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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an inservice training program, developed collaboratively by the Idaho Assistive Technology Project and the Idaho State Department of Education, that is designed to increase the expertise of Idaho's special educators in the area of assistive technology. The lack of training Idaho's special educators have had in assistive technology and the need for training is discussed. Eleven school districts are participating in the training. The school districts have training teams that consist of special and regular educators, speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, special and regular education administrators, and parents. The training uses self-administered training modules that include floppy discs, CD-ROMS, video tapes, worksheet packets, and a final test on a computer disc. In addition to the training modules, participating districts are provided with kits consisting of several pieces of assistive technology. The training model has been found to provide an effective and efficient method of training special education personnel in how to select, acquire, and use assistive technology with students with disabilities. (CR)

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CREATING SCHOOL BASED ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TEAMS IN RURAL STATES: AN INSERVICE TRAINING MODEL

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This inservice training program, developed collaboratively by the Idaho Assistive Technology Project and the Idaho State Department of Education, was designed to increase the expertise of Idaho's special educators in the area of assistive technology. Amendments made in 1990 to the Education of the Handicapped Law require that assistive technology be considered as a component when drafting every child's Individual Education Program. With assistive technology incorporated into IEPs, or at least considered for inclusion, Idaho's Special Education children would be better served by the schools and special educators of the state.

In the IDEA an assistive technology device is defined as: ...any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of children with disabilities. An assistive technology service is defined as: ...any service that directly assists an individual with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device.

Idaho's special education teachers are highly skilled and trained concerning the most appropriate methods and materials to effectively educate children with disabilities. However, their pre-service and post-degree training in assistive technology was seen as lacking. Thus, the inservice training discussed in the remainder of this paper was developed to fill this gap in their training.

The need for training Idaho's special educators in assistive technology is made evident by data collected from several sources. The Idaho Assistive Technology Project collected data over a three year period. The data showed, based on reports submitted by the Project's Regional Coordinators, that the overwhelming need (30.5%) is for direct services to school age children. This same data further indicates the need for training is in the areas of communication technology and access to computer hardware and software.

The need for training is further suggested by data gathered by the Project's Information and Referral Specialist. The data tells us that school age children are not receiving adequate assistive technology services from the schools. Between September 1, 1995 and March 15, 1996, the Information and Referral system responded to 263 calls, of which 84 concerned issues related to school age children.

A report titled, Idaho Special Education Needs Assessment Survey, completed by Melinda Lindsey, Ph.D., in June of 1997, revealed that Idaho's special educators ranked the need for training in assistive technology and computers as 13th out of 28 areas of perceived needs for training.

Finally, Robert D. Glass, Ed.D., in a report prepared for IBM International Foundation, discusses what

teachers see as needed to achieve their goals in assistive technology. These needs include a higher level of awareness at top administrative levels, assistance in locating funding, more information on best practices, opportunity to travel to and observe other districts, more involvement from parents, assistance in developing IEP goals, more training, and compromise between insurers and educators.

In the paragraphs that follow, the inservice training model is discussed in detail. Questions and comments are welcome at any time.

The inservice training model described below has been in use now for one and a half years. During the 1996-97 school year, five school districts participated in the training. This year, 1997-98, the original five districts chose to continue with the training.

In addition, ten more school districts applied to participate. Out of the ten districts that applied, six were selected to receive the training. We just received word that we are funded for a third year. At this point in time we consider the program a success. We are interested in sharing what we are doing with others.

The selection process is by written application. There are two application forms used in the selection process. One form is completed by districts who participated and are applying to continue in the training process. Another form is filled out by school districts who are applying for first time participation in the training.

District teams consist of between 6 and 9 people. Also, the membership of the teams is broad; consisting of special and regular education teachers, speech and language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, special and regular education administrators, and parents.

Several strategies were used to ensure the training program was cost effective. These included utilizing self-administered training modules developed by the University of New Mexico. A list serve is utilized for the majority of the communication between training participants, keeping telephone costs to a minimum. Kits containing different assistive technologies were purchased allowing participating districts to experience the same kinds of technologies.

The training modules consist of floppy discs, CD ROMs, video tapes, worksheet packets, and a final test on a computer disc. Participants complete the worksheet packet, the competency check disc, and answer questions posted to the list serve for a grade. The first year of the training, grading was on a Pass/Fail basis. The year, the second, grading is on an A, B, C, D, F scale. Three modules are offered each year. Participants must complete all three modules to receive 3 University of Idaho credits. The training modules are selected collaboratively by the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, the Idaho State Department of Education, and the school districts involved in the training.

In addition to the training modules, participating districts are provided with kits consisting of several pieces of assistive technology. The first year's districts were provided with $4,000.00 of equipment. Those district's coming on board the second year were provided with $2,500.00 worth of equipment, with the districts being required to purchase an additional $2,500.00 worth of assistive technology devices and/or software. This change was made to give the districts a wider choice in the assistive technology acquired by the district.

The training project is funded through the Idaho State Department of Education and the Idaho Assistive Technology Project. The Idaho State Department of Education funds the school district teams.

The Idaho Assistive Technology Project funds those on their staff who take the training. The Idaho State Department of Education funds come through the special education arm of the state funding formula. School district team members either pay for the three (3) credits, or their individual school districts pay the credit costs. The Idaho Assistive Technology Project covers the per credit cost for their personnel who take the training for credit.

A high level of technical support is available for those school district teams that take part in the training program. Technical support comes from the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, the Idaho State

Department of Education, the regional Assistive Technology Resource Centers, the list serve mentioned in the first paragraph on this page, the web page maintained by the Idaho Assistive Technology Project, and an assistive technology web page maintained by the Idaho State Department of Education. Finally, the Idaho State Department of Education utilizes the list serve maintained by the Idaho Assistive Technology Project to assist in facilitating the training.

The individual school districts offer support in the following ways. First, they select the members who will make up the team. Second, they help ensure that team members complete all training activities. Another manner in which the school districts support the training effort is providing released time for the teams to collaborate and complete the training activities. Also, the districts provide team members with access to the assistive technology that the district already owns. Finally, the individual school districts complete and submit all enrollment and evaluation forms.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the training program has been the establishment of strong linkages between the Transition Specialists with the Idaho Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and the school districts. Eight Idaho Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Transition Specialists are linked up with the school district team that is closest to that specialist's office. Other outcomes include state-wide linkages between special educators throughout the state, improved linkages between regular education and special education personnel, and increased communication between special educators and administration. Another positive outcome has been that parents are involved in the training to a greater extent than before, thus enabling them to be knowledgeable partners in planning and implementing assistive technology into their child's educational program. Finally, and perhaps most important, Idaho's special and regular education students are better served in all areas of their education.

To fully appreciate why this type of training model was selected, it is important to understand some the things that make Idaho unique. Idaho is made up of seven natural geographical regions ranging from the high desert found in the southern part of the state on the Snake River plain, to the Rocky Mountains in the central and northern parts of the state. Idaho is thirteenth (13) in size among all the states, and fortieth (40) among the states in population.

Idaho has a population of just over one million people. The state's population density is 12.1 persons per square mile. Seventy-seven percent of Idaho's residents live in towns of less than ten thousand people. Idaho is considered one of the most rural states in the nation. Only one city, Boise, has over one hundred thousand residents. To put the whole thing into perspective, the driving distance between Washington D.C. and Atlanta, Georgia is less than the distance from north Idaho to south Idaho.

To summarize, the IATP, the ISDE, and those school districts who have participated in the training consider the program a success. The training model provides an effective and efficient method of training special education personnel in how to select, acquire, and use assistive technology with students with disabilities. Special education personnel are able to learn at their own pace and are provided with a high level of technical support. The program works well in a rural states like Idaho. Linkages have been established between the different professionals involved in the educational process of Idaho's children with developmental disabilities. So far, all districts who participated in the training have chosen to participate another year. In addition, participating districts have encouraged other school districts to apply for the training. All involved in the project believe that this training program is an excellent avenue to educate people in the field of assistive technology. All who have participated believe that they are now better able to consider the assistive technology option in each child's IEP.

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