

Frequently Asked Questions

Accessibility FAQ

What is accessibility?

Accessibility generally means equal or equivalent access by a person with a disability. Technology is accessible if it can be used as effectively by people with disabilities as by those without. However, this doesn't mean that, for example, a blind user will complete a task on a website as quickly as one who can see. (Listening takes longer than looking at the screen and reading.) But it does mean that if a blind parent visits your school district's website they will get the same information as a person who can see. The same is true of other approaches to making tech accessible.

Does accessibility mean different things for different people?

Yes, it depends on who you are, what you do, what you use and your environment. For a blind user, it might mean having technology work with the screen reader software they use. A user with attention deficit disorder might be looking for a website that doesn't have flashing and blinking objects that they find distracting. To a color-blind user, a website is accessible when color isn't used to convey meaning and the contrast between colors is strong. And a user with mobility impairment sees accessibility as being able to use a website with limited fine motor skills and to navigate without needing a mouse.

Why does it matter to make our school district's digital communications accessible?

In addition to complying with state and federal laws and policies, making your parent communications accessible is important both as a matter of fairness and for reaching your audience. According to the U.S. Census

Bureau, nearly 57 million Americans have some type of disability, with 31 million having a mobility disability and 16 million a sensory disability involving sight or hearing. Ensuring that your website, emails and mobile apps are accessible is critical for successful communications.

Are there standards or laws for accessibility that school districts must comply with?

While there are numerous U.S. federal laws and regulations that protect the rights of disabled individuals (including ADA, IDEA, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act), few address technology in detail. The passage of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 resulted in the Electronic & Information Technology Accessibility Standards which define the minimum level of accessibility for websites developed or used by the federal government. They cover the broad spectrum of electronic and information technology, including web content. The standards are the only set of technology accessibility standards that have their basis in the law, so these became the de facto objective standards for solution providers to build against and for schools to measure against.

Concurrent to this federal procurement standard, the first set of formal guidelines for identifying how to develop web accessible content was published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) in May 1999. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 (WCAG 1.0) define how to make web content more accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities, including visual, auditory, physical, speech, cognitive, language, learning, and neurological disabilities. The successor WCAG 2.0 were published in December 2008 and became an ISO standard, ISO/IEC 40500: 2012 in October 2012.

Canada has adopted the WCAG standards at the federal level and additional provincial guidelines also exist, such as in Ontario.

Together Section 508 and the WCAG guidelines outline the technical and behavioral principles that should be followed to ensure websites and related digital content are accessible.

Are there state regulations that cover accessibility?

Yes, nearly every U.S. state has some accessibility policies and these types of policies are spreading to Canada and other countries. Some states have adopted Section 508 standards as well, particularly related to state (and sometimes local) government institutions. Please check with your school district's legal counsel to learn more about what applies to you locally.

How are individuals with disabilities able to use websites and related online technology?

There are a number of assistive technologies, devices, software, or techniques that assist individuals with disabilities when they visit websites or use related online digital technologies. They include screen readers, refreshable Braille displays, screen magnifiers, onscreen or other special keyboards, and word prediction software. Accessible websites are designed so that visitors can use these assistive technologies with them. In some cases, universal design principles can enable integration of accessibility within the website, minimizing the need for external assistive technologies.

What are the key elements of an accessible website?

There are a number of key elements of an accessible website. For example:

- All information on an accessible website is explicitly labeled, using alternative text for each item, including images and image links. This way, when a parent with a disability visits your site using a screen reader, they will get all of the information you are sharing.
- Visitors should be able to navigate an accessible site with the keyboard and not need to use the mouse. They should also be able to activate objects with the keyboard and move through the site in tab order.

- An accessible site has focus control, providing the user the ability to control keyboard and reading focus within a webpage or application. *Keyboard focus* is the on-screen location where keyboard actions will be interpreted by the application. It is often indicated visually by the cursor or a selection highlight, or programmatic dotted rectangle. *Reading focus* is the on-screen location where a screen reader begins to render content from. Users who are blind, have low vision, or have mobility impairment all rely heavily on proper control of keyboard and reading focus when browsing web based content.

What website elements can “break” accessibility?

There are a number of types of digital content or other website elements that can hurt accessibility. Some examples include PDF or other document files that are formatted so a screen reader can't read the text in logical order, video files that don't have captions, or external website content that is embedded into the website which itself may not be accessible. So it is important to evaluate all new content or content integrations to make sure your website remains as accessible as possible.

Are there any tools available that can help us evaluate the current accessibility of our websites?

While no tool is foolproof or a substitute for human and legal review, there are a number of free tools available that can help guide you through the evaluation process.

- [tota11y](#) is an accessibility visualization toolkit from Khan Academy. It demonstrates what data from your site is revealed to a user that is dependent on a screen reader.
- [aXe: the Accessibility Engine](#) is an open source library that is a small (~100 KB), fast, portable JavaScript library that executes automated accessibility testing inside your testing framework or browser of choice.

There is also a recommended list of tools developed by the [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) as well as [tips for choosing the right tool for your needs](#).