# The Accessible Learning Experience S.01, Ep.04: A State-District Partnership for Accessibility in Georgia

Luis Perez:

Welcome to The Accessible Learning Experience where we help you turn learning barriers into learning opportunities. On this episode, we're joined by Carson Cochran and Somer Smith to discuss their state district partnership in Georgia. Carson is a program manager for the Georgia Department of Education and Somer is an assistive technology specialist for Marietta City Schools. Georgia is one of seven states participating in the National AEM Cohort.

Luis Perez:

With technical assistance and support from the National AEM Center, Cohort states bring together state level leaders and leaders from three to five selected school districts to develop coordinated systems for the timely provision of high quality accessible educational materials and technologies for all learners, especially students who need them due to disability. Carson and Somer share some of the lessons they've learned as their partnership in Georgia has grown. Stay tuned to the end to learn about an exciting IEP initiative, Take a Minute. Now, let's turn to our conversation with Carson and Somer.

Luis Perez:

Welcome, Carson and Somer. So great to have you on the podcast. We are so excited to have this conversation with you, so we'll go ahead and jump right into it. Somer, tell us a little bit about yourself and your experiences supporting learners who use accessible materials and technologies. Is there an experience that stands out in shaping your approach to this work?

Somer Smith:

Great question, Luis. I'm Somer Smith, the assistive technology specialist in Marietta City School district in Georgia. My background is in speech language pathology. I've always had a passion for students who use AAC communication devices because I feel like everyone needs to have a voice. But I did have an experience with my daughter who has a diagnosis of dyslexia. Trying to get the accessible materials that she needed in school to be successful and going through that IEP process as a parent opened my eyes to a lot of the needs that our students do have.

Somer Smith:

I have since had a career change from speech language pathology into assistive technology so I could help more families through the process and make it a little bit easier for them to get the accessible educational materials that they need.

Luis Perez:

Thanks for sharing that personal experience, Somer. For so many of us, it is personal. That's what brings us into this work. So I'd really appreciate that. Carson, how about you? How did you get started in this work? What's your why for accessible materials and technologies?

Carson Cochran:

Hi, I'm Carson Cochran. I am the program manager of the Georgia Instructional Material Center with the Georgia Department of Education. I'm here as a representative of the state and part of a very exciting cohort of seven states that are participating in a four-year process to improve statewide support for districts in the acquisition and implementation of accessible technologies and accessible educational materials. Luis, I have kind of the same path as Somer. I'm a speech language pathologist and worked extensively with children. It's K-12 and actually adults who were non-verbal.

Carson Cochran:

I'm reminded of an experience that I had when I was relatively new to the field and trying to do an evaluation on a non-verbal student with cerebral palsy. The communication system that I was using had kind of an evaluation package built into it. Being new, that's all I knew to do, so I was trying that and I was asking him questions to identify and touch objects. Then it came to the reading part. This was a high school student who was extremely bright, but I realized he couldn't read.

Carson Cochran:

Part of the reason that he couldn't was because he had never interacted with text independently. It was always read to him or he had been guided through it and he lacked the independence of being able to read. I never will forget that experience and just the look on his face and the embarrassment on both our faces of me asking him to do something that he couldn't do and him not being able to read and he should have been able to.

Luis Perez:

And then that's the goal, right? Is to bring about that independence, that autonomy, so I can definitely appreciate that. Thank you for sharing that experience, Carson. We know that teamwork is so important to making sure that students who need accessible materials and technologies can get them in a timely manner and are able to use them to support their learning. We know that it's important to bring together a team that can provide different perspectives to this work. Can you give the audience a sense of how you're building such a system in Georgia, Carson? What does that team look like? Who is on your state team and what are their roles?

Carson Cochran:

It was funny. When we were applying for this Cohort, I had two active applications going at the same time trying to figure out who the best person was on the team. I had a lot of input from various individuals in the state, reached out to folks at CAST to try to guide me through the situation. But what I found is that there are key components that are required to participate in the Cohort. Some of those we've pulled in.

Carson Cochran:

We've got instructional technology, curriculum folks. We've got school and district effectiveness, assistive technology. We went out beyond what we were expected to have. We pulled in some pre-service teachers in the university systems and then we also participate with the folks that have the Tech Act grant. But what really happens is that our team is very fluid. So what we've really been doing is pulling in the skills of people across the DOE, also other organizations to learn more as we come up on things that we're really not sure how to navigate.

Carson Cochran:

We reach out to those in those specific fields to get more information to help us put the package together, if you will. I think these connections have also benefited us as a department as a valuable resource, because what we're doing at the DOE is becoming more mindful about accessibility of all the materials that we're producing whether they're print materials, video materials, or even if we're just doing face-to-face trainings or supports. We want accessibility to be built into everything that we do. I think that's a huge growth offset of this Cohort project and it's a great, great benefit.

Luis Perez:

Love to hear that, Carson, that it's building that awareness of accessibility that's extending beyond this works. Now I know that you are also working with districts like Somer’s. Tell us a little bit about that.

Carson Cochran:

Well, I always laugh because of Somer's experience, which she'll tell you about in a little while. I can imagine we'll touch on that. It's important for us at the state to reach out and work with districts in the support because districts are the boots on the ground interacting with the students. So what we want to offer to the districts that we're working with... And we have three Cohort districts that we're working with. They're in different sizes and different demographics. So that we can really look at a balance of what we're doing.

Carson Cochran:

But what we want to do is offer support to the excellence that's going on in the districts already and providing them tools to implement accessibility in materials and in technologies... and I'll talk about it in just a minute, to really implement an initiative that we've got brewing. I think number two, it's that we are gaining important information about what the process looks like at a local level. So we can share those processes throughout the state to benefit not only the three districts that we're working with, but every district in the state of Georgia.

Luis Perez:

Somer, Carson hinted at your experience when you were asked to join this partnership. Can you tell us a little bit about that and what that was like?

Somer Smith:

Sure. To be honest, when we got the call from the state, I was a little nervous because I thought that meant we were in trouble or we had done something wrong and we had been working so hard to make changes in our district. So then I was like, "Oh no! What have we done?" But then he assured me that it's a good thing, we're not in trouble, that since we had been trying to make some changes, we were more of a district that they were looking for. Our district is a very small district.

Somer Smith:

We are an inner city district, but we have a very diverse population from very affluent families to very low economic status. We have a lot of students who have multiple languages within their homes. What that means for our district is we have a lot of needs for the accessible materials. So once we started with this Cohort with the state, we were so excited and realized that we were not in trouble and that this was actually a great opportunity. So I think it was fun for Carson because he just saw this as a great opportunity for everyone.

Somer Smith:

He didn't realize how it would look at our level and that we were like, "Oh no! What did we do?" So that part was interesting. Once we started with the Pilot though, that was eye-opening for us because we realized we did not have all of the people that we needed at the table. We started our Pilot with the special ed director, the assistive technology specialist, the director of instructional technology, and then we did have a parent on the team as well and I believe a representative from special education.

Somer Smith:

Once we left our first meeting with our tasks on how we could improve some of our procedures, we realized that we needed to add a lot more people to our team because we could really make some proactive changes in our district. So now our team to look at accessible educational materials includes the chief of special student services, the executive director of academic achievement, the technology and innovation coordinator, a vision impaired teacher, a DHH, Deaf/Hard of Hearing teacher, general education, special education, parent, and the director of all of our media specialists. So we have a lot of people who are now working together to make some changes in Marietta City and we are super excited about it.

Luis Perez:

So you've really rounded out your team and again brought in different perspectives because they're all important in making sure that this work takes place in a coordinated, collaborative way. So that's excellent. To Carson's point, you're mirroring some of the work that's going on at the state level. Like Carson said, you are the boots on the ground, so the state can get your perspective of what's going on to inform their practices.

Luis Perez:

Then you can also learn from the state level by being able to get that information about what's going on across the state. So this is a great partnership and a really exciting way to approach the work. So Somer, what are some of your priorities that you're working on at the district level? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Somer Smith:

Yeah. Our first priority that we focused on was the procurement process. We, in participating with the state, realized that we did not have the correct language for educational materials in a lot of our RFPs. That was alarming to us, so we now have the language available. Then when we went to put it in all of our procurement documents, we realized we had an even bigger problem because the way our district is, is each school has a varying level of independence, meaning that the administration of that building can choose the curriculums or the additional educational resources that are appropriate for that building.

Somer Smith:

Like I had said before, we have varying needs across the district. So one building may have a very high bilingual population and may need some different resources than another school. In that, we have a lot of different types of resources that are brought into our schools and all of those resources are not necessarily accessible to all of our learners. The administration in each of the building was not aware that this language needed to be in those procurement procedures because it's not anything they had ever had to deal with before.

Somer Smith:

And anything that was purchased for the whole district, we had an awareness at the central office level, but in the independent schools, that awareness was not there. So it opened our eyes to a lot of things that we needed to do within our district to make some improvements. So from that, we now have some administrative guidance that is being worked on right now that will go out to all of the administrators. So if they do buy materials specific for their school, they would know what language would need to be in that procurement document to make sure that it is accessible for all of our learners.

Somer Smith:

That's been our primary focus so far. Then our next focus is really on the timeliness of it and just making sure that our students are getting that at the same time as everyone else.

Luis Perez:

Thanks so much for sharing, Somer. That procurement piece is so important. The more that we can do to be proactive and to have accessibility be included as part of that procurement process, the more successful we'll be because we're ensuring accessibility is considered from the start for all learners in the materials and the technologies that we acquire. So, great work there. Keep that going. Carson, how about for you? As you work with the districts, what are some of the priorities that you're focusing on at the state level?

Carson Cochran:

Like we said earlier, I think the districts are mirroring what we're doing and vice versa. What Somer was explaining is in not isolated just to her district. I work at the Georgia Instructional Material Center, and almost daily, we're getting requests for materials to be put into braille or large print or digital because they're not already done so at the district level when they're purchasing these things. That's the biggest thing. We used to be a state where there was a list that was approved that aligned to the curriculum.

Carson Cochran:

About three or four years ago, we went away from that so that all districts can basically choose the curriculum that aligns to the standards for what's best for the district. So it opened things up. There's no longer a finite list of things to make accessible. It's like the world is your oyster, if you will. So it's very difficult and we're just trying to raise awareness across the state at the district level to make sure that whenever a district or local school is purchasing or acquiring maybe free materials, that they are accessible for every student in the building, in the district, so that all students have access to that material like all the others.

Luis Perez:

Somer, you had shared a story with us in a previous conversation that brings all of these things together in relation to the timeliness of the materials. And this is another component that's important, is the parent voice in all of this. Can you share that story with us, Somer?

Somer Smith:

Yes. This one was eye-opening, a little bit of a hard pill for us to swallow, but it's one of those things you know better and you do better. So we are one of the three districts in the state of Georgia that is part of this Cohort with the state. We were the only district to add a parent to our panel for the first meeting and they were explaining everything that we would be doing throughout this process. She was very quiet through all of it, very happy to be part of the meeting.

Somer Smith:

Then as soon as that meeting ended, she gave me a call and wanted to set up a meeting. One of the topics that was discussed in the first Cohort meeting was about the timeliness of accessible educational materials and how we really need to have those materials in the student's hands the same day as their general education peers. That really rang a bell for her because her son, who is now in second grade, this year he'll be in third grade, has never had his reading material which needs to be enlarged at the same time as his gen ed peers ever in his educational experience. And he's been with our district the whole time.

Somer Smith:

That broke my heart a little bit because it was one of those things we did not know that was happening at the central office level. We knew that things were being ordered, but since everything at each school is so individual with our district, things were happening and he was getting what he needed, but he was not getting it at the correct time. So we have corrected all of that. He had everything he needed to start this school year on time, but we didn't have a written process for that. So the timely manner, we now have a written process for how to get the enlargements and brailing if needed.

Somer Smith:

I would really encourage any states who are going to go through this process, please add a parent because they bring a whole different perspective. It's sometimes not easy to hear, but if we want to do right by the kids in our district, we really need to hear that information. So even though it was hard to hear, it was very good for us and we made the changes that we needed and we were able to make those very quickly. We just we weren't aware at the district office level that that was happening.

Luis Perez:

You bring up a great point, Somer. Sometimes, you need to hear some of that information where it's not working because that's the only way that you're going to be able to correct it. So it's important to get that information and then be able to take action on it. You point to a great lesson about including that parent voice because it can provide that information that maybe you don't get at in other ways. What are some other lessons you would share with another state in your case, Carson, or with another district, Somer? What are one or two lessons that you would share from your experience so far being involved in this kind of partnership?

Carson Cochran:

Well, I really like what Somer said. When you know better, you do better. It's difficult to change and it's difficult to look at yourself and honestly look back. With the parents' perspective, we all see things differently and we all have those different experiences that we bring to the table. So it's so important to include all of those people. Like I said earlier, I think in the first statement, was our stakeholder group has... It's fluid. It moves in and out depending on the needs of the work that we're doing.

Carson Cochran:

We have in Georgia a system of continuous improvement and that system revolves around the whole student. What we are gaining from this Cohort is that realistic look of where we are as a state, how we're providing supports to a district, talking to the districts and finding out where we are lacking in different aspects of things from their perspective, and then trying to put plans in place that support districts throughout the state to help continually improve and to know better so that we can do better.

Carson Cochran:

One of the things that have really benefited us are the Quality Indicators of Accessible Educational Materials because they align perfectly with our system of continuous improvement. It's really taking a look at what you're doing, examining it, finding out where those gaps are, and then helping set goals to improve around the work that's already in motion. I would give a big shout out to using those quality indicators and Accessible Educational Materials Pilot, which is a tool that CAST has to really help put things into perspective for not only local districts, but states as well.

Luis Perez:

We appreciate that shout out to the AEM Pilot, which is, like Carson said, is a tool that states and districts can use to self-assess and continue to monitor their progress against the Quality Indicators for the Provision of Accessible Educational Materials and Technology. So thanks for that shout out, Carson. Somer, how about you? What is one or two lessons that you would share with someone else, another district, for instance?

Somer Smith:

I think the main thing that I would share is that if you have the opportunity to participate in a pilot with your state level representatives, I think you should definitely do it. The main reason I feel that way is I would not have been able to get all of these team members around a table to discuss accessible educational material had it not been for this pilot. We know that there might have been some holes in some of the procedures, but I am not able to pull all of those people together had I not had the backing from the state.

Somer Smith:

Or I could come back and say, "Hey, these are the changes that need to be made and this is who we're participating with and this is why." We've been able to make some great changes and everyone has been on board with it, but it really does take that full team of people. But I don't think that would've happened. It's not that no one would want it to happen, it's just we needed some type of facilitation to get the ball moving and that is what the Accessible Educational Materials Pilot has done for Marietta City.

Somer Smith:

So we would definitely recommend it. I think it's also great to build relationships with people in the state and with the Centers for Accessible Materials because it gives us more resources for our district, plus it gives us more research that we can back our decisions with.

Luis Perez:

To wrap things up, Carson, I would love it if you could tell us a little bit about a special initiative you started in Georgia, Take a Minute. What is the goal of that initiative? What do you hope to accomplish with it because it's a really exciting initiative?

Carson Cochran:

Luis, I'm glad you asked. We're really, really excited about this. Our Take a Minute is basically we're moving past compliance of just checking a box for assistive technology and accessible educational materials in the special factory section of an IEP. We're really looking at changing things for students and having some results that are based on our decisions and our conversations at the IEP table. What we're asking is that IEP teams just basically take a minute and answer a few questions that we're providing.

Carson Cochran:

Final question will be answered whether or not the student needs assistive technology. In AEM, you can answer yes, no, or maybe, we don't know, but we can find out. Once that minute is over each team member gets a I Took a Minute badge and they can wear that badge throughout the day, throughout the building to help raise awareness of what accessible educational materials are and how they can help students level the playing field if they have difficulty accessing materials, digital materials, having the technology that they need to access their curriculum.

Luis Perez:

That is awesome. I can't wait for people to be wearing those badges. Like you said, it will raise awareness and people will ask questions, "What are you taking a minute for?" And hopefully that'll start a conversation and really spread awareness. Look forward to that. So Carson, would you be willing to come back later this year and let us know how Take a Minute is going?

Carson Cochran:

Absolutely. I'm very excited to share anything that we have. And I really feel good about this and I think that we'll get some really good subjective and objective data.

Luis Perez:

And sometimes, that's the important thing as you roll these things out, get that data, get that information, and then you can make adjustments. You've both used the phrase, when we know better, we do better. So really, that's the spirit, I think, in which you are engaging in this work, which is so important, that continuous improvement.

Luis Perez:

Well, thank you so much, Carson and Somer. It was great to have you on the podcast. I look forward to reporting back on not just Take a Minute, but how this partnership is going and how it's improving the timely provision of accessible materials and technologies for all students in Georgia.

Luis Perez:

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of the Accessible Learning Experience brought to you by the National Center on Accessible Educational Materials at CAST. You can find us on the web at aem.cast.org. Here, you'll find show notes with link to all of the resources mentioned on each episode. Thanks again for listening, and remember, accessibility is everyone's responsibility.

Luis Perez:

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