

This case study is the fourth in our series highlighting one of our 56 federally-funded state and territory programs funded under the [Assistive Technology Act of 2004 \(P.L. 108-364\)](#). To learn more and to locate your state/territory program, visit the [AT3 Center website](#).

Missouri AT Program Reimburses Schools for AT Purchases

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), every student who receives special education has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and every IEP requires the consideration of assistive technology (AT) and support services. For two decades, Missouri Assistive Technology has been helping school districts make their AT budgets go further through its innovative Assistive Technology Reimbursement (ATR) program.

The ATR program effectively offsets the cost to schools for procurement of appropriate AT for their students with disabilities. The AT must be identified in a student's IEP and cost between \$300 and \$5,000. Examples of devices and systems include video magnification devices, personal assistive listening systems, augmentative communication devices, alternative keyboards, pointing devices, speech recognition software, text-to-speech software, tablets, laptops, and more.

The program, which began in 2002, is open to students in grades K-12 attending a Missouri public school, a Missouri charter school, or a Missouri School for the Severely Disabled.

SCHOOLS VARY IN THEIR AT NEEDS

"Some school districts are very savvy when it comes to assistive technology," explains David Baker, Program Director, Missouri Assistive Technology. "They are very eager for this program to come out each year, and they know in advance exactly which students they are going to do applications for. Other school districts may realize that certain students could benefit from AT, and they talk about it at IEP meetings, but we still have to help them refine AT consideration and coach them through the reimbursement application process."

Baker says that Missouri Assistive Technology, which is housed under the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, helps school districts start using the reimbursement program, makes suggestions as to devices they might consider, provides device demonstrations and short-term loans, and points them in the direction of related educational and technical supports.

"In many cases we are familiar with the school districts that are applying for ATR because they have previously borrowed devices from our Equipment Technology Consortium (ETC), or loan bank," Baker says. "In fact, one of the requirements of the ATR is that either an evaluation be done that prescribes the device or they've done some kind of device trial. Those requirements help ensure that the device ultimately chosen for purchase is a good fit for the student."

HOW THE SCHOOL REIMBURSEMENT PROGRAM WORKS

Missouri AT has an assigned ATR program coordinator who is the primary liaison with all of the participating school districts. Beyond that, according to Baker, they try to keep the process simple.

"At the beginning of each school year, we open up the ATR application process," explains Baker. "The application form is really straightforward and takes about an hour to complete. It asks for a bit of background on the student,

some demographics, and a description of the student's disability. The application also must include the section of the student's IEP that explains the need for AT."

While school districts have a responsibility to provide AT for students if it is needed, reimbursement funds are limited. The State Department of Education makes available about \$500,000 each year to Missouri AT for the ATR program. Even so, Missouri AT almost always has more applications than dollars.

"We tell districts that it is first come, first served," Baker notes. "In most cases, school districts that submit solid applications by the end of the calendar year are likely to receive reimbursement. But we also try to evenly distribute dollars among small, medium, and large school districts geographically spread around the state. We try to be as fair as we can because we have some districts that could literally use the whole \$500K."

In the 2019-2020 school year, Missouri AT supported 245 students from 82 districts, plus three state schools, which Baker says is typical for any given year.

TOP 10 TIPS FOR BUILDING AND MAINTAINING AN ATR PROGRAM

As Missouri AT has fine-tuned its ATR program over the years, they've identified a number of best practices that could help other states create and maintain an ATR program.

1. **Build relationships with the state Department of Education.** AT programs, especially those that provide large numbers of devices to school districts, are in a unique position to help their state Department of Education understand the financial struggles districts face in purchasing assistive technology for students.
2. **Identify AT champions within school districts.** "School districts that use AT really, really well—and do it consistently year after year—have one person that has been championing it in the district," says Baker. "Those advocates within the school districts are a powerful force."
3. **Assign staff with AT expertise** to help guide schools in the process.
4. **Dovetail your existing programs** to support establishing a reimbursement program. For example, if your device loan program currently serves school districts, you can make the case to your state Department of Education that a reimbursement program would be the next step to help schools serve students with AT needs.
5. **Manage and promote an up-to-date device inventory** for use in AT matching during IEP meetings.
6. **Consider alternative versions of the same concept.** School finance can be complicated, and some districts cannot accept reimbursements. In such cases, creative workarounds in the form of long-term loans serve the same outcome.
7. **Keep showing up.** Missouri AT promotes their program through their website, emails and mailings, but also sends representatives to the annual Missouri Special Educators Conference. Through hallway conversations and sidebars, they explain the program and give examples of how AT can help students of different abilities.
8. **Educate parents** as well as educators to understand the importance and benefits of AT and the requirement to consider AT under IDEA. If parents know about AT and believe it will benefit their child, they can advocate for the use of AT as part of their child's IEP.

9. **Highlight impacts.** Until the pandemic, Missouri AT hosted an annual AT conference called “Power Up.” At each of these conferences, they highlighted a couple of districts’ successful policies, methodologies, or innovative practices involving AT. The opportunity to share success stories not only strengthened Missouri AT’s relationships with schools, but also inspired others to consider seeking reimbursement through the ATR program.
10. **Remember that situations – and staff – change.** It may take a few years, or even a staffing change within a school district, to persuade a district to try the program. Stay with it to find the opening.

“State AT programs can really help their state Department of Education to ‘connect the dots’ between how AT ties into larger statewide educational goals (e.g., improved reading levels),” Baker summarizes. “We can demonstrate that increasing the number of students who have appropriate devices can positively impact educational goals and that investing in an AT reimbursement program is an impactful return on investment.”

ATR IS A “WIN-WIN” FOR SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

Among the more than 80 school districts participating in Missouri AT’s reimbursement program is the Francis Howell School District just outside St. Louis. Cathy Fortney serves as the district’s AT Facilitator, helping to guide assessment for, procurement of, and training in assistive technology for students in special education. An occupational therapist by trade, she also supervises the OTPT department and serves as the ADA Compliance Officer for the District.

We asked Fortney to explain how she uses the ATR program and what she sees as the value to her school district and its students. Here’s her perspective:

The ATR program allows us to provide students in K-12 with the AT to help them be successful while alleviating some financial burden for the district or the families.

Missouri AT makes it very easy to apply; they require paperwork showing that the student requires the AT and has demonstrated success with it, but it’s not an excessive amount of paperwork and is very “doable.” They are very, very helpful and exceptionally efficient at Missouri Assistive Technology in helping with all of it!

We have about 16,500 students total in our district, including about 1,900 students on IEPs every year. We typically access funding from ATR for about five to eight students. We have been accessing the ATR grant for a very long time (maybe from its inception) to help students with a huge variety of ability levels. For example, we provide supports for individuals who use wheelchairs or other aided mobility, those with learning differences, and those who need aided communication.

We always want to provide exactly what students need to be successful in our setting and beyond, while being good stewards of our district's resources. What I love about the Missouri AT Reimbursement program is that they don't make it difficult to access funding, and they allow the devices to travel with the students upon graduation. In fact, we often access AT for students who are close to graduation because it allows us to send the AT with the student, which has proven to be key in facilitating a successful transition for our students into their post-secondary independent living, employment, and continued education pursuits.

The ATR program is a win-win. Students get what they need, and it helps us to be responsible stewards of district resources by accessing outside funding sources.

For more information about Missouri AT's Assistive Technology Reimbursement program in schools, visit their website at <https://at.mo.gov/>.

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