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Technology Tools to Support Student Writing

Part 2: Special Education

An Interview with Nanci King Shepardson

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Nanci King Shepardson is the founder of Schoonmaker Scholars, a national consulting group specializing in literacy and assistive-technology instruction. The organization provides individualized academic support to students and professional development for educators and parents on leveraging technology to address literacy and high-incidence learning challenges.

Editors' Note: *This interview is the second of a two-part series on technology and writing development. Here we focus on assistive technology (AT) that can support the learning growth of students with special education, and explain the AT evaluation process. These are key features of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, which states in part, "Each public agency must ensure that assistive technology devices or assistive technology services ... are made available to a child with a disability..."*

H. "Bud" Meyers: Nanci, would you share some technological tools, especially those helpful for students with special education needs?

Nanci King Shepardson: There is ample research to support these three accommodations: **text-to-speech** (Matre & Cameron, 2024; Raffoul & Jaber, 2023), **speech-to-text** [dictation] (Dawson et al., 2018; International Dyslexia Association, 2016), and **word prediction** (Dawson et al., 2018; Evmenova et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2018) – to support the efficacy of some students who need Tier 3 instruction. But I will also say that text-to-speech is a powerful editing tool for all students, and here's why. When a student writes their paragraph and knows the topic so well, they can't necessarily catch their mistakes. When they highlight what they've written on the screen, and it's read back to them using text-to-speech, they may say, "Oh, my gosh! That's not what I wanted to say," or, "That's not the way I wanted it to sound," or "Look, I've used the same word seventeen times in the last seventeen sentences." Text-to-speech

can be leveraged as an editing tool. For students who struggle with vocabulary and choosing more sophisticated words, word prediction can be a very helpful accommodation, especially if teachers pick tools that import specific dictionaries. Let's say students are writing about dinosaurs or architecture. You can import these verbose, complicated technical dictionaries that are skill-specific or concept-specific. As a result, students' writing has improved vocabulary and sophistication because word prediction is embedding these content-specific words. This can be an impactful and empowering accommodation for students, because so often those who struggle with writing feel like they're not smart. If they struggle with writing often, and they are not great spellers, what happens? It's what I call they dot their ***e***'s. They're not sure if it's an ***e*** or an ***i***, so they make an ***e*** and put a dot on top. They're hedging their bets. The struggling speller is not going to use the word ***beautiful***, they're going to use the word ***nice*** or ***pretty***. Word prediction can mirror how they talk and include that vocabulary.

Looking at the blank page, our anxious kids can become overwhelmed by the size or complexity of an assignment, and may freeze. The multifaceted components of writing create this wave of anxiety. Their brain starts releasing chemicals that just bring down the garage door in their brain, and they can't access all of their amazing ideas. As a solution, we use speech-to-text. I tell them, "Don't worry if there's a capital letter. Don't worry if it's spelled right. Just talk about the topic." And all of a sudden, the speech-to-text has captured half a page or a full page, and the student relaxes. Let me be very clear here. We are never going to begin and end with speech-to-text, ever. We're never going to use one tool in isolation ever. But it could be one tool in the toolbox. [See p. 8 for more about individual student's toolbox.]

HBM: Might there be opportunities for students to misuse text-to-speech that teachers ought to be aware of?

NKS: The question is about metacognition. Ask a student why they're using text-to-speech. Maybe because they've read this before, but have a quiz tomorrow, and want to hear it one more time to prepare. That would make sense. Students need to know why they're using it. If it's just to get it done, then that's a problem. They're not being metacognitive. They get to the bottom of the page, and you, the teacher, ask, "What was that about?" And the student looks at you like you've told them to travel to the moon. There's a risk of kids going on autopilot, because the computer's doing the reading for them. That's where we need to ensure kids know why, such as to support their decoding and comprehension. I always talk to kids about adjusting the rate when they use text-to-speech, the speed at which it is read out loud.

In addition, the voice pitch [different voices, such as high or low] can be really important for some kids. In my private practice, I teach kids to identify a voice to match with a genre. If they're reading their math textbook, it's Voice A. If they're reading their science textbook, it's Voice B. My recommendation for deploying a different voice for each subject is based on my own experience in working with students in assistive technology, not an approach found in research.

I have seen that a specific voice associated with a subject can activate a student's prior knowledge. The voice reminds them of the content previously heard or read. Voice and rate are examples of how kids have to be very prescriptive, discerning, and metacognitive in picking what tool to use for text-to-speech. They also need to be careful of what I call the "Charlie Brown effect – the sound of a "Wah, wah, wah" teacher at the front of the room. I say to kids, if you start to feel that "wah, wah," then stop. Change the voice. Change the pitch. Maybe change the rate. Maybe you need to go back and reread. When we don't explicitly teach those strategies when leveraging text-to-speech, kids can go on autopilot and not actually get a whole lot out of it.

HBM: Nanci, you contributed to the International Dyslexia Association's 2020 publication on how to advocate for assistive technology tools and services. You distinguish between skills and services, the latter of which require more intensive instruction from a specialist. Could you explain the difference between those terms and give examples of each when it comes to writing?

NKS: Advocating for assistive technology (AT) tools and services can feel daunting for parents. It is important for parents/caregivers to know that, if your child has an active IEP, AT services must be considered as a part of that IEP.

Now, let's define skills. Spelling is a skill. Handwriting is a skill. Writing a complete sentence is a skill. Vocabulary is a skill. Second, services refer to Tier 3 specialized instruction provided by an education specialist geared to address the skill the student has not mastered.

Regular classroom instruction wasn't enough. Specialized instruction will probably be more intense, take a little longer, and be a lot more explicit. Specialized instruction can come from a special-education teacher, reading specialist, occupational therapist, or speech-language pathologist. Accommodations in those special services would include learning speech-to-text, text-to-speech, and word prediction. In a very simple way, it teases apart the skills versus the services. The services are meant to serve the development of the skills. It's a circular pattern – we identify the skills that are weak, we provide services to shore up those skills, and the skills improve.

There is ample research to support **text-to-speech** (Matre & Cameron, 2024; Raffoul & Jaber, 2023), **speech-to-text** (Dawson et al., 2018; International Dyslexia Association, 2016), and **word prediction** (Dawson et al., 2018; Evmenova et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2018), in that order. Text-to-speech has been around the longest, so there's the most research on its efficacy. A meta-analysis (Wood, et al., 2018) from the University of Florida with Rick Wagner found text-to-speech effective for students with or without disabilities. Buzick and Stone (2014) have shown that as a testing accommodation, both kids

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[T] he number one pitfall is a mindset that technology can take the place of good instruction. For example, I have been in school meetings where they say, "We don't need to have a reading specialist. We can just have the student use text-to-speech and speech-to-text." I say, "No, no, no! That's not how this will work."

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with disabilities and those who didn't performed better with a text-to-speech accommodation. This supports the efficacy of text-to-speech across all types of learners. But as I've said, there's a lot of specific instruction that goes into teaching a kid how to leverage text-to-speech effectively.

Some of the pitfalls of speech-to-text are homonyms like ***your/you're***, ***there/their/they're***, ***to/too/two***. This technology cannot necessarily capture the nuances of that kind of language. However, I will say that some of the latest research around Artificial Intelligence (AI) is changing that narrative because the accuracy of speech-to-text or a transcription service has been much improved. As these large language models are getting more and more data, they're getting more and more sophisticated.

It used to be that parents complained, "These tools can't understand my kid." The student feels completely defeated because they try to use speech-to-text, and the resulting text isn't even in the neighborhood of what they said, because their articulation was not clear. Now, it's significantly better. Nothing is perfect, but with AI, it gets better over time, because the AI tool gets to know the student, gets to know the intonation patterns, the diction patterns, the articulation patterns, and the technology improves.

Lastly, word prediction. Word prediction has been around the least amount of time, but there is valuable research (Evmenova et al., 2010; Goldstone et al., 2021) that supports this finding: Students write more syntactically complex and sophisticated sentences when they leverage word prediction. I think teachers can feel very comfortable saying to families, "There is good research to support leveraging these three tools, but not in isolation and only with guidance."

How and when should this technology be taught? Since we're talking about students eligible for special education, we'll focus on the IEP. I recommend not leaving anything to chance. Somebody might say, but this IEP is getting really long. That doesn't matter. If a student needs this, then write it in the IEP. You need a clear plan for choosing the right tool. I recommend first having the student try out the tool for a few days. Many vendors now are giving at least 14- or 30-day trials. This additional time to practice the tool also gives the student's team time to establish who's needs to get trained. I am a big proponent of every stakeholder working with that student getting trained on that tool. If this is a middle-school student, the special educators will get trained, but so will the homeroom teacher, the science and math teacher, everybody. Then they can support that student in every single academic setting over the course of the school day. That includes care-

givers and parents, and so the tool goes home with them, and the parent knows how to help and support that student.

HBM: This is so much clearer than almost everything I've heard in the past four or five years. I think Vermont leadership needs to consider the kinds of systemic interventions students need. The Agency of Education can design professional development specifically targeted to support IEPs.

NKS: Often I am asked, at what age should we support a student with technology? Age should be considered one kid at a time. A student with dysgraphia [impaired letter writing by hand] (International Dyslexia Association, n.d.) may not be physically able to write the sentence, ***The cat is mad***. Often, but not always, these kids are very verbose. They may have sophisticated vocabulary, but they're constrained in writing. Imagine a big, incredible bucket of knowledge, but there's only one straw that allows that bucket of knowledge to get onto paper. That straw is limited by a lack of fine-motor control. In that situation, speech-to-text is a useful way to help get that bucket of knowledge onto paper, but never in place of a documented plan for OT services to foster the development of those fine-motor skills for that student.

HBM: The Individuals with Disabilities Act (sec. 300.6 Assistive technology service) states that public schools must allow for the "evaluation of the needs of a child with a disability, including a functional evaluation of the child in the child's customary environment."

This evaluation is a subsection of Sec. 300.105 Assistive technology, which reads, "Each public agency must ensure that assistive technology devices or assistive technology services, or both … are made available to a child with a disability if required."

These laws raise a number of questions. Who's qualified to conduct an AT evaluation of a student with an IEP? What does a high-quality AT evaluation entail? Are these commonly done?

NKS: What I'm starting to see now is districts working with an assistive technology specialist. That specialist will come in to assess and support students with AT and write a report. Some districts have begun writing consultation hours with the AT specialist into the student's IEP because teachers don't have that training. The short-term answer is to build AT consultation hours into the IEP, so that an AT specialist can come back and coach the students' teachers and the student.

To conduct an AT evaluation*, an educational specialist may have a graduate degree in assistive technology. There is a certification called ATP, which is Assistive Technology Professional, although this has not gone national. It is important to note that the AT evaluation is part of the IEP, a legal IEP goals. I wrote a Fact Sheet for the International Dyslexia Association for parents/guardians, How to Advocate for Assistive Technology Tools and Services.

*** See Shepardson's Request for Assistive Technology Evaluation template and other free resources at her website: https://schoonmakerscholars.org/resources/.**

document. This is actually a federal law stating that if a student has a documented disability with an active IEP, AT gets considered. An AT evaluation may be considered to help that student meet their Some districts have an AT specialist on staff. When I conduct an AT evaluation, I always start with a complete record review. I read every assessment that's on file for that kid, not just the IEP, but everything from the OT, SLP, cognitive testing, ABA [Applied Behavior Analysis]. Then I conduct at least one, and often two observations of the student, depending on the age. If the student already has special-education services, then you want to see them in special ed and in regular ed. You want to interview their teachers. You want to find out the teachers' comfort level with AT. Most importantly, you want to talk to the kid and the parents. Ask them, "What are you thinking is going to be most helpful?" Often parents have valuable insights. All this is done before writing the AT eval. After I conduct the observation, I conduct some assessments of my own. I will look at how strong their typing skills are. How do they navigate dictation? Since I'm a reading specialist, I also analyze

Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, Sec. 300.6 Assistive technology service

Sec. 300.6 Assistive technology service

Statute/Regs Main » Regulations » Part B » Subpart A » Section 300.6

300.6 Assistive technology service.

Assistive technology service means any service that directly assists a child with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device. The term includes—

(a) The evaluation of the needs of a child with a disability, including a functional evaluation of the child in the child's customary environment;

(b) Purchasing, leasing, or otherwise providing for the acquisition of assistive technology devices by children with disabilities;

(c) Selecting, designing, fitting, customizing, adapting, applying, maintaining, repairing, or replacing assistive technology devices;

(d) Coordinating and using other therapies, interventions, or services with assistive technology devices, such as those associated with existing education and rehabilitation plans and programs;

(e) Training or technical assistance for a child with a disability or, if appropriate, that child's family; and

(f) Training or technical assistance for professionals (including individuals providing education or rehabilitation services), employers, or other individuals who provide services to, employ, or are otherwise substantially involved in the major life functions of that child.

their Words Correct Per Minute. I think that's such an important piece to the puzzle, because if they are not reading, that data point is needed. Then I put all those puzzle pieces together, summarize the strengths and the challenges of the student, and generate the tools based on the IEP goals. It's a grid. One IEP goal might be to improve accuracy in reading CVC words to perhaps 90% of the time. Here's the goal and here's the tool that will help them reach that goal.

HBM: What about designating a specific IT staff member as the district AT specialist?

NKS: If you don't have your own in-house assistive-technology professional, there has to be somebody in that role. Maybe the superintendent designates the assistant superintendent or the director of special education, whoever oversees special-education services, "to take the R," as they say in the corporate world, take the responsibility for AT. So that person would get the most professional learning. They go to the ATIA [Assistive Technology Industry Association] conference in Florida every year, and learn about the latest and greatest tools, how to implement them, and how the laws are changing. That is best practice if you're not going to have a person with an actual degree in AT. That's the person in charge of overseeing the use of AT. This would probably include funding AT, maintaining tools, arranging training, and all the other parts needed. That would not replace consulting with an AT specialist, who would conduct AT evaluations of students and recommend specific tools and training. But I do think a school district needs to have a point person overseeing AT and also to avoid duplication.

HBM: In terms of instruction, how does the gradual release of responsibility look when it comes to technology-supported writing instruction and practice? What pitfalls have you seen in student learning when the gradual release of responsibility was poorly implemented?

NKS: If you do a search on the gradual release of responsibility and pitfalls, the #1 pitfall is a mindset that technology can take the place of good instruction. For example, I have been in school meetings where they say, "We don't need to have a reading specialist. We can just have the student use text-to-speech and speech-to-text." I say, "No, no, no! That's not how this will work."

The second pitfall is tech for tech's sake. You may say, "We're being innovative using technology to help the student," and then try to move forward without actually having a purpose and plan. This has to be a purposeful conversation, where we identify an educational objective, and if we're going to use tech, how will that objective be achieved by using tech in lieu of something else. I can't tell you how many assistive technology meetings I've attended for an IEP, and it's been recommended that the student needs technology. The principal or whoever's in charge will say, "Well, we have Chromebooks, so we'll just give them a Chromebook." That's when we get into trouble, because that's putting the tool before the student. We always start with the kid first, their strengths and challenges. We're analyzing the tasks that we're asking the kid to do, and thinking about the school environment. That's called the SETT framework (Zabala, 1995): Student-Environment-Tasks-Tools. Tools is at the end.

If this is a middle-school student, the special educators will get trained [in the AT], but so will the homeroom teacher, the science and math teacher, everybody. Then they can support that student in every single academic setting over the course of the school day.

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We don't think about the tool until we've thought about all those other things. If you get this kneejerk response, "We have Chromebooks," and that's the end of the conversation, that's a big red flag.

When I do AT training, we talk about working norms. If we truly implement Universal Design for Learning (CAST, Inc., 2026), each kid's toolbox will look different, because every kid is different. We need to have broad working norms in place that set the stage and the culture. One student might need an Apple Watch, but another might need speech-to-text, and another might need colored highlighters, or that kid might need to sit close to the teacher, and another kid might need an amplifying system. If we build a culture where everybody gets what they need, we achieve equity versus equality. Surely you've seen the picture with kids trying to watch a ballgame over a fence, each with different supports. It's that same idea. Anecdotally, when I was still in the classroom, I started every year saying to the class, "The kids were good sports. One came in on crutches. One had a bandage on his throat. One had a rash. Now, if I'm a good doctor, do I give the same medicine to all three of those people?" All the kids said, "Of course not!" I told them, teaching is no different. If I'm a good teacher, using that same metaphor, I would give them a pair of crutches, but the next person might need amoxicillin for the strep throat, and the other kid might need cream for a rash.

If there's a culture in support of everybody using different tools to show what they know, because everybody's a different kind of learner, then we won't criticize or single anybody out. These are our working norms to level the playing field on what's fair, kind, and equitable, particularly when we consider equity for improving student learning outcomes and closing achievement gaps.

HBM: When it comes to supporting student writing, what should we be cautious about when using technology at the process or product stage?

NKS: I'll share a quick story because this will illustrate my response. I was teaching in an independent school, in their Center for Learning, working with kids with documented disabilities. One kid had a lot of executive functioning struggles, and writing was just a bear for him, the hardest thing asked of him. Looking back, I'm horrified that I did this, but I showed him speech-to-text. I said, "You can just talk and get your thoughts down." The kid just couldn't believe it. I met with him for 30 minutes, and he left with an assignment due the next day. He had to post it to

the class learning management system by midnight. At close to midnight, he decided to actually do this assignment. He turns on the speech-to-text, lays down on his bed, and just rambles about whatever the prompt was. He never read it. He just saw all these words, hit save, and then hit send. This was verbal diarrhea, total nonsense. The next day, the teacher received this in his inbox, and he found me and said, "I think we really have a problem. Look at what the student turned in." I said, "Hold on, I think I know what happened here."

I tell you this story because I put the technology before the skill, and that was the wrong thing to do. I put the technology before the assignment. I just sent this kid off with this new technological tool, and he had no instruction other than how to turn it on and turn it off. That's the big pitfall. Students can learn how to turn it on and off, but if they don't know what it's for, or what their educational purpose is in using it, you could get into some murky waters. Letting the tech do the work goes back to your question of process over product, which is absolutely where we need to be cautious. Is this assignment the computer doing the student's work for them? Or did the student do the thinking and the computer represents that thinking? Never use any technological tool in isolation. We might have a kid needing speech-to-text, but that's not the only tool they're going to use. They might use speech-to-text to get the ball rolling, but then we have to sit down and say to the kid, "You've got a lot of text, but we can't stop here. Now we have to go back and look at the writing and maybe parse it into parts or color-code it because your thoughts were disorganized."

There's a lot of teaching that needs to go along with the use of the tool. How do we edit it? How do we make it yours? Tech for tech's sake is always a bad idea.

And now there are so many speech-to-text options. Some will say Speaker 1, Speaker 2, Speaker 3, allowing multiple speakers. That's where you go back to, "What's your task? Who's doing this work?" Because if it's a group project, you do want a text-to-speech option that does identify the speakers. But if it's just one student, you don't need those bells and whistles, and that might confuse things. I've had students just this past semester where I've written AT [Assistive Technology] evaluations, and they don't like speech-to-text, because other voices in the room get populated into their work. They feel the tool just makes things harder. Speech-to-text has different options, and we need to match the right speech-to-text tool with the right task for the right kid.

When a school has teachers who are trained to support assistive technology, then their students can be more successful. When it comes to that training, #1: avoid "one and done." Somebody comes in and gives a three-hour presentation, perhaps on teaching writing, and then you never hear from the presenter again or anyone associated with them. There's no follow-up or any kind of expectations for teachers to apply that professional learning. That needs to change for kids to get what they need.

#1: avoid "one and done."

HBM: What other resources would you recommend?

NKS: The Georgia Project of Assistive Technology, from the Georgia Department of Education, has done a nice job of developing guidelines written for families and teachers around the use of AT. The other resource I recommend is the Chafee Amendment. It's the law around accessible materials, which they call AIMs, Accessible Instructional Materials, to ensure that every student has the right to access grade-level content. If they can't read it independently, you need to find a way to get it to them in another way, and 99.9% of the time, that's using text-to-speech.

Thank you for asking me to join this interview. This has really been a pleasure.

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About Nanci King Shepardson, M.S.Ed., Ed.S., W.D.P., CPACC

Nanci King Shepardson is a Reading and Educational Specialist with a distinguished career dedicated to literacy, learning, and access for all students. She holds a Bachelor of Science from Wheelock College in Preschool/Kindergarten Curriculum and Infant/Toddler Development, a Master of Science in Education in Language and Literacy from Simmons University, and an Education Specialist degree in Assistive Technology, also from Simmons University.

A credentialed K-12 Reading Specialist, Nanci is recognized by the International Dyslexia Association, holds Wilson Reading System certification (Level 1), and is certified by the Center for Effective Reading Instruction (CERI). In 2022, she earned the Certified Professional in Accessibility Core Competencies (CPACC) credential. Her classroom experience spans preschool through 4th grade, with specialized work as a Reading and Educational Specialist serving students in grades 7 through post-graduate, as well as tutoring learners of all ages.

Nanci consulted for the International Dyslexia Association, authored published works in her field, and is a sought-after national speaker on dyslexia, high-incidence disabilities, and assistive technology. She is a committed advocate for students with disabilities and their families. Grounded in the science of reading and current assistive technology research, she serves as a trusted resource for parents, educators, and schools. Equity and access, particularly access to evidence-based reading instruction and assistive-technology services, are central to her professional mission. Nanci brings both professional expertise and personal insight to her work, as the parent of an adult child with dyslexia.

Meet the Team



H. "Bud" Meyers is Professor Emeritus at the University of Vermont (UVM) where he taught quantitative methods, evaluation design and leadership development from 1971 through 2013 and served as the director of the James M. Jeffords Center for Policy Research. From 2000 through 2006, while on leave from UVM, he served Vermont as Deputy Commissioner of Education for Assessment and School Improvement. Bud has designed and conducted program evaluations for a wide range of education and human service programs. His experience includes twenty studies of state educational and human services programs for Vermont's Research Partnership and the Jeffords Center as well as fifteen program evaluations carried out as an independent evaluator for Lighthouse Evaluation from 2000 through the present. The latter focused on the Mathematics and Science Partnerships (MSP) programs of the National Science Foundation and U.S. Department of Education based in Massachusetts and Vermont. He currently serves as Director of the consulting group Lighthouse Evaluation, LLC.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.



Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction.*