

Sara Ayars, MS, CCC-SLP

Statewide AAC & Assistive Technology Leader | Adjunct Professor | SLP

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Assistive Technology & AAC Specialist, Speech-Language Pathologist, and Adjunct Professor with 18+ years of experience leading initiatives that advance inclusive education, accessibility, and communication for students ages 3–21, grounded in neurodiversity-affirming, communication-rich practices where all learners are seen, heard, and valued. Recognized for statewide leadership in Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) and AT. Committed to developing future SLP leaders and building team capacity to create communication-affirming, universally designed learning environments where every student’s voice is valued.

- Led statewide AAC and AT initiatives impacting educators and students across Washington
- Designed and launched an interactive “Exploratorium” to support inclusive technology implementation
- Presented at national conferences (ASHA, ATIA, Closing the Gap) on AAC and inclusive practices
- Scaled statewide professional learning systems that increased educator capacity to implement AAC and inclusive practices across 15+ districts
- Influenced statewide practice by translating AAC research into scalable implementation models for schools and districts
- Mentored graduate clinicians and taught university-level coursework in evidence-based practice

Experience

AUGUST 2023 – PRESENT

Assistive Technology Specialist & Speech-Language Pathologist | Special Education Technology Center | Ellensburg, WA

Lead statewide AAC and assistive technology initiatives through consultation, coaching, and capacity-building for educators, therapists, and families. Partner with state agencies, districts, and multidisciplinary teams to align AAC and AT implementation with MTSS, UDL, and inclusive education frameworks. Lead development of an interactive, web-based “Exploratorium” that translates assistive technology into practical classroom use through immersive, scenario-based design.

Design and facilitate scalable professional learning systems to build capacity in AAC and inclusive learning environments. Founded and co-facilitate the AAC Collaboration Corner and AAC Open Mic Office Hours, providing ongoing coaching and technical assistance to multidisciplinary teams across 15+ districts. Design and deliver multi-session professional learning, including *Planting the Seeds of AAC*, and co-facilitate literacy retreats focused on inclusive, comprehensive literacy for students with complex communication needs. Author a monthly newsletter reaching 200+ educators statewide and present locally and nationally (e.g., ASHA, ATIA, Closing the Gap), translating research into practical, communication-affirming practices. Work centers on bridging research to practice and building sustainable, communication-rich systems at scale across educational settings.

FALL 2024 – PRESENT

Adjunct Professor | Western Washington University | Bellingham, WA

Develop and deliver graduate coursework focused on research design, clinical inquiry, and the application of evidence-based practice in SLP. Design inclusive, universally accessible course materials and lectures integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to support diverse learners. Foster student success through mentorship, structured feedback, and alignment of learning outcomes with clinical competencies and ASHA standards.

JANUARY 2026 – MARCH 2026

Clinical Educator | Western Washington University | Bellingham, WA

Provide clinical instruction and supervision for five graduate-level SLP clinicians delivering services to nine clients across diverse communication needs. Facilitate student learning through direct observation, guided reflection, and in-the-moment coaching to support clinical decision-making and skill development. Deliver structured mentorship and evaluative feedback aligned with clinical competencies and graduate-level training expectations, promoting growth in evidence-based practice and client-centered care. Served in a temporary clinical educator role to provide continuity of supervision during a leave of absence.

AUGUST 2007 – MAY 2025

Multiple Roles | Bellevue School District | Bellevue, WA

Led district-wide efforts to expand AAC implementation and inclusive practices through coaching, collaboration, and professional learning, building sustainable systems of support across schools.

Assistive Technology Specialist, June 2018 – May 2025

Provide comprehensive training, support, and PD to facilitate accessibility and inclusion. Advocate for best practices in UDL and technology to ensure equitable access for all learners. Collaborate with a diverse range of stakeholders, including students, families, educators, therapists, specialists, administrators, and support staff, to develop and implement AT solutions. Focus on coaching and collaboration with staff to establish effective AAC systems and implementation for students aged 3-21. Coordinate efforts among families, vendors, and therapists to secure independent funding for dedicated AAC devices. Spearheaded district-wide implementation of Core Vocabulary through a Specific Learning System First approach.

Speech-Language Pathologist, August 2007 – June 2023

Screen, assess, and deliver therapy services, including co-teaching and in-class interventions, to students with moderate and severe communication disorders across preschool to fifth-grade levels in both special and regular education classrooms. Proficiently develop and program AAC devices tailored to the needs of emerging, context-dependent, and independent communicators, utilizing a range of high-, mid-, and low-tech devices and software. Collaborate extensively with general and special education teachers, private SLPs, occupational therapists (OTs), physical therapists (PTs), psychologists, Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs), para-educators, other support staff, and parents. Place particular emphasis on training and coaching teachers and support staff to offer comprehensive support for students with Complex Communication Needs.

Teaching & Learning Department, August 2020 – June 2023

Collaborate with directors, curriculum developers, Instructional Technology Curriculum Leaders, members of the Multi-Language Learning Department, and other leaders to develop and further district initiatives, review accessibility, and promote inclusive practices. Provide PD opportunities for staff across Bellevue School District.

Speech-Language Pathology Advisory Leader, June 2020 – June 2023

Serve in an elected leadership role for the SLP team. Design and facilitate PD sessions for the SLP group, addressing and resolving caseload and workload issues as they arose.

Speech-Language Pathology Compliance Evaluator, January 2014 – June 2018

Review Speech-Language Impairment evaluation reports district-wide in compliance with district, state, and federal regulations. Provide training to SLP staff on updated district, state, and federal guidelines.

Technical Assistance Team Autism Consultant, August 2010 – October 2013

Engage in specialized training conducted by University of Washington staff. Use evidence-based practices to support Autistic students and their general education teachers and other support staff.

DECEMBER 2023 – MARCH 2024

Assistive Technology Specialist | Bellingham Public Schools | Bellingham, WA

Conduct PD training sessions for the SLP department on subjects including AAC, MTSS, and inclusive practices. Deliver PD sessions and engage in individualized coaching cycles with teachers and SLPs district-wide on emergent, comprehensive literacy strategies.

JUNE 2010 – AUGUST 2011

Augmentative Communication Specialist | Seattle Children's Hospital | Seattle, WA

Conduct outpatient AAC assessments, dynamic evaluations, and trial treatments for children aged 3-21 with complex communication needs. Collaborate with family members, private SLPs, school teams, and support staff to facilitate device programming, setup, training, and implementation. Manage paperwork for device funding through Medicaid and various insurance companies.

Education

SEPTEMBER 2001 – JUNE 2005

Bachelor of Science: Speech and Hearing Sciences, Psychology | University of Washington | Seattle, WA

Graduated Cum Laude

AUGUST 2005 – AUGUST 2007

Master of Science: Speech-Language Pathology | University of Washington | Seattle, WA

Successfully fulfilled mandatory coursework and clinical practica, supplemented by additional studies in counseling skills, educating children with emotional/behavioral disorders, and educating Autistic children. Acquired proficiency with Prompts for Restructuring Oral Motor Phonetic Targets (PROMPT). Gained substantial experience in dynamic assessment and trial treatment to assess candidacy for AAC under the guidance of Dr. Pat Dowden.

JANUARY 2007 – JUNE 2007

Public School Internship | Snoqualmie Valley School District | Snoqualmie, WA

Developed and executed assessment and treatment plans for speech and language disorders within the elementary and middle schools of the district catering to students with complex communication and physical needs.

Professional Memberships and Certificates

- Certified member of American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA), 2008 - PRESENT
- ASHA Special Interest Group 12: Augmentative Alternative Communication Member, 2008 - PRESENT
- Washington State Department of Health Certificate, Speech-Language Pathology, 2010 - PRESENT
- Washington State Educational Staff Associate (ESA) Certification, 2007 - PRESENT

Assistive Technology and AAC Systems Experience

- Hardware: iPad, Tobii I-series, Accent, Smartbox, Step by Step, Communication Builder, GoTalk, switches, environmental controls, various eye-gaze devices
- Software: Boardmaker, Boom Learning, Chat Editor, Clicker 8, Empower, HelpKidzLearn, LessonPix, Microsoft Suite (Teams, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote, Lens), WordQ, Read&Write, Google Suite
- Applications: Proloquo2Go, TouchChat with Word Power, LAMP WFL, GoTalk NOW, TD Snap, Grid 3, Proloquo4Text, Verbally, SimPODD, Clicker Writer, Voice Dream Reader, Bookshare

Selected Publications and Writing

- Author, *Inclusive Insights & Access Tips* (monthly newsletter on AAC, AT, and inclusive practices)
- Forthcoming: *Closing the Gap Solutions Magazine*, August 2026

Selected Presentations and Professional Learning

National

- Beyond “Sit and Get” in WA: Responsive PD for Inclusive Assistive Technology Implementation- Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA), January 2026, Orlando, FL
- Rooted in Inclusion, Flourishing with AAC: Growing Communication-Rich Schools- ATIA, January 2026, Orlando, FL
- A Transformational Approach for SLPs Supporting Language in MTSS: AAC as a Tier 1 Support- American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA), November 2025, Washington DC
- Rooted in Research, Flourishing in Practice: Transforming Schools with AAC- ASHA, November 2025, Washington DC
- Charting a Course to Transformative Professional Learning about Comprehensive Literacy for All in Public Schools- ATIA, January 2025, Orlando, FL
- Charting a Course to Transformative Professional Learning about Comprehensive Literacy for All in Public Schools- Closing the Gap, October 2024, Minneapolis, MN

Statewide

- Tales from the Trenches: AAC Funding and Other Resources- WWU AAC Graduate Course Guest Lecture, October 30, 2025, Bellingham, WA
- Tales from the Trenches: Hard Won Wisdom and AAC Assessment- WWU AAC Graduate Course Guest Lecture, October 21, 2025, Bellingham, WA
- *Planting the Seeds of AAC: Growing a Communication-Rich School Culture*- Special Education Technology Center (SETC), October 2025 through March 2026
- An Introduction to AAC- Senden Center, December 2025
- AAC Collaboration Corner Monthly Series- SETC, beginning September 2025
- AAC Open Mic Office Hours Monthly Series- SETC, beginning September 2025
- Hands-On Literacy: Designing Inclusive, Meaningful Literacy Instruction- SETC, March 2025, Bellingham, WA
- Virtual Literacy Retreat: Inclusive Literacy Design- SETC, March 2025
- Comprehensive Literacy Instruction: Collaborative Planning for Students with Significant Support Needs- SETC, January 2025
- Charting a Course to Transformative Professional Learning about Comprehensive Literacy for All in the Public Schools- Inclusive Learning Summit, October 2024, Lynnwood, WA
- AAC Collaboration Corner Monthly Series- SETC, September 2024 through May 2025
- SETC Emerging Literacy Retreat: Learn, Collaborate, and Create- SETC, February 2024
- AT Chatter Series, Supports for Early Childhood- SETC, January to March 2024
- [Literacy for ALL: One District’s Start to Emergent Literacy Instruction](#)- SETC, November 2022
- [Building Capacity for AAC Implementation in Large School Districts](#)- SETC, November 2021
- [The Big Core Roll-Out: One District’s Plan to Implement Core Vocabulary](#)- Special Education Technology Center, December 2020

Regional/District-wide

- Delivered 50+ additional district and regional trainings on AAC, UDL, and inclusive practices (available upon request)

Portfolio and project examples available upon request.