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LEARNING ENABLED

District Leader guide to accessible classrooms
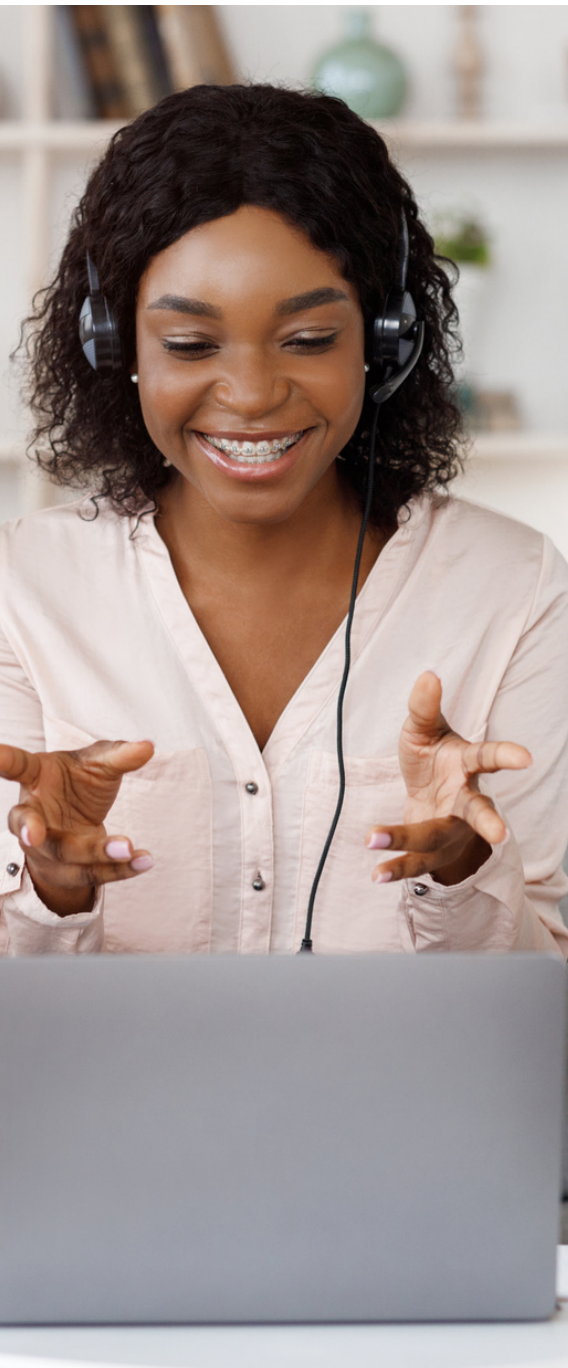
Accessibility matters

7.3 million students have a disability or developmental delay. If classroom materials are not accessible, that means 14% of students are left out of learning. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the use of technology and online resources in the classroom. Inaccessible digital resources are a barrier just like missing computers or lack of internet access. Leaving accessibility needs unmet has the potential to dramatically worsen inequities in education. Unfortunately, not every company creating digital content meets accessibility requirements.

WCAG is the gold standard in accessibility

WCAG, or Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, provide a standardized technical framework to ensure that digital content found in websites and apps is fully accessible to all users. The goal is for everyone to enjoy all aspects of the content without a diminished experience due to disability. WCAG is published by the World Wide Web Consortium Web Accessibility Initiative, and is regularly updated to accommodate changes in assistive technology, website design, and mobile devices.

> "Accessibility allows us to tap into everyone's potential."
>
> **Debra Ruth**
> Disability advocate

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To determine if digital content meets accessibility standards, it's measured against criteria that ensures a barrier-free experience.

This includes common disabilities found in classrooms everywhere, such as:

- Visual
- Auditory
- Cognitive, learning, and neurological
- Physical
- Speech

When schools fail to implement tools that support all learners, students are left out of learning. Both technology and the content must be accessible to meet the instruction needs of every learner.

Ensuring accessibility is an urgent priority

A 2022 poll from NPR/Ipsos shows that most parents believe their children's academic performances are improving, despite the many challenges in K-12 education stemming from the pandemic. Unfortunately, that rosy outlook is not shared by parents of students with a learning disability or delay.

NPR/Ipsos poll findings:

Parents of students that receive special education services or have an IEP are significantly more likely to indicate their child is behind where they should be in math and science, reading and writing, social skills, and mental health."

67% of parents whose students have an IEP said their child received no additional services to compensate for those missed or lost during the pandemic.

While most parents of students who do not have an IEP say their "outlook has improved" regarding their child's education; parents of students with an IEP do not report the same improvement.

NPR/Ipsos, 2022

Laws require WCAG compliance

The same laws that govern other areas of accessibility to ensure a free appropriate public education also apply to information and communications technology (ICT). This means any program or agency that receives funds from the U.S. Department of Education must provide accessible digital resources.

This applies to K-12 schools, higher education, public libraries, and programs provided by these institutions in all 50 states. Both the U.S. Education and Justice Department have called for underline websites to comply with WCAG 2.0 A/AA standards.

"The guidance that WCAG provides allows developers and content creators to include people who have historically been excluded from digital experiences."

Mark Shapiro
President, Bureau of Internet Accessibility.

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Current legal trends in accessibility

Higher standards for technology accessibility continue to be called for nationally, and at the state level. The U.S. Department of Education's National Accessibility Team, an arm of the Office for Civil Rights, has underline announced major investigatory efforts focused on accessibility.

As of 2022, three states have passed legislation requiring all curriculum and internet sites be WCAG 2.1 AA compliant.

- Illinois - HB0026
- Maryland - SB0617
- New Jersey - A4856

This legislation applies to digital content such as:

- Web pages
- Web sites
- Web service platforms used to communicate with parents
- Third party or open educational resource (OEC) products made available to students
- Online learning

Increased resources have been devoted to investigating school districts and other public agencies for accessibility compliance. We can continue to expect higher standards, more serious legal consequences, and a higher volume of compliance investigation.
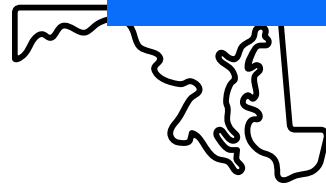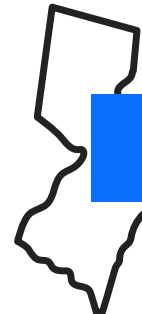
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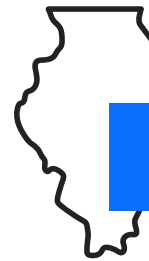
Is your district WCAG compliant?

Three steps for
WCAG 2.1 compliance:

STEP 1

Foster an organizational culture that embraces accessibility

Accessibility requires a holistic approach because it touches on so many areas of instruction, technology, and legal compliance —all of which are continuously changing. Creating a culture in which accessibility is understood and valued as a cornerstone of education will help you succeed.

- Be sure district leaders and teachers understand what it means to be accessibility compliant.

- Create awareness by educating staff, parents, and students so they understand that without accessible classroom technology, a large portion of the school community is left out.

- Identify and support staff members, parents, and student groups who are champions of accessibility.

- View improving accessibility as a journey, setting concrete goals along the way.

- Create a sustainable plan for ensuring you remain in compliance as standards are updated continuously.

STEP 2

Partner with vendors that meet your accessibility goals and compliance needs

Unfortunately, it's up to school district purchasing representatives to ensure that outside vendors are capable of delivering accessible products. When hiring vendors to develop websites, web services, curriculum, or other digital tools, do not assume companies are WCAG compliant. Achieving and maintaining conformance to WCAG standards takes time, investment, and a commitment to accessibility.

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You may want to add <u>language</u> into requests for proposals or purchasing agreements that outlines your <u>expectations</u>. At minimum, be sure to ask:

- What types of accessibility documentation can you provide for your product?

- Do you have accessibility engineers or similar experts on your development staff?

- Does your accessibility audit process include actual users with disabilities using assistive technology in addition to automated software scans?

- May we review your latest accessibility report for this product?

- What is your process for updating your Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) to stay in compliance with <u>WCAG.</u> and <u>Section 508</u> Standards?

One school district's journey to accessibility

School leaders often assume vendors will comply with accessibility requirements. Unfortunately, that's not always true. One such case comes from the Juneau, Alaska School District who had hired a third-party to develop its web content when they could no longer afford to do it in-house. Unfortunately, a U.S. Department of Education investigation found the new web content to be out of compliance. The good news is the district found a new vendor and is educating its employees about accessibility. They have also recruited staff members who use assistive technology to review digital content.

Source: "<u>Advocate Moves Needle on Website Accessibility,</u>" EducationWeek

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STEP 3

Check instructional tools for WCAG compliance

Evaluate your instructional materials using the POUR principles.

The specifications provided by WCAG determine whether websites and apps pass or fail accessibility standards across four domains, known by the acronym POUR.

P ERCEIVABLE

Users must be able to use their senses to interact with the features of the web page and comprehend the content. For instance, users with low vision must be provided with an auditory or touch-based interface. Users with a hearing impairment must have a visual way to access audible content, such as closed captioning.

O PERABLE

All users must be able to operate interactive features such as on-screen buttons, dials, and navigation markers. For instance, users with limited mobility or low vision must be able to use a keyboard or voice commands to interact with the web page.

U NDERSTANDABLE

Plain language and consistent elements allow users to comprehend the content and predict how to navigate the page.

R OBUST

Content must be compatible with multiple web browsers and assistive technologies, such as screen readers, braille displays, screen magnifiers, and switches. To ensure accessibility, content must be coded properly, following WCAG standards.

Take action to ensure you provide instructional materials that can be accessed by all of your learners

Purchasing materials that are WCAG 2.1 AA compliant helps your district get more out of their instructional materials by making them accessible for all students. At Newsela, we are committed to creating a sustainably accessible product and organizational culture. To do this we:

- Provide accessibility training to all employees.
- Incorporate accessibility into every step of software development.
- Solicit feedback from teacher and student users.
- Partner with third-party accessibility services companies to perform regular audits.
- Update our accessibility template as significant changes are made to the guidelines, at a minimum of every six months.

Providing every student access to instructional content that excites, empowers, and unlocks their potential has always been our mission at Newsela.

Our platform is designed and developed using accessibility best practices with the goal of supporting all learners, regardless of their ability or use of assistive technology. Our accessibility experts ensure we're always building to the most recent guidelines.

We also understand that providing differentiated content, diverse perspectives, and content that is available on and offline shapes how we at Newsela deliver instructional materials that are accessible and equitable for all students.

Visit our <u>accessibility page</u> to learn more.

At Newsela we're proud to deliver instructional materials that seek to benefit every student, specifically those with disabilities.

Our conformance to WCAG 2.1 AA standards reflects our efforts to provide content that is accessible to all learners.