to put my child in a private school because the school district refuses to provide services that his doctor thinks that he needs. Can I get the school district to pay the private school tuition?

A: If your school is refusing to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in a reasonable period, a hearing officer or court may order reimbursement for tuition at a private school. However, there are steps that you should take to increase your chances of tuition reimbursement: 1. At your child's IEP meeting, request that the appropriate services be provided. Have documentation ready to support your claim for specific services. If the school refuses to provide the appropriate services, explain to the IEP team that you are rejecting the placement and inform them of your intent to place your child in a private school 2. If holding an IEP meeting is not practical, give written notice to the school of your concerns and your intent to make a private school placement. 3. If the school district notifies you of intent to evaluate your child in writing (with a reasonable statement of purpose for the evaluation), you must make your child available for that evaluation.

Written notice does not have to be given if the following circumstances are present: 1) a parent is illiterate and cannot write in English; 2) compliance with the notice requirement would likely result in physical or serious emotional harm to the child; 3) the school prevented the parent(s) from giving notice; and, 4) parents did not receive notice from the LEA of their obligation to provide notice of intent to make a unilateral private school placement.

Q: How much parent involvement is required?

A: The law envisions active parental involvement in all phases of the student's educational program including evaluation, planning and placement. Parents should be vigilant in monitoring implementation of their child's program and the progress s/he is making.

Some TANF recipients with disabilities may experience challenges in securing supportive services enabling them to work, such as accessible transportation, assistive technology or other accommodations. Other recipients who are parents of a child with a disability may struggle with finding appropriate child care or other in home care As we try to understand how TANF is being implemented for people with developmental disabilities, we need your help. Please let us know through a letter or e-mail the successes you are seeing as well as any barriers to success.

If a TANF recipient with disabilities or with a family member with disabilities is experiencing difficulty in securing an accommodation because of the disability, he or she may want to contact their local legal services office or the Georgia Advocacy Office as soon as possible. A TANF recipient penalized for failure to comply with the TANF Personal Responsibility Act or Work Plan, must appeal the decision within a short period of time to continue receiving Medicaid and benefits while the appeal process is underway.

Supplemental Security Income - SSI: Last Year Congress passed federal legislation altering the SSI definition of disability. No longer will children qualify if an impairment prevents them from performing activities normal for their age. The new law requires a child to have marked and severe functional limitations. The Atlanta Constitution reported that 2,000 children in Georgia have lost their cash benefits and another 1,942 will have their cases reviewed. A child who loses their SSI benefits is still able to receive Medicaid.

If you receive a denial of benefits notice, you must appeal within 10 days to keep receiving the benefits until the appeal is reviewed and decided. Several lawyers are volunteering their time to represent children if they lose their benefits during the hearing stage. To find out more information about the SSI Kids Disability project, call 1-888-224-2669

Technology-at-a-Glance Voice Recognition Technology... It's Affordable, and for Everyone by Michael J. Weeks

Advances in today's technology are astounding. Every waking day brings new technology to enhance our lives providing more opportunities for people with disabilities. Today, industry experts contend that computer technology doubles every eighteen months. Rapid change creates industry competition for developing new and marketable products which reduce product cost to the consumer. For example, the retail price a few years ago for computer voice recognition software was \$8000. Today, this technology sells for as little as \$49.95. Speech and language technology continues to improve in accuracy, speed, and performance.

With computer voice recognition technology, typing text into a computer is no longer necessary. The user simply talks into a microphone and the spoken words appear on the screen correctly spelled. Modifications and adaptations can be made to the microphone, headset, keyboard, or mouse allowing the product to be used independently by the user. Speech recognition software is a learning product. The user can "train" the software to recognize dialect and to perform more accurately with the user's voice and language style.

Voice recognition technology has opened new doors and opportunities for people with disabilities. Consumers with mobility, sensory, and learning disabilities can be a part of today's information superhighway, participate in the educational process, and they can obtain and maintain employment using this technology.

Dragon Systems, Inc. is one of the industry leaders in speech research. Their company developed the first commercially available speech recognition capability for a portable personal computer (PC) in 1984; the world's first commercially available large vocabulary general purpose dictation system for PCs in 1990, the world's first commercially available "software-only" dictation system that supports virtually any Windows application in 1993; and the world's first large vocabulary general purpose continuous speech recognition dictation system for PCs in 1997. Currently, Dragon Systems remains the only company offering different application platforms (MS-DOS, Windows 95 and NT, Apple Macintosh, MAC OS, DSP & telephony) and seven different languages.

Two other leading voice recognition technology companies are IBM and Kurzweil Speech Products. These companies are rapidly introducing new speech recognition products causing market competition and price reductions, providing consumers with more choices and better products.

There are two types of voice input systems: "voice-discrete" dictation and "continuous" dictation. With "voice-discrete" dictation, the user must make a slight pause between words when spoken. The user speaks in a natural, normal pace without pausing between words when using "continuous" dictation. Discrete recognition is more accurate but a little less natural than continuous speech dictation.

Another new product on the market is Wizzard Software's "VoicE-mail" (\$49.95). The company claims to have the world's first e-mail application (Windows 95) that incorporates discrete speech recognition technology, allowing the user to verbally instruct PCs to perform tasks such as creating, composing, and sending faxes or opening different applications.

True continuous voice dictation systems like IBM's VoiceType Simple Speaking Gold (\$99) and the new ViaVoice Gold (\$149.95) allows the user to dictate directly into favorite software applications. Dragon's NaturallySpeaking Personal Edition (\$149), the 1997 COMDEX Award Winner, and Kurzweil's VoiceCommands for Microsoft Word (\$59.95) are natural language continuous speech products that are designed to be used specifically with Microsoft Word or by the "cut and paste" method into other software applications. Multi-packaged software products such as Dragon's Deluxe (\$695) package includes both "discrete" and "continuous" dictation systems that interact and compliment each other. These products have large vocabularies that are powerful and highly accurate. With continued use, these products become more intelligent and individually customized .20

When purchasing voice recognition software, the user should be careful to choose a product that meets individual needs. Before purchasing, the user must know the software applications and computer hardware requirements. The software industry drives the hardware industry to develop faster and more powerful computers to operate new software applications. So, a faster computer might be required to operate the software that you select. You should carefully consider the type of dictation system, discrete or continuous, including vocabulary size that you require, the software applications that will be used, and total cost to operate the system. The beginner might

consider a lower cost product and become proficient with that system before investing in an advanced product. Technology professionals, such as a rehabilitation engineer or rehabilitation technologist, can assist the consumer in the selection process for products that will meet their individual needs. Contact Tools For Life, for additional information.

Speech and language product companies have customer service employees to assist consumers. They can answer questions about their product and hardware requirements to operate the system. The Internet is another good source for information. By using an Internet search engine (Yahoo) and simply typing "Voice Recognition Software", the consumer can find out information on the latest technology, competitive prices, and product reviews.

Voice Recognition Technology will continue to become more advanced, more powerful, and more affordable.²⁰ For more information on Voice Recognition Technology and Software Products contact:

Dragon Systems, Inc. (1-800-825-5897) www.naturalspeech.com

Kurzweil Speech Products (1-800-380-1234) www.lhs.com/kurzweil/sales/store.htm

Tools For Life (1-800-497-TOOL (8665))

Tools for Life-Georgia Southern University: Helping Others to Help Themselves by Veronica M. Jones

The southeast regional Tools for Life, Technology Resource Center (TRC) is located on the campus of Georgia Southern University. It is one of seven Tools for Life Technology Resource Centers designed to help Georgians achieve greater independence through the use of assistive devices and referral to appropriate services. Our center demonstrates hearing, visual, mobility, adaptive toys/switches and computer technology devices. Seventy-five percent of our staff, volunteers and consultants have a disability themselves. We are proud of that statistic because we are better equipped to help our consumers as we, ourselves, face the same challenges that they do everyday.

Our center will help identify the kinds of devices available, locate financial resources to help pay for these devices, teach service providers and individuals how to use and maintain the equipment and loan the equipment.

Lending Library - We have devices from several areas of disabilities for loan. This provides a perfect opportunity for a person to try a device to see if it will fit their needs before purchasing it.

Instructional Classes in Sign Language - Our center is fortunate to have a qualified sign language instructor. Classes are taught here at our center. We offer beginning and intermediate classes. Georgia Southern students, instructors and consumers from the surrounding counties benefit from these classes.

Workshops on ADA Law and American Sign Language - We have had several ADA Law and Sign Languages workshops. People from Augusta, Savannah and other surrounding counties have attended these workshops.

Training on Dragon Dictate - We can provide training sessions on Dragon Dictate. For example, a high school student received training from us to use Dragon Dictate. He used this software to dictate an essay that was required to graduate. He passed and graduated on time. A local consumer with traumatic brain injury (TBI) was trained on Dragon Dictate to pass her typing test at a local technical school. She passed and succeeded in acquiring a job in our community.

Web site - We have our own web site that showcases our assistive devices. We have recently attached an information request form to better serve our consumers. Our website address is <http://www2.gasou.edu/tools/tools.htm>.

Our center also stocks catalogues categorized presently into these categories: mobility, hearing, vision, augmentative communication, education (recreation and software), elderly, games and activities, sports, hand therapy, medical, and dressing assistance. Information and/or catalogues may be mailed to any person or agency upon request.

We have recently formed a wheelchair support group for wheelchair users. The name of this group is "Rollin' On". Their mission is to provide a forum where persons with disabilities can interact, network and promote advocacy. The goals achieved through peer support and advocacy are to motivate each other and instill courage and stability to improve independence; to promote growth towards resuming their place as a productive family member; to reclaim their dignity by rejoining their community and workforce; and to share adaptive technology information and experiences. For meeting schedules, please call our office.

Tools for Life at Georgia Southern University welcomes anyone interested to please call, write or come by our center. You may contact us at:

Tools for Life Center, Georgia Southern University

P.O. Box 8098

Statesboro, GA 30460-8098

Voice: 912-681-5961

TDD: 912-681-0136

FAX: 912-871-1787

E-mail: tools@gsaix2.cc.gasou.edu

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