

The Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast S2.E11: More Than Tech: How Assistive Technology Changes Learning

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SPEAKERS

Barry Aherne, Amber Wade, Beth Santer

Beth Santer 00:17

Welcome to the Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne RESA facilitators, who will be joining you for this conversation. Today we are joined by Barry Aherne and Amber Wade. They represent Wayne RESA's Wayne Assistive Technology Team, which we refer to as WATT. In their roles Barry and Amber and their team support 33 local school districts and 97 public school academies in creating greater access and opportunities for students through assistive technology and individualized supports. They also support broader systems and inclusive practices that benefit all learners. Today, they're going to share their expertise, experiences, and insights on how supporting access for some can ultimately strengthen learning for all. Welcome to the podcast, Amber and Barry.

Barry Aherne 01:12

Thanks Beth.

Amber Wade 01:13

Thanks for having us.

Beth Santer 01:14

All right, so I always like to start at the beginning, which kind of getting an understanding of what your why is, so why don't each of you tell us a little bit about yourself, what led you to RESA, the WATT team, and what role do you think WATT plays in supporting schools and students? So, why don't we start with Barry.

Barry Aherne 01:36

Well, I am a speech language pathologist by training, and prior to being at WATT or at RESA, I was an SLP for Monroe County ISD, and then became there an assistive technology and AAC consultant, so did that for a couple of years, and I met the WATT team by spending time with them at Region Four meetings. We meet monthly, do a lot of good assistive technology stuff for the southeastern corner of the state, and a position opened up on their team, and I couldn't not apply for it to work with three amazing women. So that's why I am here.

Amber Wade 02:22

I am Amber Wade. I am another one of the AT consultants here at RESA. Prior to coming to the organization, almost five years ago, I was in Dearborn Public Schools as a special education teacher, instructional coach, and teacher consultant. I became a part of the WATT team again almost five years ago, and prior to that in my role as also an assistive technology coach, so I was like a WATT groupie, hanging around, coming to PDs, participating in our professional learning communities, and really developed my capacity through those experiences, and here I help support a lot of our physically and otherwise health-impaired programs. A lot of the alt access stuff work for more complex needs in our students that are in what many call, like, their least restrictive environment in general education or resource programs, and meeting their needs there.

Beth Santer 03:21

Okay, great. so when people hear assistive technology, they often think of high-tech devices. What does assistive technology really include?

Amber Wade 03:33

It really is an umbrella term. So, when we hear assistive technology, a lot of people do automatically think of high-tech devices, your big expensive things. They'll also go right to our augmentative and alternative communication devices. Well, further, we'll say as AAC, that's a mouthful. They'll go right to those, but really those are just a part of what's a much larger umbrella that includes our mid-tech devices, like a calculator, or a specialized keyboard, or specialized mouse, and even our no or light tech devices, like a paper communication board, or a visual schedule, a pencil grip, simple things like that.

Barry Aherne 04:19

Yeah, that... so in reality assistive technology includes anything that would help a student perform a task that might otherwise be difficult or inaccessible, right? Even the legal definition is kind of broad, just, you know, because it just increases a student's functional capabilities, I guess, and access to participation and education.

Amber Wade 04:44

Yeah, pretty much stopped short of things being surgically implanted.

Beth Santer 04:47

Okay, okay. So, Barry mentioned access, and how does assistive technology create access and remove barriers for students in educational settings?

Barry Aherne 05:00

Well, it kind of helps like shift the focus from what a student can't do independently to maybe how we can provide access, so they can demonstrate what they do know, and then participate meaningfully in their educational environment, so maybe something like speech to text instead of handwriting an essay for another student. It might be like using visual supports to navigate routines independently. Someone with complex communication needs, it might be having access to an AAC system, so they can share ideas, ask questions, build relationships. Like I would say, the goal of a of assistive technology is not to lower expectations. The goal is to kind of remove barriers that prevent students from accessing those expectations.

Beth Santer 05:54

So, I'm curious, because each of you listed many different things that fall under AAC, so what is the process if a district needs support? That's my first part, but then the second part is, is how do you arrive at what they need for that access?

Amber Wade 06:15

Yeah, so we have a system set up where school teams can visit the Wayne RESA website, and get to the assistive technology page, where they're able to create a support ticket request, and where one of the four of us will triage it, look at it, review it, and pick it up, depending on the student's needs and the circumstances and availability of the team members here at the county, and the availability of the school teams, and what we do if they ask for a consultation, we go through what is called the SET framework, which stands for Student Environment Task and Tools, which is a feature matching assistive technology consideration framework to allow us to think about what does that student actually need in the environment based on the task that we're working on supporting instead of going tool first when the problem with tool first thinking is they say oh on Instagram or TikTok, I saw this really great, flashy new cool thing, which might be very cool and very flashy and very fun, but it might not be practical for that environment. It might not make sense, it might not actually do what we need it to do. So we like to do that feature match matching process to go through and really isolate what that, what's best for us to try for that particular student and that in particular environment for that particular task.

Barry Aherne 07:49

Yeah, one of the other, I guess, scenarios we come across, kind of like how Amber was talking there, is we'll have somebody ask a particular, or especially for when it's AAC, it'll be, oh, this is the one that we use in this classroom, or this is the one that another student is using, or this is the one that the SLP is familiar with, and that's not necessarily the best reason to, you know, assign it to any student, so we would still want to consult, we would still want to talk about the student, the environment, the task, and then the tool, but that's not to say that at any point that maybe that tool is the right one for that student, and it also does give us a little bit of kind of buy-in from maybe the adults in the room, right, because they already have a little bit of knowledge, so they're going to be able to implement with maybe a little bit more fidelity, be able to model more successfully, as long as you know they're kind of honest enough with the with the process that at some point they think, okay, this is working for me but not the student, and then we can kind of, you know, talk about things and figure things out again.

Beth Santer 09:02

I think it's interesting when you talk about your process, because you're right. So much of when you're in a working in a local district might be what you have had access to in the past, or what somebody knows, and you may not even be aware of everything that exists. And I was a speech therapist by trade, and that was back when there wasn't as many options, and now there's so many options, so you probably do come across a lot of teams where they're not even aware of everything that could be possible.

Amber Wade 09:35

Absolutely...

Barry Aherne 09:36

That's true.

Amber Wade 09:37

there are so many things that are constantly coming out, a lot of the even the big companies that have been around for a long time are constantly changing their equipment, so that's where the four of us really work hard to stay on top of all those rapid changing things in our ed tech and assistive tech

environments, so that we can relay that information to teams that we're working with in our local districts.

Barry Aherne 10:01

But that's not to say that maybe that's something that worked 20 years ago, it doesn't still work today, right? Like, just things are still there, and, and they can be successful, but those are just kind of part of our tool kit now, and not just the only tool that we have anymore, right?

Beth Santer 10:15

Yeah, that's a great point.

Amber Wade 10:16

Yep, there are definitely some tools that have longevity. We have some joysticks on our shelves that have been around probably 10 15 20 years, but if you plug them into a computer, they work just as well as a brand new one that can get delivered tomorrow.

Beth Santer 10:30

That's great, great points. So, can you share an example of a student or situation, keeping confidentiality in mind, where assistive technology had a significant impact on participation or learning?

Barry Aherne 10:42

I mean, I think, for me, you know, I tend to focus a lot more on the AAC side of things, just being an SLP by background, and, and looking at things like that, so really, for any student, but especially those with limited verbal communication, that can be kind of like... people presume that they're just kind of maybe passive in a classroom, that they're not paying attention, that they can't follow along, whatever it may be, but I have worked with students where once we have implemented a more robust AAC system, and that that AAC system is intentionally modeled throughout the day, like students do start to begin contributing opinions, asking questions, right, participating in discussions, even if it's just one word at a time, and they're putting that through, and then you know teachers start to recognize that, oh, the student does have some knowledge, right, peers want to engage more frequently with that student, and then that student realizes that too, and then can become even more of an active participant in that classroom community, right? So it's just, it can be slow, but it does happen, and I have seen it happen, and it's fantastic.

Amber Wade 11:57

Yeah, a lot of the students I support, you're looking at a lot of that physical impairment that impacts their ability to access, like the grade level content, like their peers, so their handwriting, because their fine or gross motor, might be impacted. We have several students where we give them, like, a mini keyboard, and now they're able to type with their thumbs, and now they're doing the same classwork as their gen ed peers, they're able to produce the same amount as their gen ed peers, all because we gave them a different way for them to type that information. So we see a lot of great success with that, a lot of big aha moments with things built into devices, so with so many of our students using Chromebooks, really showing teachers these accessibility features that are already built in, that they're not a paid subscription, they're not an additional download, you don't have to deal with safe listing them, they're already there and ready for the students. I just worked with a team last week, or week before last, and I was telling them about some of the things built into a Chromebook for voice typing and reader mode, and some additional things, and their mind was blown because they had no idea these tools were there, so while they had students struggling, they already had the tools to help support that student to allow them meaningful access when we have students that are frustrated that they're asked to read a certain piece of text, but they're reading at a much lower grade level, like that's a very

frustrating experience for a lot of our students. So, by giving them the right tools to allow them to listen to that text and follow along, their behaviors go down, they're able to show what they know, and have really true, great, meaningful experience in their classroom,

Barry Aherne 13:49

and that's what exposes them to that grade level language, right? They just listen to it and can follow along.

Amber Wade 13:53

Absolutely.

Barry Aherne 13:54

Yeah. And I think, too, you know, assistive technology, like, it doesn't, it doesn't create the students' ideas, right? It just simply provides access, like, to a way for them to express those ideas.

Beth Santer 14:07

Yeah, yeah, you know, as you guys are talking, I'm thinking about the term UDL, which stands for Universal Design. Where does that fit in to all of this?

Amber Wade 14:21

That's a really great segue for, like, the example I just shared. UDL is such an important part, and when we're talking with teams about students, and we bring out things like voice typing or text to speech, things that are already built into all of our devices, whether they're a Chrome device, a Windows device, or a Mac device, those tools are already there. The tools are there to meet the needs of many people and many different needs, and even those who may not have a disability at all still benefit from those tools. I use voice typing all the time because I find. It to be a very valuable tool, but teachers teaching students how to use these tools as a whole classroom. Your 25, 30 students learning how to use those tools. The kids that really need them will have a lot less stigma using them if everyone is using them, and they don't cause any harm. It's just the idea of building a ramp instead of just stairs, because everyone can walk up a ramp.

Beth Santer 15:28

Yeah, I've often, I've often heard that, and actually that ramp is example is what I have heard, is that something that may start out as a need for someone ends up benefiting all.

Barry Aherne 15:41

Yeah, yeah. yeah, even just, I mean, something as simple as using captions, right? If a teacher has on their screen, and not even just teachers, even for us, like, if we're presenting, or we're in meetings doing things, just having that captions on for those, obviously, who have difficulty with hearing, it's helpful, but sometimes you miss a word, and you know you just need to look at it quickly and do that, or you know a word comes across the screen, and it's, oh, I didn't know that's how you spelled that word, and now that kid has learned the spelling of a word, right, and following along things like that, so just having that on all of the time, you know makes things a lot easier for a lot of people.

Beth Santer 16:24

Yeah, so I'm curious, because you had mentioned in your process that you'll have somebody from a local district reach out to you when they see a child is struggling or needs something. Do you ever have a situation where somebody reaches out to you and they're not sure whether their student needs assistive tech or something else, and how do you problem solve that?

Amber Wade 16:48

Yeah, I mean, we do get consults sometimes where they're like, we're not, we're just not sure, and we always tell people, put in the consult. Even if you're not sure, we are here to help support and be a idea. You know, to have those experiences and go back and forth in that banter, and ultimately we'll kind of go through, like, tell us about this student, tell us about Beth, like, what is she good at, what is she like, what are other things that might be impacting her, what does her day look like, what's that environment, and then really get down to that, what is that specific task again? It's going almost back to that set framework and using that as our guide. What is the thing that the student might be struggling with? And sometimes it is keep using what you're using, sometimes that's the answer, sometimes it is try something new. There's a lot of variability with it.

Barry Aherne 17:42

I would say that there isn't an IEP goal you could write that there isn't an assistive technology tool to match.

Beth Santer 17:50

Huh, interesting. So, what are some common misconceptions schools or staff may have about assistive technology?

Barry Aherne 17:58

There's last resort.

Amber Wade 17:59

The last resort, some of them just don't think their kids are using it at all. So we'll review IEPs, and on the prior written notice they will write assistive technology is not needed for this student, but then when we actually look through the IEP, you look through the present levels, you look through the supplementary aids and services, sometimes even the IEP goals, and you see assistive technology repeatedly written in, but they just don't think some of these things count as assistive technology. So, because of that, they think AAC is the only type of AT, so they're like, "Oh, this student has verbal speech, so they don't use at, but they use text to speech on all their assessments. They're using a calculator to support math calculation. They're using voice typing to dictate long responses," so their IEP is filled with assistive technology supports, but they're documenting that it's not needed. So that's one of the biggest misconceptions that I see reviewing lots of IEPs.

Barry Aherne 19:03

I think another big misconception is that, you know, there's kind of, there are prerequisites to earning assistive technology, you know, we don't, there aren't. I guess you don't have to prove readiness before receiving communication supports or any of those kind of things, and then on top of that, a misconception that the technology alone will solve the problems, right? You can't just hand a kid a piece of technology or a piece of assistive technology without any, you know, training or modeling or implementing it appropriately, and just expect them to be successful with it, right? It takes time and it takes practice and proper coaching.

Beth Santer 19:40

Yeah, and that kind of leads me to the next question. When you're going out for consultations, I'm assuming that they're that you're also looking at it through a systems lens, and that the classroom setup or the processes that they use will help support or not support the use of an AAC device or assistive technology, so maybe go into a little bit of that. What you're looking for to support the best use for assistive technology in a classroom,

Amber Wade 20:13

A lot of education, right? So it's making sure that all the team members are a part of the conversation, so sometimes that's where we sometimes will see some of the flubberies will happen when it's we do consult and it's just the SLP that's participating, well, that student might only see the SLP once a week for 15 to 20 minutes, right, so that's not very much time, so really for a lot of the tech that we're putting into place, and for any of our student supports, really, we have to look across environments, because they're not just with the speech path in their little office, they're in their classrooms, they're at gym, they're in the cafeteria, so we're, how do all these things fit, and having a really comprehensive team being a part of that conversation is so important because the OT might have a different perspective. The physical therapist might have some input on a mounting if we're looking at how we're going to attach something to a wheelchair or if they're in a Rifton chair activity chair. How does that work? So really bringing in multiple perspectives, the classroom teacher that's with the student quite a bit, maybe even the paraprofessional getting their input and making sure that they have the training needed to support that student with all of that.

Barry Aherne 21:31

yeah, that's really that, that 'E' part of the SETT, right, the environment, figuring out what's, you know, what's already being used, what is available and maybe isn't being used, or isn't being used, you know, correctly, or you know, most successfully. If the, you know, with the people who were around, what kind of training have they had? What kind of training do they need? What would they like, you know, all of that, including all the adults in the building, but then also, you know, families are important too. Families are, you know, most often the experts on our students, right, or on their, their children, knowing what they're doing at home, maybe they're doing something successfully at home or unsuccessfully, figuring those things out and working with them that way. It really is, you know, getting as much information as possible to try to figure out what this student could be most successful with.

Beth Santer 22:25

Yeah, you brought up, you brought up the parents, and I guess that is one of my wonderings. Is how does the strategies and supports that you're providing at school, how are parents getting that communicated and consultation or trainings that parents may need to help make their environment the best to carry over those skills?

Amber Wade 22:53

Yeah, so when we do consultations, we, the team member that reaches out, we tell them to invite whoever, you know, I mean, they want to, and sometimes it is the parents. Just today I was doing a consultation, and we were with the mom of the students, and going through kind of all these different things that Barry and I have talked about through that SETT framework, and really getting to know that student, and then talking to them and answering their questions, because each of our teams across the county are really at different places, so we have some teams that are really understand some of our, some of these specialty softwares and technology really well, so they're really able to take on that parent training piece really independently, and then some of our teams that might, this might be the first time they have a student with complex communication needs in their building, or just complex needs in general, where they're not used to sometimes a specialty software. We kind of jump in and help support them train whoever needs to be trained, including the family.

Barry Aherne 23:54

And we're lucky in Michigan that we are aged 0 to 26 right. So, so the little ones that are not yet in school, and particularly for AAC or for communication, I've done, and other members of the team, we do home visits, work with the team, maybe the SLP or OT or PT, or whomever is visiting the home, we can visit with them, and that's really nice, because then we, you know, meet the parent in their most

comfortable environment and help them to get things set up, can do some coaching, training, show them how they can use it around the house using, you know, that their kids' favorite toy or with the pet or whomever, whatever else is going on there.

Beth Santer 24:36

Yeah, that's great. So, as we're finishing up here, if you could leave school teams with one message about access, inclusion, and supporting all students, what would it be?

Amber Wade 24:48

Presume potential is for me the biggest thing for our students, because I think sometimes some teams will say, oh, this student's only at that level, so they can't do this or they can't do that, because they're only functioning like this. We really have to presume potential for our students that they might not have the skills yet to show all those things, but you know, through my experiences, we find there's lots of kids who have lots of things to say, lots of knowledge to share, that once they get the right tools in place to show those things, they can really blossom. We know many adult AAC users, they wouldn't be where they are today, like, and many of them have master's degrees, they give keynote speeches if they didn't have adults in their lives that believed them that they had potential and work with them and patiently knowing that it's a marathon that a sprint to make sure they have what they need.

Barry Aherne 25:54

Yeah, I would encourage teams to focus less on whether students fit into existing systems and focus more on whether our systems are designed to support the students that we do serve, right? Like, inclusion isn't about where a student sits, it's about whether they have genuine access, meaningful participation, and, you know, a voice within their learning community.

Beth Santer 26:17

Yeah, excellent points. Well, we certainly appreciate both of your insights on how assistive technology is not just about tools, but about access, and it's about removing barriers, so students can fully participate and succeed. Your work certainly highlights the impact of thoughtful collaboration, systems level planning, and a commitment to designing learning environments that work for all students, as we wrap up, we're reminded that when we prioritize access in universal design, we don't just support individual learners, we strengthen instruction and opportunity for everyone. And with that, I and the RESA community want to thank Amber and Barry for sharing all of their insights and for being with us today. You certainly represented the WATT team well. Thanks to all of our listeners. We hope that you join us again for the Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast.