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Practical Implementation Issues around Recommending Technology in Schools

Limitations of Technology

The first point to make is that technology is only part of the answer for any individual. There are many other factors to take into account, not least the support of the pupil's teachers and support staff for day to day support and trouble-shooting. When considering the implementation of any technology, you need to identify the limitations of use of technology and how these will be dealt with. Day to day issues such as moving equipment, security and virus protection also need to be taken into account.

Maintenance, Warranties and Insurance

- Maintenance. Someone needs to take responsibility for ongoing maintenance of equipment. This might mean replacing broken parts not covered by warranty, carrying out system updates, and cleaning equipment.
- Insurance. Equipment needs to be insured both while at school, and at home where appropriate.
- Warranties. Extended warranties can provide valuable piece of mind, and are worth considering for high value equipment.

Considerations for Laptop Users

For a child who will be using a laptop computer, you will need to consider the following:

- Furniture and seating. Ergonomic considerations, such as positioning of equipment are vital. Does the seating provide adequate support, and does the child need external devices to maintain a comfortable position? Is a height adjustable desk needed?
- Power management. Currently, laptops will not maintain a charge for an entire day, so some arrangement for charging during the day may be needed. A spare battery may be helpful for some (though these carry their own associated management issues) or lessons identified where running the computer from an ac mains adaptor would be acceptable.
- Organisation. Laptops take a while to boot up and shut down, and so the child and support assistants need to be aware that extra time is needed at the beginning and end of lessons for setting up and packing away.
- Security. Laptops are very attractive to thieves. All equipment needs to be insured, and arrangements made to keep it secure when not in use, for example during PE or drama when the equipment would not normally be needed.

- Weight and durability. Does the child need a lightweight, or a particularly tough laptop?
- Ports and floppy drives. If external devices are being recommended, enough appropriate ports are needed. These could be PS/2, USB or serial ports. Many laptops no longer have floppy drives as standard.
- How the equipment will be carried? Is the child able to carry it, or will someone else? What sort of carry case is suitable? A range is currently available, including shoulder strap, rucksack and wheeled luggage case. When making this decision consider what else the pupil is likely to need during the day.
- Ongoing technical support. Frequently suppliers of the equipment will provide technical support (such as those systems supplied by AbilityNet), though the extent of this support needs to be examined carefully. It is important that the child has a named person to contact within the school environment when there are technical issues with the machine. This person should have appropriate knowledge, or be trained to a level to provide this support.
- All children should be able to use school computers during ICT lessons, rather than their own laptops. This may mean duplication of access devices, and accessibility issues being resolved on a school computer network.

Considerations for Pupils Using School Printers

- Are there reliable printers?
- Make sure the printer is consistently available.
- Is the printer a network or a local printer? Make sure if the printer is on the network that the computer will be able to go on the network.
- If files are to be transferred and then printed, make sure that software is compatible, and that there is a means of doing that. Pen drives are a convenient way of transferring information, and are usually more reliable than floppy disks.
- A means of printing homework needs to be put in place.

Supporting Students Using Specialist Software

- Consider when each piece of supportive software will be used. Some programs lend themselves to particular jobs, for example word prediction is well suited to support creative writing, whereas word banks provide more structured vocabulary support.
- Time needs to be allocated to prepare resources. This may be preparing electronic copies of text to be put on the board, or preparing grids or topic dictionaries.
- The support team need to be aware if there are free resources available.
- Consider elements of supportive software which may be disruptive, such as speech feedback. You could reduce this by giving the child headphones.
- Consider carefully implementation issues around voice recognition software. This may include how it is used when mobile, in the classroom, and at home. As well as other factsheets produced by AbilityNet on issues surrounding voice recognition, you may find the information on voice recognition in schools produced by the Call Centre helpful;

http://callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk/Research/Speech_Recog_PRA/CALLSpeech_PRB/callspeech_prb.html

Training and Support Issues

A number of suppliers and independent sources will provide face to face training for pupils and/or support staff and parents. It is also possible to find “getting started” tutorials on a number of software packages on the internet.

There are a number of points to consider when introducing new technology into a school environment:

- Time needs to be allocated for support staff to attend training on the equipment.
- Sufficient training should be provided for the support team on the features of the software which the child will be using.
- Staff should be aware of sources of information and ongoing support after this training.
- Parents should be included in training and ongoing support. They can also be willing to prepare resources for their child to use at home or in the classroom.

Transition Issues

Frequently schools report to us that one of the difficulties of ensuring a consistent level of support to a pupil with their computer, is that a key member of staff who was originally trained with the equipment has left. Schools need to consider how such training could be cascaded to other staff to avoid over reliance on one member of staff in supporting a pupil.

If a pupil is likely to move on to the next phase in their education in the next year or eighteen months, additional considerations can assist a smooth transition:

- Ensure equipment is appropriate for both schools, in terms of portability and compatibility.
- Involve relevant staff from the new school in assessment and training on the equipment recommended.

Further Information

Depending on the needs of the pupil and staff, there are a number of other AbilityNet factsheets that you may find helpful when considering how to effectively support a pupil with technology in schools. These are available from our website at www.abilitynet.org.uk

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