Special Edition with Mrs. Cohen Technology Integration Specialist

"The sweetest path of life leads through the avenues of learning, and whoever can open up the way for another, ought, so far, to be esteemed a benefactor to mankind." David Hume (1711-1776).

Sometimes people say a child with a learning disability needs to be "fixed". Our students are not broken, so they cannot be "fixed". Just like the fact that some people have brown hair, black hair, red hair, or blonde hair and there is nothing wrong with having any of those colors, there is nothing wrong with learning differently. It does mean that the educators in that student's life need to find ways in which he/she can succeed.

Mrs. Cohen believes that every human being learns differently from every other human being and no one way is right for everyone. What our students do need is to develop an understanding of how they learn best and what they can do to enhance their learning. At The Hillside School a significant component of our educational programming is the use of technology and assistive technology by all staff and students. When students enter the school we introduce them to a wide variety of hardware and software to enable them to choose the technologies that are most beneficial. None of the technologies would be of any use without having educated, empathetic teachers who can assist the students in incorporating the technology into their skill set. This means that the teachers need to understand how to analyze what will help each individual child and to help that child incorporate that technology into their skill set. Our focus is never on how much technology the children can learn. The focus is on the best technology for each child to help him/her achieve their learning potential and independence.

What is the difference between technology and assistive technology? Technology includes computers, software, "devices", Internet, etc. General technology can be used by anyone. Common technologies include laptop computers, word processing programs, e-book readers, email, smart phones, etc.

Assistive technology "is defined as any device, piece of equipment or system that helps bypass, work around or compensate for an individual's specific learning weaknesses."* It assists our students so that they can become more self-reliant, more accurate, better able to complete tasks in a timely fashion, and it helps relieve the pressure the students often feel.

Mrs. Cohen believes that through the use of assistive technology our students can find methods that allow them to gain access to educational materials that would be beyond their ability to assimilate, to actively participate in the learning experience alone and with their classmates, and then it can assist them in communicating what they have learned to others.

Some examples of the assistive technology we use are computerized books that can be seen and read on a computer screen where the student can write notes, highlight and bookmark in the text (this includes fiction, nonfiction, and text books) and create a word processing document from their notes and highlights. If that sounds like a Nook or Kindle, it is similar but not the same thing. A program that the students use to see and hear books, Read Out Loud transfers notes the students make, while reading an electronic book, into a word processing document. The Read&Write Gold program provides a means whereby the students can hear a website read out loud, highlight important points in a variety of colors, and then transfer the colored highlights (grouped together by highlight color) to a word processing document for ease of report writing.

Some students use Dragon Dictate on a computer or iPad so that the computer program takes their speech (dictation) and transfers it to onscreen text in Microsoft Word. We also use two programs that will predict the next word a student might want to use in their writing. Co:Writer shows a list of possible word choices and reads them out loud so that the student can choose the word they want. Read&Write Gold shows the word choices, reads them out loud, and can provide definitions for the terms. It can also check verb tense and homophones. Some programs will read what the students are writing as they type it so that they can hear if their word choices make sense. There are many more programs and components of programs that offer other wonderful features to our students.

Technology training at The Hillside School begins in Kindergarten. We choose those technologies that will work for the children at their current grade and maturity level. In some cases we can introduce a specific technology at an earlier age than many schools do. We are able to do this because we have smaller class sizes and the classroom teacher is in the computer lab during instruction so that they can also assist the students.

Every class attends one scheduled technology class per week. Teachers can also schedule time in the computer lab with their classes when the room is not in use. At other times, teachers may make requests for special technology classes for assistance on completing a project or to learn about a new piece of software or hardware or to gain greater depth of knowledge on a specific application. The classes are frequently designed to collaborate with what the students are learning in their class. Last year our sixth grade classes were studying the Greek gods and goddesses. They spent time in the computer lab creating PowerPoint presentations and learning how to embed music in their slide show. Individually, each student met with Mrs. Cohen to create an audio (voiceover) file with his or her narration about the god or goddess they had chosen. They embedded the voiceover files in their PowerPoint presentations, too. This provided the students with the means to share their new knowledge and skills with the entire school community when they presented their slideshows at an assembly.

The technology is worth nothing unless it is put into the hands of the user and they are provided with instruction on its use. With instruction and practice our students can learn to soar.

*Hillsider Magazine, Vol. 2 Issue 1 Spring 2011, pg.4