



CONNECTOR

ANYA EVMENOVA, EDITOR

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President's Message

Joel Mittler, Ed.D.


As you read this, my two-year tenure as your TAM President will be coming to an end. As you might recall, the TAM Board asked me to stay on as President for an extra year. I agreed to do so, but only because I knew that the wonderful TAM board members would also stay the course.

In some ways, two years go by very fast. Certainly in our technology world, many new and updated products appear while others seem to disappear. Smart phones seem to get smarter, and mobile devices seem to become more widespread. The number of apps has doubled to around a million in both of the largest app markets, iOS and Android. Technology just cannot be held back.

However, the needs of students with disabilities do not seem to change. While the number of students with IEPs may have leveled off or even decreased in the last 2 years, each year new students are identified and they and their anxious families enter the special education system hoping to see improvement. The good news is that our field welcomes them and works to

help them achieve that goal, often with the use of technology.

In this world of frustration over the political system, in this world of financial pressures on school budgets, in this world of trying to get our students to meet the goals of the Common Core Curriculum, it is good to know that there are so many special educators who work hard and care deeply about their students. Those of you in CEC and in TAM are the best of them all. You see the value in your membership, you continue to want to learn and improve your knowledge and skills, and you are willing to support an organization that is working on behalf of the children you care about.

You should know that the TAM board members share those values. I have been most fortunate to continue my work with such wonderfully talented and selfless folks. I cannot name them all individually, but if you look at the list of officers in our publications, know that they all work tirelessly on your behalf and on behalf of TAM. I specifically must thank my predecessor, your Past President Brenda Heiman for her ongoing support. I also know that you and TAM are in wonderful hands as I turn responsibility over to Vice President Margaret Bausch in January. Again, I want to thank you for your continuous support of TAM and of all the children and youth with disabilities. 

Share a Story

Timothy Coleman, Student, Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia

Hello, my name is Timothy Coleman, and I am a junior at Hampden-Sydney College majoring in Government and minoring in Public Service. At first glance, I look like every other student. I am heavily involved in extracurricular activities including the Garnet and Gray (Hampden-Sydney's tour guide service), the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, and I have a job in the Office of Academic Success as a peer mentor for students who have disabilities. However, what people do not see is that I have a learning disability. As a child I was diagnosed with dyslexia, and I have been working to overcome my disability ever since. At times I thought I would never overcome these obstacles and become a

successful student. The changing moment in my school career was when I was introduced to assistive technology.

In my junior year of high school, I started using Dragon Naturally Speaking, a type of voice recognition software. Instead of writing papers, I was able to speak my papers right onto my computer. Assistive technology opened up many doors that I thought would have been locked. Things that I struggled with such as spelling, no longer were a big problem. I was able to get the thoughts accurately onto the paper. I was no longer afraid to use "big words" in my writing.

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Interview with the Authors

Interview with Cheryl Temple and William Reeder

Anya Evmenova

Dr. Cheryl Temple is the Assistive Technology Services (ATS) Program Manager at Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). Mr. William Reeder is the former AT coordinator and a retired special education director for FCPS. ATS provides support to school teams to ensure that all students with disabilities who require assistive technology (AT) benefit from its use. Dr. Temple and Mr. Reeder co-authored the new TAM monograph titled *Developing and Sustaining AT Teacher Leaders*, which is coming soon to the TAM store (<http://www.tamcec.org/publications/>).

Tell us about your monograph – Developing and Sustaining AT Teacher Leaders.

The purpose in writing this monograph for TAM was to provide teachers and administrators with ideas on how to support AT that could impact students with disabilities in various environments. The monograph offers solutions, from no-cost to low-cost, or solutions that can be built into school and district budgets over time. With these short-term and long-term solutions school systems can effectively utilize their already existing resources, specifically focusing on developing AT Teacher Leaders. Based on the experiences of having a teacher leadership program in some shape or form for over 20 years, we share practical ideas that would work in any environment, Pre-K-12, and regardless of the school system's size. The monograph has five short chapters about best practices for AT Teacher Leaders; benefits for creating teacher leaders for AT; the nuts and bolts of how to do it; funding such initiatives; and involving administrators in the leadership process. For example, a lot of people forget that funding is not

always about allocated money. There are lots of ways to get your hands on money. We will give people ideas about where they can find some extra funds to get substitutes or to get particular software they need.

So who are AT Teacher Leaders and what is their role in schools?

AT Teacher Leaders can be a great resource for the teachers in their school building. We provide them with training opportunities, giving them support, so they can grow and become a point of contact in a school. No program in the country has an AT specialist located in every single building. So we need to develop leaders within the school who will be there every day. Since AT has to be addressed during each IEP meeting, you need to have people at each school building who have an understanding of AT and can help others. In addition, many of our best AT Teacher Leaders have already been developing resources and sharing with colleagues in their school. As an AT Leader, they are given the mechanisms to share their ideas and resources with all other teachers. So being able to recognize who those talented teachers are and let other people know is very important. Sometimes giving someone a title - in our program they are called TOPS or Technology Outreach Program Support Teachers - is a very rewarding aspect. Teachers like and should be recognized.

How do you envision TAM members using your monograph?

We hope that TAM members are going to find at least one good idea, and hopefully more, about where they can start, and the next steps to take, in order to develop AT Teacher Leaders. The

monograph also includes many ideas for those who feel good about what they currently have in place but are looking for ways to expand their program. Our practical ideas can be used to meet the needs of different schools systems. You can have a school system with four schools and still have an AT Leadership program. You can also develop Teacher Leaders in the area of AT with the emphasis on how technology can improve access and progress for all students. While a lot of ideas come from our experience in Fairfax County Public Schools, we have also worked with other school districts in other parts of the U.S. and even internationally. In other words, we have developed much of what we talk about in the monograph through experiences and consulting in many different environments over the years.

Do you believe that our international members can benefit from your ideas?

Yes, a lot of ideas that we talk about come from our international experience and from more than 20 years of participating in conferences that focus on international schools through the U.S. Department of State. In addition, anyone working with students who are struggling or are English language learners can benefit from knowing about the technology we use.

Do you have any advice for TAM members who want to use this product for professional development activities?

We would recommend reading the monograph and discussing how it would be applicable to a particular situation. Hopefully, this work will bring people together to start the dialogue

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CAN Report

A Government “Designed by Geniuses So That It Could Be Run by Idiots”

Joel Mittler, Ed.D., TAM CAN Coordinator

Thomas Friedman, the highly regarded New York Times columnist, has recently described our system of government as one that was “designed by geniuses so that it could be run by idiots.” I believe that is particularly relevant in these difficult days in Washington.

As the fall season moves into winter, our policy makers seem to have forgotten what they learned in kindergarten, namely that we all have to get along. We do that by being reasonable, cooperating, and compromising. Instead, as this is being written, our Congress continues to talk past each other, some hold firm to extreme positions, and our country remains in a stalemated position. I hope that by the time you read this, some settlements have been achieved.

As the unnecessary sequestration of last year (which will continue for a decade) took its effect on our schools this fall, we saw a reduction of special education funding. This reduction was delayed until this school year because of forward funding for schools. If you recall, Congress had once promised to fund up to 40% of the costs of special education. However each year the appropriators decide how much they will actually provide. Through annual appropriations, we reached a level of about 17.5% a few years ago. After the recessions of the past few years, a Congressional reluctance to increase funding, and the mandated 5% sequester cut, our current funding level is at 14.9%, the lowest in over a decade. As this is being written, the best we can hope for is a continuation of last year’s funding for a few weeks through what is known as a Continuing Resolution. Beyond


that, actual funding for FY 2014 remains unsettled as the Senate Appropriations Committee approved an increase in special education funding, while the House appropriators have not moved on a bill. However, the House budget bill calls for significant cuts in domestic spending. Thus, another stalemate on education funding seems likely.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, formerly called NCLB) also remains unsettled. The House of Representatives passed a partisan bill last July, and the Senate Health, Education and Pension Committee (HELP) passed a different partisan bill in June. This Senate bill now needs to go to the floor of the Senate for action, which may happen this fall. If that occurs, negotiations would need to take place between the House and the Senate leading to a compromised bill. CEC has strong objections to many parts of the House bill and while it prefers the Senate bill, it also has raised some concerns. Time will tell if these bills ever move through the legislative process.

In the interim, with the NCLB 2014 deadline fast approaching, about 40 states have opted for waivers being offered by the Obama administration. While those waivers reduce the pressure on states, they introduced new issues for those of us in special education. These include a need to have our students meet the Common Core Standards and be prepared to take newly designed tests based on these standards. In addition, our teachers will face a newly designed performance evaluation of their efforts, based in part on the performance of their students on these new tests. When

new tests based on the Common Core were introduced in my state, New York, the results for all children showed a precipitous drop in performance from the previous year. It remains to be seen how students with disabilities fared under these new examinations, although it likely that their performance may even be worse.

One other issue that should be mentioned, especially to those of us with an interest in technology, relates to the increased amounts of data that are being assembled about students and teachers. While local districts have always maintained data and kept it locally stored, newly created systems are accumulating these data from across states and storing it in the “Cloud”. They also are making it available to outside groups, including vendors to develop apps and other supportive materials. One such company, InBloom, collected so much personal data, including the previously protected disability status of students, that several states that had previously agreed to work with them have withdrawn under pressure from those concerned with privacy issues. It also has been reported that the Department of Education loosened the existing privacy standards that exist under FERPA so that these companies could obtain data that were previously protected. Stay tuned as we try to live within our growing world of data collection and data analytics.

If you wish to receive a weekly update from CEC on policy matters or have any questions, feel free to contact me at jmittler@liu.edu. 

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about where they are now and where they want to be in the future. The key word in our title is *sustain*. Unfortunately, what often happens is that people have very good intentions and start the initiatives, but lose steam along the way. We hope that the ideas we present are something that can enable the continuous dialogue about different strategies that have been tried in the past and should be tried in the future. Keeping it in front of peoples' minds is definitely part of our goal.

How is your monograph different from other existing products on the same topic?

There are not a lot of publications on developing AT Teacher Leaders. Practicality is our main focus. That, alone, makes it different from other publications. We

are bringing 25 years of experience of working in many school systems across the country, which is important. We have worked with school districts that are very small and or other that are very big. Whether the school system has one school or 100 schools, the ideas are easily modified to any environment. What we are promoting is working off the talent that already exists: identifying it and giving those talented people support and ideas to expand on the things they are already doing successfully.

In your opinion, what is the future of AT Teacher Leaders? What can be done to support such implementation?

The AT Teacher Leaders initiative definitely has a future. The law requires that AT must be considered for every

student in the IEP process every year. In many cases IEP teams are struggling with that decision. Having talented teachers who are able to help schools and school systems determine what is required in an organized way is going to be very beneficial. There is always going to be a need for some system like this. That need is not going away. One thing that will support the implementation of AT Teacher Leaders is having a plan. You cannot just have an AT Teacher Leadership program without some kind of central plan. That is where we involve our administrators. That is where we have district level support, so we can move forward with the plan and have a systematic way of doing it. The monograph will give you ideas about how to develop, modify, and sustain that plan. ●

Share a Story (continued from Page 1)

I used Dragon throughout the last 2 years of high school, but I did not fully recognize the value of it until I arrived at college. Hampden-Sydney College is known for its Rhetoric Program, a highly intensive writing program that includes multiple classes and a written proficiency exam (RPE). To graduate, a student must pass the classes and the RPE. Needless to say, I have ended up writing more papers than I can count. While I struggled with learning the five major grammatical errors, Dragon allowed me to write papers I did not know I could write. The Rhetoric Program made me a stronger writer, but I would have never been able to write the papers if I did not have assistive technology. With the help of Dragon I passed my RPE the first time around. I not only use assistive technology while writing papers, but I also use it in class in

my day-to-day routine. I use my laptop and iPad to take notes in class, plan my daily schedule, and access eBooks. I have even used these devices to access books on tape. Assistive technology does not give me an upper hand over other students, it merely levels the playing field and allows me to perform to my true potential.

Assistive technology gave me the confidence to achieve and try harder in school. If you had asked me my freshman year of high school if I would be going to college, I would have probably said no. Now that I use assistive technology, I feel that my opportunities are endless and I have achieved so much more than I would have otherwise. While you are reading this keep in mind, I did not write this essay, I spoke it. ●

TAM Welcomes International Members

TAM is reducing its division rates for the International Members. They can now join the professional membership of TAM for only \$30.

TAM CONNECTOR

TAM Connector is published 4 times a year by the Technology & Media Division of the Council for Exceptional Children. Email all news items to Anya Evmenova (aevmenov@gmu.edu). Change of address should be sent to Anna Henderson at the Council for Exceptional Children, 2900 Crystal Drive, Suite 1000, Arlington, VA 22202-3557.

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