

*This case study is the third in our series highlighting one of our 56 federally-funded state and territory programs funded under the [Assistive Technology Act of 2004 \(P.L. 108-364\)](#). To learn more and to locate your state/territory program, visit the [AT3 Center website](#).*

# Colorado Links AT Loans, Libraries, and Youth Literacy

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For decades, interlibrary loan programs across the country have made it possible for anyone with a library card to get books and other materials from virtually anywhere. About 15 years ago, it occurred to the director of Colorado's Assistive Technology Partners (ATP), Cathy Bodine, that the interlibrary loan system could also work for delivering equipment from ATP's loan bank. The result was a collaborative partnership that has helped get assistive technology to thousands of children, ages 0-21, across the state.

## COLORADO FUNDS GROUNDBREAKING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH

Assistive Technology Partners began in 1989 when Colorado received federal funding from the Technology Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 and the Elderly Act. From this beginning, it grew from a single project to a multi-faceted program encompassing research, engineering, industry, academics, clinical services, and worldwide community engagement.

To reflect their growth and continued commitment to driving innovation in the field of inclusive, assistive, and health technologies, Assistive Technology Partners was rebranded as the [Center for Inclusive Design and Engineering \(CIDE\)](#) in 2018. CIDE is an applied interdisciplinary and human-focused innovation center focused on the use of technology to address the myriad challenges experienced by those living with disabilities and those aging into disability. CIDE's services range from one-on-one assessments for individuals with disabilities to training for groups and businesses, but some of their most important work is designed to benefit children with disabilities.

"The National Department of Education has recognized the importance of every child having access to reading materials in their homes and communities,"<sup>1</sup> says Maureen Melonis, M.N.S., CCC-SLP/L, Associate Director and Senior Research Instructor at CIDE. "And, of course, libraries support this goal. But children with disabilities may also need assistive technology (AT) to allow them to read those materials. That's why we partnered with the Colorado Department of Education on a school-based, [StateWide Assistive Technology, Augmentative and Alternative Communication \(SWAAAC\)](#) program to provide multidisciplinary assistive technology services for students with disabilities, ensuring them equal access to the curriculum and full participation in their education and classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/bookaccess/index.html>

“In addition, younger children with developmental delays or disabilities often have difficulty playing and interacting with the world around them,” adds Melonis. “AT can provide them with opportunities to be active participants in life rather than passive bystanders. To help these younger children, 0-3 years of age, CIDE teamed up with Early Intervention Colorado to create the [Tech for Tykes](#) program, which gives them access to age-appropriate AT devices.”

## LOAN BANK ALLOWS FAMILIES TO TRY BEFORE THEY BUY

Both youth programs—SWAAAC and Tech for Tykes—allow providers to borrow AT equipment for students to try out for a few weeks at home or school. This helps ensure that when purchase decisions need to be made, children will get the technology that works best for them from all the options that are available.

The CIDE loan bank contains about 1,700 assistive technology items, including switches, mounts, AAC devices, adapted curricula, executive function supports, and much more. Anyone can view the online catalog, although equipment must be requested and ordered by a SWAAAC Team Coordinator or designated Early Intervention Consultant.

Between July 1, 2018 and June 30, 2019, 1,290 devices were borrowed from the Colorado AT loan bank by 64 different school districts or Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and community agencies. Eighty percent of those borrowers indicated they needed equipment to assist them in decision-making (device trial or evaluation). That’s more than 1,032 new, documented cases of AT consideration in Colorado schools. And by giving children a chance to trial different technologies and find the best fit, the loan bank increases the chances that the AT will be put to good use and not quickly abandoned.

**“In addition to equipment, our borrowers get a lot of support,” Melonis notes. “Part of our agreement for users of the loan bank is that we provide technical assistance and professional development. Assistive technology without training is not assistive.”**

“If a piece of equipment or a device doesn’t work for a child, it will sit on a shelf,” notes Melonis. “Not only is that a costly waste, but the child may not qualify for funding or reimbursement for another device for many months or even years. That is precious time lost in their potential development.”

To put this into perspective, during the 2018-2019 fiscal year, AT loan bank borrowers in Colorado ultimately decided NOT to purchase 54 percent of the AT devices they trialed. The total value of those devices (which, if purchased, would likely have been abandoned) was over \$1 million, representing a huge cost savings to school districts facing budgetary constraints.

“The Colorado AT loan bank is an invaluable resource,” adds Robyn Kellogg, OTR, Director of Technology Integration, Assistive Technology, San Juan BOCES, which includes eight districts across five counties in the southwest corner of the state. “In this remote, rural area, we are trying to meet the needs of kids across a broad spectrum of disabilities. We know that technology ages quickly; some equipment can cost as much as \$10,000; and not every technology works for every child. In some cases, a technology purchase will only be paid for if the user has trialed three different devices. So borrowing from the loan bank allows educators, children, and families to try the latest and greatest technology; make sure it matches their needs; and fulfill funding requirements.

“If we had to pay for all of the equipment that we want to trial, we couldn’t afford to staff adequately,” continues Kellogg, “That’s an important balance. You can have a huge inventory of equipment, but if you don’t have staff that know how to use it and can provide guidance, it’s not very useful.”

## BRINGING IT HOME: HOW LIBRARY COURIERS DELIVER RESULTS

Kellogg says that being able to pick up AT loans at the county library is also a cost savings, as well as a convenience.

“Previously, if we wanted to borrow AT equipment, it was mailed to us and we had to pay the postage to mail it back,” Kellogg explains. “A significant part of our budget was postage for AT devices. Now, thanks to the library courier service, we can pick up devices at a central location without paying postage.”

In Colorado, the backbone of the interlibrary loan system is the [Colorado Library Consortium \(CLiC\)](#), which connects participating libraries throughout the state so that they can share materials. Their couriers travel regular routes, transferring books and other materials between public, school, and college/university libraries. Since partnering with CIDE a decade and a half ago, couriers have also delivered AT.

CIDE pays a fee for the courier service, about \$800 per year, which is funded by state Assistive Technology Act dollars and also, in part, through agreements with the Department of Education and Early Intervention Services. The fee includes three stops per week at CIDE to pick up materials from the loan bank.

On the other end, each borrower must make arrangements with a local courier site, such as a public library, school, or community college.

“We ask borrowers to identify if their district is already participating in the library courier program to determine if they may be able to use the courier service free of charge through their existing contract,” says Melonis. “If that is the case, they simply find the person in their district who works with the courier service to learn about the drop off location and internal processes. If a district or organization is not currently a member of the Colorado Library Consortium, they contact our office and we talk through the options. There is a fee to become a site. That fee is based on the number of deliveries and pickups they need.”

CIDE loans items for six weeks, allowing about a week for an item to get out to a borrower and a week for it to get back. Currently, 85 percent of loans coming out of CIDE’s loan bank are delivered via courier, reaching 77 team leads who get them to thousands of children with disabilities across the state.

# PRO TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

CIDE's Melonis says that their program has continued to grow, with more libraries and loan bank borrowers being connected each year. Here she shares three key strategies that have helped them improve their AT loan service in collaboration with library couriers:

1. **Actively manage loan bank inventory.** Every week we meet and talk about our waiting list for high-demand items. Monthly, we do marketing around “unloved items” that haven’t been checked out in a while, but we still think are really great devices. We also encourage our borrowers/patrons to tell us what they want, even if we don’t have it, so we can consider adding items to our inventory. If we see a product frequently on the waitlist, we consider purchasing it to add to the loan library. Our AT specialists provide input and guidance on the things that we should add.

Actively managing the loan bank includes tracking items carefully. CIDE has adapted the Alexandria public library system database for this purpose. This tool allows us to track where items are and when they are due back. A detailed tracking and database system is a key part of success.

2. **Demonstrate how AT supports state-level library objectives.** Most states have literacy goals and are committed to achieving accessibility. It may be up to you to help them connect the dots between literacy, reading, access and assistive technology, from devices that help children see or hear books to those that allow them to hold a book.
3. **Build relationships with local libraries.** Some libraries are only familiar with lending books and similar media materials. They may be small and not have a lot of storage space. The idea of handling assistive technology devices was completely new to them. It was time well spent to help those librarians understand the value of offering this type of service—the difference they are making for kids who didn’t have the ability to read a book and can now borrow a book that’s been adapted so they can turn the pages themselves, or they can hit a switch and the book will be read aloud to them. When a librarian understands the power of being a connection, of helping get these items to kids and literally changing their world, then they understand, and they are excited to serve as that connection. You may even encourage providers to bring their students with disabilities with them to the library when they pick up AT to personalize the experience and raise awareness of how libraries are helping meet community needs.



The online Alexandria loan bank catalog details all the inventory currently available for loan. Alexandria is searchable by anyone (teachers, caregivers, family members, related service professionals, etc.). It includes descriptions and features of devices, purchase price, and a picture of the item(s).

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