

Assistive Technology Newsletter

September 2026: Back To School



Every Student Learns Differently

A new school year brings new classrooms, routines, expectations, and opportunities. It is also a good time to remember that every student learns differently.

For students with disabilities, assistive technology (AT) can help remove barriers and provide greater access to learning, communication, participation, and independence. AT is not about giving a student an advantage. It is about giving students the tools they need to access their education and demonstrate what they know.

Assistive technology can be as simple as a pencil grip or visual schedule or as advanced as specialized communication software, a screen reader, or a speech-to-text program. The right technology depends on the individual student, their goals, and the barriers they are experiencing.

Assistive Technology in the Classroom

Assistive technology can support students throughout the school day. Examples include:

- **Text-to-speech and audiobooks** for accessing written information
- **Speech-to-text** for writing and completing assignments
- **AAC devices and apps** to support communication
- **Screen readers and magnification** for accessing digital content
- **Visual schedules and timers** for routines and transitions
- **Note-taking and organization apps** for assignments and deadlines
- **Alternative keyboards, switches, and adaptive equipment** for physical access
- **Sensory tools, fidgets, and headphones** to support focus and regulation

Electronics as Accessibility Tools

Phones, tablets, smartwatches, and other personal electronic devices are common in schools, but for some students with disabilities, these devices may serve an important accessibility-related purpose. A student might use a device for communication, reminders, scheduling, health or safety needs, reading, note-taking, navigation, or another disability-related need. Schools may have policies limiting personal electronic devices, but it is important to recognize that a device that may be optional for one student could be an important accessibility tool for another. When considering electronic device policies, schools should consider the individual needs of students with disabilities and whether a device is being used as part of an accommodation, service, or support.

Electronic Devices in North Dakota Schools

North Dakota law generally requires students to keep personal electronic devices silenced or turned off, securely stored, and inaccessible during instructional time. This includes smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, Bluetooth-enabled devices, wearable devices, and gaming devices.

What About Students with Disabilities?

There are important exceptions. A school may not prohibit a student from possessing or using a personal electronic communication device when:

- A licensed medical provider determines the device is necessary for the student's health and well-being; or
- The device is required by the student's IEP under IDEA or Section 504 Plan.

For some students, a phone, tablet, smartwatch, or other electronic device isn't simply a personal device. It may be an important tool for communication, accessibility, health, safety, organization, or independence.

Know the policy. Know the exceptions. Know your student's needs.

AT, IEPs & 504 Plans

Assistive technology should be considered when determining what a student needs to access and participate in their education. Under IDEA, IEP teams must consider whether a student needs assistive technology devices and services. AT may also be included as an accommodation or support in a Section 504 Plan. Parents, students, educators, and other team members can work together to identify barriers and explore possible AT solutions.

AT Tip of the Month

When considering AT for a student, start with the barrier, not the device. Instead of asking, “What technology should this student use?” ask: “What does the student want or need to do that is difficult right now?”

Think AT Forward. Think access. Think participation. Think independence.