

Assistive Technology Fact Sheet #2: Assistive Listening Devices For Children With Hearing Impairments

*Developed by the Department of Public Instruction in collaboration with
the Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative*

1. What are assistive listening devices (ALDs)? ALDs are devices designed to solve specific listening problems created by a hearing impairment which cannot be solved by personal hearing aids alone. ALDs may be use alone or in conjunction with personal hearing aids.
2. What are some example of ALDs? Two major categories of ALDs are personal frequency modulated (FM) systems that are worn by the student and receive speech input from a teacher-worn microphone, and sound field FM systems that provide amplified speech from a teacher-worn microphone to a loud speaker directed into an entire room or parts of a room. Both types of ALDs may be used alone or in conjunction with a student's hearing aids.
3. Why are ALDs needed in schools? The acoustic environment in most public school classrooms makes auditory learning and communication extremely difficult or impossible for many students with hearing impairments. The most common acoustic problems in classrooms are excessive background noise, reverberation, and distance between the teacher and student. None of these acoustic problems are solved by the use of personal hearing aids alone.
4. Which Wisconsin students will benefit from an ALD? Any student with a hearing impairment, with or without hearing aids, for whom the acoustical conditions in the learning environment are a significant barrier to auditory learning and communication may benefit from using an ALD. Students with all types and magnitudes of hearing impairment are vulnerable to these acoustic barriers.
5. How do you define a hearing impairment for students in Wisconsin schools? State Special education law defines hearing impairment as a significant impairment in hearing, with or without amplification, whether permanent or chronically fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance, including academic performance, speech perception and production, or language and communication skills. The definition may include children with mild hearing loss, unilateral hearing loss, chronically fluctuating hearing loss, and children with normal auditory sensitivity with a central auditory processing disorder.
6. How many students in Wisconsin schools are identified by school districts as having a hearing impairment? Based on a statewide count made on December 1, 1999, 2177 students were identified as needing special education services because of an identified hearing impairment.

7. What should I do if I think a child is having hearing difficulties in the classroom? The child should be referred to the building administrator or school nurse to ensure that the child's hearing is properly screened (see The Wisconsin Guide to Childhood Hearing Screening, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1994). If the child fails the hearing screening, the child's parent should be encouraged to seek medical and hearing evaluations for the child. If the evaluation reveals a hearing impairment, school staff should consider whether a referral to the building student assistance team or a special education referral is appropriate.
8. Who decides if a student needs an ALD? If the child is identified as a child with a disability under the IDEA, the child's IEP team decides whether the child needs an ALD. For such a child, an educational audiologist should be a member of the IEP team. In the case of a child who is qualified as a handicapped person under section 504, the team that determines the child's educational needs and develops the child's accommodation plan should make the decision. If the IEP team or section 504 team decides that an ALD is necessary for the child, the school district must provide the device, and the services necessary to select, fit, monitor, and maintain the device. The ALD and the services should be clearly identified in the child's IEP or accommodation plan.
9. Can any member of a child's IEP team or section 504 team evaluate a child's candidacy for an ALD, select the ALD, and fit it to the child? The child's IEP or section 504 team must make the decision concerning the child's need for an ALD. However, some ALDs are considered hearing aids and can only be provided to children in accordance with applicable state laws. Only persons licensed by the state may dispense "hearing aids". Audiologists in Wisconsin are licensed to dispense hearing aids, and are the appropriate professional to evaluate, select, and fit ALDs for children for use in the school environment. Fitting an ALD that qualifies as a hearing aid under state law also requires clearance from a physician. ALDs that do not qualify as a hearing aid do not require the involvement of a person licensed to dispense hearing aids or a physician's approval. If you need help in determining if an ALD qualifies as a hearing aid, contact your district's educational audiologist, teacher of the hearing impaired, or speech and language pathologist.
10. What should I do if my school district doesn't have access to an educational audiologist? Many school districts in Wisconsin are located in cooperative educational service agencies (CESAs) that employ educational audiologists. School districts in those CESAs may purchase educational audiology services from their CESA. Some individual school district's also employ educational audiologists. Wisconsin school districts and CESAs currently employ 22 educational audiologists statewide. In order to meet the needs in Wisconsin and conform to maximum educational audiologist/student ratios recommended by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), 70 educational audiologists should be employed statewide. If your school district does not have access to an educational audiologist, a member of the child's IEP or accommodation plan team should facilitate the involvement of a community audiologist. The audiologist should be

willing to work with the child and school staff in the educational environment to ensure that the proper audiological evaluations are conducted and that the proper ALD is provided to the child in accordance with applicable laws.