

Every Voice Counts

Columbia Park Elementary's School-Wide AAC Project

How one elementary school brought augmentative and alternative communication to every classroom — and how yours can too.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Columbia Park Elementary's AAC and diversity project was a school-wide initiative that introduced every student to the full spectrum of human communication — speech, sign language, symbols, core boards, and mid and high-tech speech devices. It was a hands-on, inclusive experience that sought to build empathy, awareness, and practical communication skills across the whole school community.

How the project unfolded

Phase 1

Classroom Visits

The District SLP and school LST visited every classroom to introduce students to the many ways people communicate. Lessons were grade level-appropriate and interactive, sparking curiosity before the hands-on activities begin.

Phase 2

Hands-on AAC Exploration

Students rotated through AAC stations in small groups — including high-tech devices such as iPads loaded with communication apps like Touch Chat and LAMP, as well as mid and low-tech AAC stations. They explored, experimented, and experienced what it feels like to communicate in new ways.

Phase 3

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Activities

Structured activities challenged students to communicate using only AAC tools. This built genuine empathy for those who rely on AAC every day, while making the learning fun and memorable.

Phase 4

Student-made Communication Boards

The culminating activity: classes designed and created custom low-tech communication boards for their classrooms, shared school spaces, and for teachers to wear around their necks. Students became creators, not just learners.

Please watch the video to see the project in action.

Practical details

Timeline	3-4 weeks for the full project. Classroom visits range from 30-60 minutes per class depending on grade level. Hands on sessions range from 45-60 minutes per class.
Devices needed	6-8 iPads with AAC apps (e.g. Touch Chat). 6-8 Mid-tech speech devices (e.g. Big Macs and GoTalk). A variety of low-tech speech supports including ASL picture cards and sample core word boards. Hint: Devices can be borrowed from SET-BC.
Who leads it	Team should include District SLP, LST, Educational Assistants. Classroom teachers can also be involved in planning depending on time available. Plan for EA training before launch — 1-2 sessions to build confidence with the tools.
Scope	Every classroom in the school. No grade is excluded — the content scales to any age group.

Guide for other schools

The following steps outline how any school can replicate the Columbia Park Elementary model.

Step 1 — Planning

The SLP and LST team should meet to plan out the introductory AAC lesson as well as determine the hands-on AAC stations that will be explored by students. Needed materials should be gathered at this time. It's also a good idea to think ahead about where finished communication boards will live: classrooms, hallways, the library, the gym. Consider teacher lanyard communication boards too. Communication Boards made by students carry far more meaning than store-bought ones — plan for display and ongoing use.

Step 2 – Confirm your device loans early

Contact your SET-BC District Partner who can assist with requesting short-term device loans through SET-BC. Request at least 6 units and confirm the loan length, shipping details and timing before setting your project dates.

Step 3 – Train your Educational Assistants

Run 1-2 EA training sessions before the project begins. EAs are the backbone of classroom support – they need hands-on time with the devices and a clear understanding of each phase before launch.

Step 4 – Map your classroom visits

Schedule every classroom visit before the project starts. Coordinate with classroom teachers so they know what's coming. Build in flexibility – illness and coverage issues are common in schools.

Step 5 – Run the Project

Introductory Lessons in each classroom kick-off the project

- Use videos and story books to generate interest and enthusiasm
- Use lots of visuals to engage learners

AAC Exploration sessions build knowledge and provide hands-on experience for students

AAC Maker Sessions can be scheduled at classroom teacher's discretion

Step 6 – Document as you go

Photograph and video each phase. This serves multiple purposes:

- Sharing with parents and the broader school community
- Sharing project details with SET-BC
- Helping other schools see what is possible

Hint: SET-BC provides media consent forms for any students who will be filmed or photographed as part of project documentation.

Step 7 – Project Wrap-up

Plan for sharing out the accomplishments and contributions of each class:

- Plan a Gallery-walk to share created communication boards
- Display created communication boards throughout the school
- Create a project video or slideshow to share during a school assembly