NEEDS TO know

Investing in ICT resources can totally transform the educational journey for pupils with SEN – but how can you be sure you're heading in the right direction? Sean Stockdale has some sound advice

For teachers, May can be a strange time; the end of the academic year is almost within reach, yet tasks suddenly start appearing out of nowhere, seeming to push the summer break ever further into the distance. If internet forum chat is anything to go by, one such appearance on the 'to do' list that seems to befuddle many teachers looking to improve their special needs provision, is working out what SEN IT resources they should be using with their students.

Fortunately, help is at hand – but to access it we will need to wind back a little to the days of Becta. Just as the organisation closed in what is now commonly known as the 'bonfire of the Quangos', it produced some useful guidance for special needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) looking to make the best use of IT. The resources comprise three sections: Remind me – showing just some of the ways that you can use technology in teaching, learning and administration; Inspire me – looking at how technology provides support and enables independence; and a Review checklist, for your own professional development. Given the timing of Becta's closure there was no promotional drive to make teachers aware of these materials, so they have been left largely to gather dust. However, under the Creative Commons licence nasen (formerly the National Association for Special Educational Needs) has now been able to host these materials, and they are free for teachers and SENCOS alike to download and use.

The resources start with an overview document, which is well worth reading as it outlines some of the key features of successful IT and SEN use. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that your job as a teacher is to provide support for learning. This means assessing individual learners' areas of difficulty and devising ways of providing additional support that you may be delivering yourself, or by liasing with teaching colleagues and support staff.

Ask the experts

It is easy to get seduced by glossy IT sales brochures, but you need to look beyond the marketing hype and consider exactly how any resources you invest in will support learning. Many expensive IT purchasing mistakes could have been avoided if the buyer had taken a step back

ABOUT THE EXPERT

SEAN STOCKDALE IS A FORMER ADVANCED SKILLS TEACHER FOR ICT AND ENGLISH AND NOW EDITS NASEN'S MEMBERS' MAGAZINE SPECIAL. TO ACCESS THE SEN ICT RESOURCES MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE, VISIT NASEN.ORG.UK/SEN

and asked themselves if the money they were about to commit would support learning better if spent elsewhere (E-learning credits anyone?) You need to know what your students need, so before breaking out the chequebook it would be wise to consult them. Of course, you might already have a clear idea of particular pupils' requirements, but it is certainly worth tapping into the knowledge held by the general student body, too.

Many schools have active student councils, which are the ideal vehicle to use, but they will need a very specific brief if you want to obtain useful feedback. Asking pupils what IT equipment they want might simply lead to a long shopping list of the latest 'tec', so you need to focus your questions on what already works in your setting and how it might be improved given the financial restraints under which you are operating. Of course you'll probably have a designated IT department within your school, too, and it would be wise to liase with them, if only to ensure that any SEN-specific resources you buy are compatible with your current provision.

Make it work

Another key task before purchasing IT resources is to have a clear idea of your own IT skills. Contained with the Becta materials is a useful self-assessment audit to help you gain an idea of your own strengths. Whether you are looking to invest in hardware or software, assessing your skills and those of the team around you (if possible) will allow you to have a better understanding of the professional development requirements any new IT equipment might bring. Many of the more reputable software and hardware providers include training options and this is definitely something to take into account; if you are expecting a resource to be adopted across your school how will you ensure that it is used consistently? It is also worth remembering that 'free' resources, attractive though they may seem in terms of budget, still require an investment in time and training, and may not come with the support available with their paid-for equivalents.

Having gained a clear picture of your pupils', personal and school's needs you are now in a good place to start considering what resources to invest in. Assuming that you have got a clear idea of

what you want and have been allocated a budget it's definitely worth visiting some events where you can sample product. BETT, the Education Show, and nasen Live are all events where you can try out solutions that might suit your needs. Larger events will publish lists of exhibitors and you can always contact companies direct to see if they are exhibiting/offering training near you. With budgets getting ever tighter, skimping on your product research to purchase equipment can prove to be an expensive and poor decision, with which you may have to live for a long time.

Start here?

So let's say you've done all of the above, but are still faced with so much choice you are struggling for a place to begin. You may not be aware that 2011 was the year of communication, lead by Jean Gross. With the majority of diagnosed SEND pupils having some form of communication need, and many more children in secondary school living and studying with undiagnosed difficulties, I would suggest looking at what IT resources you have to support pupils' communication skills, and investing in that area. Assuming that you work in a mainstream school this could be hardware to enable pupils to playback, assess and share their speech (within the classroom, and online); equipment to read out tricky words for those with dyslexia; or dictation software to enable emergent and struggling writers to hone their skills – these are just a few areas, all now available through the humble mobile phone. A recent report highlighted that of two hundred young people in an inner city secondary school, 75% had communication problems that hampered relationships, behaviour and learning. You might not be working in an inner city school, but nonetheless, using IT to address pupils' communication needs should be a fundamental part of everybody's teaching repertoire.

CASE STUDY
GLADESMORE COMMUNITY SCHOOL, LONDON

Cathy Cameron works with special needs students. Her department recently invested in WriteOnline from Crick Software – an innovative writing tool for upper primary, secondary schools and colleges. "I teach small literacy withdrawal groups," she explains. "All my students are weak writers, some write reams of quite formless and ungrammatical writing, others refuse to write at all. George is the latter, he is bright boy and a good reader, however he passionately hates writing and will do anything to avoid it! With WriteOnline he was recently able to write a speech and listen back to it several times. It helped correct his grammar, and spell checked his writing and read it to him. He therefore completed a writing task independently, which turned out to be less painful for him and me!"

"If you wrote a word wrong and you know it's wrong you would put the speech on it and it would read it to you, and you would know if it's correct," reports George. "I achieved more by using the WriteOnline – normally I would write only two lines – using this helped me to write two or three paragraphs."