



Key points:

- **Understand benefits, legal obligation for making digital resources accessible**
- **Use multidisciplinary team to set clear accessibility goals**
- **Include sample accessibility language in contracts**

CoSN, CTD offer tools to help district leaders to prioritize digital accessibility

Districts increasingly are turning to websites and online parent portals to share information with their school communities. Teachers are finding innovative ways to integrate technology in the classroom. Staff are creating documents and sharing them electronically.

All the digital resources and content that schools either purchase or develop in-house need to be accessible to support the greatest range of users, sources said.

Digital accessibility is no longer a "nice to do" for school districts, said Keith Krueger, CEO of the [Consortium for School Networking](#). "It's a must."

"It can't be just the responsibility of the special education team to retrofit [inaccessible] content later," added Alise Crossland, senior research analyst with the [American Institutes for Research](#).

Using a multidisciplinary accessibility team, districts should develop a plan for addressing accessibility issues at the district website level all the way down to the digital content that teachers create and use in their classrooms, she said.

To facilitate that process, CoSN and the [Center on Technology and Disability](#) recently developed a [Digital Accessibility Toolkit](#) for education leaders.

"Issues of accessibility will continue to be in the forefront for education leaders, chief technology officers, and other educators as they seek to close the digital divide and increase educational equity for all students," the groups wrote in the resource.

Consider these first steps toward improving digital accessibility in your district:

☑ Share legal, educational reasons for why digital accessibility matters. "The special ed team has a role to play in helping administrators and content producers such as teachers understand that just because something is digital doesn't mean it's going to be usable by every student or parent who is trying to access it," said Crossland, one of the toolkit's authors.

For example, a PDF could be inaccessible to a student with a visual impairment if the document doesn't allow him to increase the size or color of the font. Or a website could be inaccessible to a parent with a hearing impairment if it features an online video that isn't captioned.

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Indeed, OCR has found districts with accessibility issues such as these in violation of Section 504. See recent cases reported at [116 LRP 14410](#) , [116 LRP 37048](#) , and [116 LRP 14310](#).

In addition to the legal obligation, there are several practical reasons why districts should make digital materials accessible. According to the toolkit:

- It can save your district time and money by not having to retrofit technology later for a particular student.
- It can improve learning for a wide range of students, including ELs and struggling learners, by providing more instructional supports such as text-to-speech, digital glossaries, and captioned videos.
- It can improve your website's SEO capabilities because search engines are able to search images that have alternative text descriptions and videos that are captioned.

"We wanted to show how these features improve your content, improve your website, and improve the experience for all the users," Crossland said.

☑ Include sample language in contracts. District leaders may not have a direct hand in creating websites or online course content, but they can play a role in improving the accessibility of these products by demanding that vendors follow web accessibility standards, said Jacqueline Hess, CTD Director for FHI 360, which manages CTD as one of its projects.

There are several resources for sample language that districts can adapt for their procurement process, Crossland said. For example, the [PALM Initiative](#) through the National Center on Accessible Educational Materials includes specific language on what contracts should include, she said.

"If you don't have it in contracts, or you're not rewriting contracts or asking these questions of vendors, then you're often stuck later trying to retrofit a program or system that is not accessible," she said.

☑ Create digital accessibility policy. Even if your district is just starting to address digital accessibility, having a policy on your website will let parents and other users know you're working on the issue and taking it seriously, Crossland said. Include contact information with a way for users to request materials in an accessible format and report issues, she added.

"There's nothing more frustrating than not being able to access something and not being able to figure out who you should contact to get that access," she said.

The district's accessibility team should also develop an internal accessibility policy to direct staff, said Tracy Gray, managing director with AIR and another author of the toolkit.

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"That policy includes a vision statement from district leaders where it's very clearly stated that the issue of accessibility is front and center," Gray said.

☑ Train staff on how to use UDL to create "born accessible" materials. At the classroom level, digital accessibility will continue to be a concern as more teachers move toward using open educational resources and creating their own content, Gray said. Universal Design for Learning can provide teachers with "a nice lens for looking at technology and making it accessible" from the beginning, also known as "born accessible," Crossland said.

Special educators can also teach colleagues and students how to use the accessibility features that already come with many consumer technologies, Krueger said.

"Our arsenal of tools on accessibility is much broader and stronger than ever before, if we're aware of what's possible," he said.

[Jennifer Herseim](#) covers Section 504, education technology, and Common Core issues related to special education for LRP Publications.

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