



Information about the Use of Assistive Technology and Standards of Learning Exams

Students with disabilities have an equal right to participate in standardized tests like the Standards of Learning exams (SOLs). Students who use assistive technology (AT) in their classes or on their other tests should be allowed to use their AT on the SOLs as well.

What is Assistive Technology (AT)?

Assistive Technology (AT) is any equipment that can help people with disabilities overcome their limitations or keep them from getting worse. AT can include equipment that is purchased, designed or specially modified. It can be as simple as a magnifying glass or as complex as a specially designed computer or program.

Who can use AT on Standards of Learning (SOL) Exams?

Students with disabilities are identified under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEA) or Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504). The student's IEP team or 504 Committee determines whether the student can participate in the SOL exam and what accommodations are necessary. This includes the use of AT.

Who is responsible for making sure students can use their AT on the SOLs?

The IEP team or 504 Committee determines what AT the student can use for class and tests. Decisions about participation in the SOL should be put in the student's IEP or 504 Plan.

What kinds of AT can be used on SOL exams?

The AT students use in class and on regular tests should be used on the SOL exam. New or unfamiliar AT just for the SOL could result in scores that don't reflect the student's abilities.

Some examples of AT that have been approved for the SOL exam include:

- Special lighting and adapted or special furniture
- Magnifying glasses or other devices to help the student read the test.
- Amplifiers like hearing aids and auditory trainers
- Tests on Tape or other audio versions of tests for students
- Word Processors and Typewriters, or Alternative Keyboards to help in typing answers
- Computers and other devices to help with communication, including programs that can read the test out loud
- Calculators, Braille writers and printers
- Masks, markers and other devices to help the student keep a consistent pace
- Spell Checkers and other devices to help the student write accurately
- Pencil grips and other devices to help the student write their answers

Are there limits on what kind of AT can be used on SOLs?

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has limited the use of some AT and has refused to allow other AT to be used at all on the SOL exam. Every local school division has a director of testing who reviews the AT recommended by the student's IEP team or 504 Committee. The director will contact VDOE if he or she is unsure if the AT is prohibited by VDOE. VDOE then reviews the AT and makes a decision on whether it will be allowed or not.

What type of AT has VDOE banned or limited?

VDOE limits the use of some AT to only certain parts of the SOLs. For instance, using word prediction software or someone to write the student's answers can only be done on the "short paper" part of the English SOL.

Also, VDOE has said that if the AT gives students an advantage but doesn't address their disability, it is not allowed. For example, VDOE has denied the use of AT that gives a student access to a dictionary on the vocabulary part of the SOLs.

VDOE refuses to allow any AT that does something that violates its security standards, like access the internet, unless that feature can be turned off. VDOE has also refused to allow AT that stores test information in its memory.

Is it legal for VDOE to ban or limit certain types of AT?

Every case is different, but we are concerned that at least some of VDOE's refusals may violate the law. This is especially true because many of VDOE's concerns can be easily fixed. For example, if VDOE is worried about programs that store test information, it can provide a computer for the student to take the test on. That way, there will be no security risk because the test will be stored on VDOE's computer and will never leave VDOE's possession or control. Concerns about internet access can be resolved by VDOE supplying a person to make sure that the student does not improperly use the internet.

What if a student uses AT that is not allowed on the SOL?

If a student uses AT that is not allowed by VDOE, their scores will be considered invalid. The students will then be considered not to have taken the SOL at all.

Can a student use AT in the classroom that is not allowed on the SOLs?

Yes! AT in the classroom is an important accommodation for students who need it, whether or not they use that AT on SOLs. IEP teams and 504 Committees still should identify and provide the AT your child needs to participate fully in classroom instruction and activities.

Does this information also apply to alternate assessment programs?

Yes, students are allowed to use AT on the Virginia Grade Level Alternative (VGLA), Virginia Substitute Evaluation Program (VSEP), and Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) as they are in the SOLs. Of course, the AT should be put in the student's IEP or 504 plan.

How Can VOPA Help?

VOPA can provide information, technical assistance and, in some cases, legal representation. If your child has been denied the use of AT on the SOLs, please feel free to contact us at:

Virginia Office for Protection and Advocacy
1910 Byrd Avenue, Suite 5
Richmond, Virginia 23230
(804) 225-2042 (local and TTY)
(800) 552-3962 (statewide)
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This publication provides general guidance only. For specific legal advice, you should speak to an attorney.