Durham District School Board (DDSB)
Inclusive Student Services
Impact Update

DDSB
Ignite Learning

2023-2024 • Volume 10

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Communication is a significant factor in how many people express their identity. We communicate to ask questions, tell jokes, make comments, express dislike, give information, form relationships, and for many other reasons. Fostering and supporting the use of communication systems is an inclusive practice that benefits students' development and expression of their own identities. Communication systems give students equitable access to all functions of communication and allow them to participate more fully in their lives both at school and beyond.

> "[AAC System] has changed my life. I was lonely and had given up on a good future, but now I feel loved by many loving people because I can talk with them. I had no way to express that I was bored and needed to learn with others."
>
> —AAC user

AAC helps people including those with complex communication needs. AAC supports strategies and communication systems. During the 2023-2024 school year, updates were made to AAC related processes in the DDSB to allow Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) to:

1. Match the right AAC system to support individual student communication;

2. Enhance training and support for educators on AAC implementation; and

3. Develop consistent AAC processes and guidelines across the system.

ACC at School

There are different types of AAC systems that we can provide for our students that range in how much technology is involved. Having several options available centres students' identities, choice and humanity as well as their communication needs.

Through Specialized Equipment Allocation* (SEA) funding, SLPs can order specialized AAC equipment or AAC apps on iPads to support communication in the classroom. Communication devices may include high tech apps such as LAMP Words for Life, TouchChat, TD Snap, Proloquo2Go, GoTalk Now and mid-tech recordable devices such as A QuickTalker, A Step-By-Step, and a BigMack.

Student, Family and Educator Learning

Knowledgeable and skilled communication partners are essential to the success of an AAC system, though learning to use AAC and learning to interact with someone using AAC are not intuitive processes. Learning to use an AAC system is like learning a new language; we need to tap buttons and pictures on the AAC system along with the student, so they can see and learn how to use the language as well. Using the system with the student in natural and motivating settings helps demonstrate how the student can use the system as a tool for their own communication. The more people use the system with the student and foster an environment where communication is encouraged and not required, the more effective and empowering the system will be for that student.

The new AAC process at DDSB places a large focus on in-school training sessions for educators and parents/guardians supporting students who use AAC so that they may learn the above skills and feel confident in using AAC systems with students. This training is an important step towards ensuring that AAC systems are successful, students feel supported in their communication, and that students can express their identities and have equitable access to educational and social opportunities at school and at home.

"When a student was asked how she felt about her new AAC system, she tapped "like". When asked how she felt about the new teenage girl voice that was added to her system, she tapped "like, like, like"."

> "AAC technology, strategies, and guiding principles have evolved considerably in recent years. An AAC process allows for this new information to be consolidated and leveraged throughout our system. This ensures that educators feel supported and AAC users' communication is honoured, allowing students to thrive at school as they develop identities, skills, and relationships. Having the chance to be a part of this new process has been exciting and fulfilling!"

> "Dedicated time for communication partner training sessions empower staff and family to understand and use the strategies recommended. This sets students up for success to use their AAC as a powerful tool to connect with others and be understood. The impact of effective AAC practices on a student's participation, learning and engagement at school can't be understated!"

–Speech Language Pathologists

AAC at Home

Families seeking AAC for home use may access funding through the provincial Assistive Devices Program (ADP) of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The ADP helps people with long-term physical disabilities pay for customized equipment such as communication and mobility devices. Students who meet the eligibility criteria can be referred to this program by the SLP (Speech Language Pathologist) supporting their school.

> "We are so excited that his new device has more words (than his paper-based board) and is more portable so we can take it into the community, to the trampoline park, and so he can communicate with his family members. Thank you so much, we know he has a lot of words and a lot of things to say, and we can see how this will help him share that with us and remove some of the guesswork and frustration."   –Parents of an AAC user

Reflects SEA naming in Ministry of Education funding for the 2024-2025 school year.

For more information about the DDSB Inclusive Student Services Impact Update, please visit DDSB Inclusive Student Services.