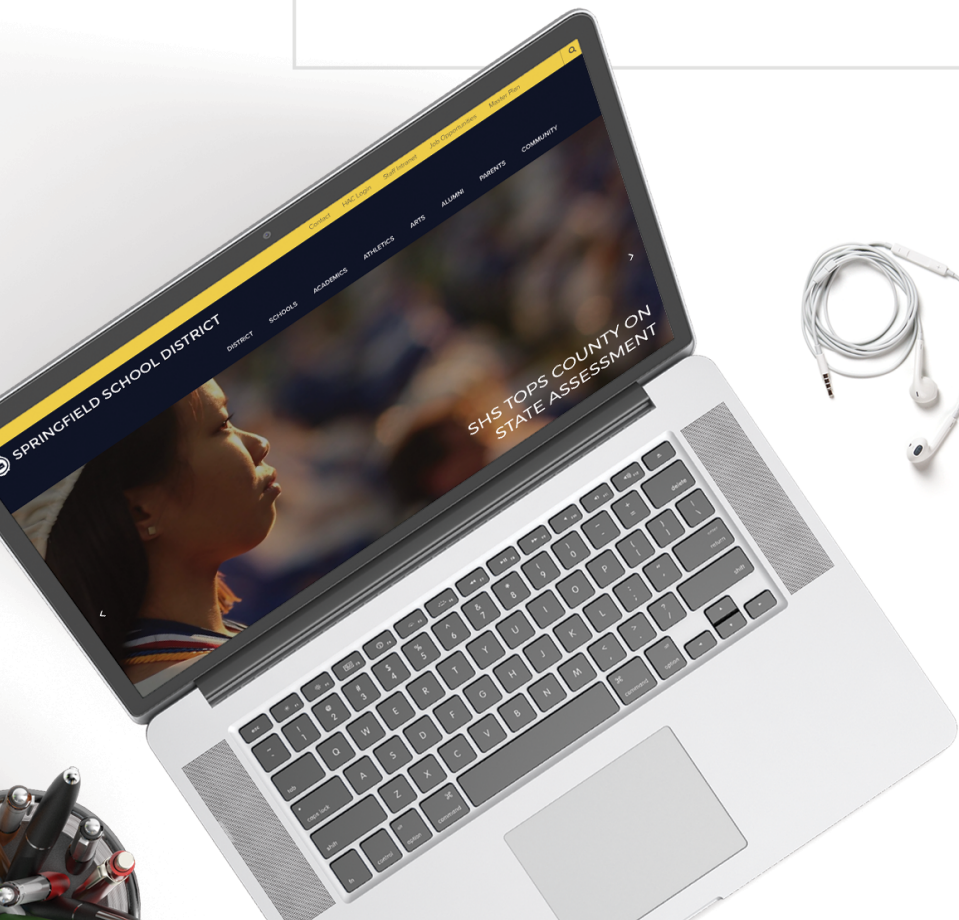


E-BOOK

Website Accessibility: Three Steps Schools Can Take In 2017 To Become Compliant





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernie Rhinerson served San Diego Unified School District as Chief of Staff for five years, and currently works as a School Marketing Consultant.

Author's Note

Website design and accessibility and parent communications were a primary focus of my work as Chief of Staff at the 115,000 student San Diego Unified School District from 2008 to 2013. During that period, California was facing large budget cuts to education, and school districts had to adapt to budget limitations and changing technologies to keep their school communities informed of changes to educational programs. In my role as administrator of the district's communication programs, we completed a total visual and message rebranding of the district and our schools.

Throughout this rebranding effort, we were committed to offer our parents and other stakeholders accessible interactive communications to keep them informed of school issues that impacted our students. We greatly expanded our communications program with new mobile responsive websites, push notifications, e-newsletters, blog and visual news, and a social media news update program.

Since leaving the district in 2013, I have continued to work as a school marketing consultant for education technology companies. I advise companies about the operational challenges faced by school districts as they seek to implement effective communications programs and help EdTech companies improve and market web-based communication tools that will support the communication programs of school districts nationwide.

- Bernie

Introduction

The importance of website accessibility for schools in 2017.

School websites around the world are now more informative, engaging and easier to use than ever before, thanks to the improvement of website platforms over the past decade. New Content

Management Systems

(CMS) website

platforms are now

available that can

easily be updated

with fresh content by

non-technical staff at

school sites. What's

more, mobile-friendly

(responsive) websites are far more

common; school information for parents

and the community on mobile devices

now account for 30-50% of all website

visits.

Public institutions, including k-12 districts and universities, must continue to keep pace with the ever-changing environment of web communications — and modern school websites no longer just offer extensive page links and pdf fact sheets. New website designs available from CMS providers like Finalsite and others allow

delivery of bold photos and multi-media content that communicate the positive stories about educational programs and events happening in schools.

By May 2016, it was reported that 350 educational institutions were being investigated by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR.)

However, with these innovative, exciting website developments, a new set of challenges arise. In 2016, the issue of website and digital content accessibility to

disabled individuals grew in importance for public school districts around the country. By May 2016, it was reported that [350 educational institutions](#) were being investigated by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) for their website's compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Section 504 requires that school districts make all digital content, including websites, accessible to people with disabilities.

At the beginning of 2017, the importance of website accessibility at federally funded public educational institutions reached a mission critical level when the [U.S. Access Board updated accessibility requirements](#) for information and communication technology (ICT) covered by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and Section 255 of the Communications Act. **The Access Board also set a new deadline that requires websites comply with the updated 508 Standards beginning on January 18, 2018 (i.e., one year after publication of the final rule in the Federal Register).**

Why Are Accessible School Websites Important?

Aside from these legal requirements, offering accessible website content for all users is the right thing to do for public schools.

More than 56 million people in the U.S. (about [one in five people in our country](#)) live with a disability of some sort. Hearing, visual, cognitive and motor disabilities impact an individual's ability to use and interact with websites, and the information and digital content they're looking for. With this potential audience making up 20% of a school's community, districts need to increase their commitment to making sure that their websites are accessible to everyone. This way, every student, parent and community stakeholder can access and maximize the learning opportunities and information offered through websites, apps and technology.

For public K-12 school districts and universities, website accessibility has become a focus of disabled community advocates, such as [Marcie Lipsitt](#) in Michigan and others. Public educational institutions around the country have received complaints and lawsuits that are demanding website changes so that the disabled can have full access to web content. With the growing attention on this issue from federal regulators and the increased activism of the disabled community, schools and universities need to look at 2017 as a year to proactively address the challenge of website accessibility.

Rather than waiting for a Department of Education OCR investigation — like the [11 school districts who reached resolution agreements](#) in June 2016 — or go through [a civil lawsuit](#) like Seattle Public Schools, school districts need to immediately upgrade their website properties in order to make them fully compliant with Sections 504/508 of the ADA and accessible to all users.

NON-COMPLIANT WEBSITES CAN BE A BIG COST FOR SCHOOLS

After several years in the court with significant legal costs, Seattle Public Schools lost a civil lawsuit in 2015 about the accessibility of its website. The lawsuit was filed by the parent of blind student who was concerned that the district website was not accessible to her child.

To settle this lawsuit, the district agreed to website upgrades and other changes that could cost the district more than \$800,000 for new staff, training and attorney's fees during a three-year consent decree.

IMPACT OF WEB ACCESSIBILITY ON SCHOOLS

In addition to the threat of lawsuits, school districts will be facing increased scrutiny from the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR). In 2016, OCR stepped up its investigations of non-compliant school websites and in June reached agreements with [eleven school districts](#) that require them to make significant upgrades to their websites for ADA compliance.

These eleven districts will now be required to make costly programmatic and technical changes to their websites to ensure ADA compliance. These agreements require that the districts make their websites accessible through a range of actions that include:

- Selecting an auditor to complete a thorough audit of existing online content and functionality to identify barriers on the existing website for people with disabilities.
- Developing a corrective action plan to prioritize the removal of online barriers.
- Adopting policies and procedures to ensure that all newly added or modified content and functionality will be accessible to people with disabilities.
- Posting a notice to persons with disabilities about how to request access to online information or functionality that is currently inaccessible.
- Providing website accessibility training to all appropriate personnel.

All of these corrective actions will be under ongoing OCR review and approval at key stages in the process.

School districts can expect that the potential for civil lawsuits and OCR investigations will continue in 2017 and beyond. Districts can avoid the costs of lawsuits and external investigations by acting in 2017 to make their websites accessible to all.

HOW DOES AN OCR INVESTIGATION WORK?

When a complaint is filed with OCR, they will first investigate the complaint. Complaints can be made by students, parents, faculty, staff, etc. If, during the investigation, OCR finds that a school district's website has accessibility problems, OCR and the school district typically enter into a voluntary resolution agreement that outlines the specific steps the school district will take to resolve the OCR's concerns.

For instance, OCR recently investigated concerns under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA that individuals with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments, could not access a district's website in Virginia Beach, VA, public schools.

As part of the resolution agreement, the district agreed to undertake an assessment of its entire website to identify and correct accessibility concerns, develop and implement a website accessibility policy, and provide training on website accessibility to appropriate employees.

Taking On The Challenge of Website Accessibility

For many public educational institutions, the task of just maintaining a website is a huge commitment in staffing, time and budget dollars — especially for districts who have numerous websites for individual schools. The public and parents all expect to be able to find information about their schools on a website that is easy to use and up-to-date.

Large public school districts in urban areas like San Diego, Chicago, Atlanta or Boston have district websites with tens of thousands of pages of information. Even smaller to mid-size school districts like [Minnetonka Public Schools](#) in Minnesota or [Ellington Public Schools](#) in Connecticut as examples, will have websites with hundreds, if not thousands, of pages to manage. Websites of this size and complexity require a substantial initial dollar investment to design and implement and significant annual budget investments for maintenance

Staffing investments for websites vary, but typically public school districts need a full-time webmaster and other web support staff in communications and IT departments to keep their sites updated and functioning well. The added challenge of meeting the technical requirements of website accessibility is certainly a huge task for public schools and will divert staff from other tasks, but it is now a challenge that all schools must address.

To meet the website accessibility challenge, the legal requirements and the looming 2018 deadline, here are three steps that all federally funded educational institutions should consider taking in 2017.

OVERVIEW: THE THREE STEPS TO WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY

Step #1:

Understand Website Accessibility Requirements

Step #2:

Conduct a Website Checkup

Step #3:

Update and Maintain Your Website With Ongoing Monitoring

Step #1: Understand Website Accessibility Requirements

The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) Sections 508 and 504 requires that people with disabilities not be discriminated against. Specifically, these sections require that communications with people with disabilities be as effective as communications to those without disabilities. This means that to be compliant, school districts must make reasonable modifications to technology tools and websites to ensure equal opportunities and access to content, software, and equipment for people with disabilities.

The OCR is increasingly examining K-12 public schools for their web accessibility and compliance with disability law. These schools need to comply with:

- Section 504, a disability antidiscrimination law that applies to any organization that accepts federal funding, which most public schools districts do.
- Level AA WCAG 2.0 standards

The first step toward website accessibility is to be aware of these legal requirements and then to understand the technical steps necessary to maintain website accessibility.

Start your website accessibility transformation with and understanding of [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) or WCAG 2.0. WCAG 2.0 was developed to give website developers and managers the technical guidelines needed to ensure that web content is fully accessible. School districts also need to be aware that these guidelines will continue to evolve and change; we are likely to see WCAG 2.1 and even WCAG 3.0 updates in the coming year.

WCAG 2.0 OVERVIEW

Within WCAG 2.0 there are twelve guidelines that include testing criteria that districts can use to determine the level of compliance of their website(s). These guidelines are used to determine at what level of success a website meets WCAG 2.0 standards:

- **Level A** (minimum) – the most basic web accessibility features
- **Level AA** (mid-range) – deals with the biggest and most common barriers for disabled users
- **Level AAA** (highest) – the highest level of web accessibility

According to the guidance provided on the [GSA Section 508.gov](#) website, “Level A sets a minimum level of accessibility and does not generally achieve broad accessibility for many situations. Level AA is proposed as the new standard for the refresh of the Access Board Standard for Section 508.” Level AAA conformance is full compliance with all WCAG requirements, but is not required as a general policy because it is not possible to satisfy all Level AAA success criteria for some content.

FIND A CHAMPION

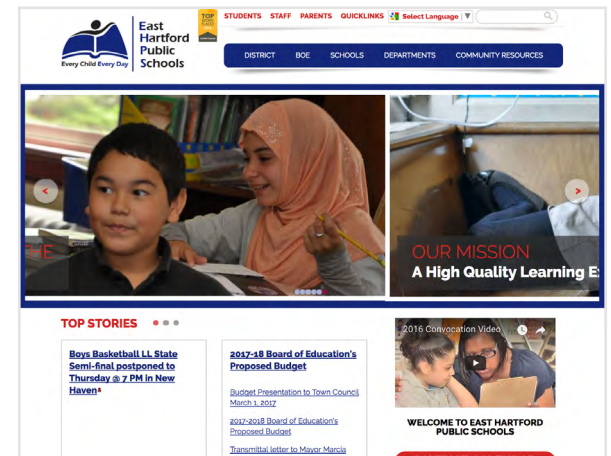
The transformation of your school website to meet accessibility standards won't happen overnight and will require sustained effort and team work over a significant period. To reach your website accessibility goals, it will be important to identify a champion for your team who will lead and coordinate your efforts. Your team leader can be from your IT Department, your Communications Department or elsewhere, but it needs to be a leader who understands the importance of this effort and can prioritize the work and changes that are necessary. The leader of your Web Accessibility team also needs to be empowered by top District leadership (Superintendent) to make the project and the on-going commitment successful.

FIND THE RIGHT PARTNER

To tackle a website accessibility transformation, school districts should also reevaluate their website provider's capabilities from the accessibility perspective, as well as their product direction and future strategy. Many CMS providers offer a great set of features and designs of districts but may not support accessibility transformations or offer the tools that can help streamline accessibility changes and support your efforts to keep up with the changing legal requirements in this area.

INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY

Most school districts have relationships with representatives from the disabled community through special education programs. These parent leaders and other community advocacy groups can help evaluate and test your website for accessibility. Involving parent and community leaders in your website accessibility transformation will not only improve the final product but will also demonstrate your school's commitment to making educational and informational resources accessible to all.



SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: EAST HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

When EHPS was cited by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) for website accessibility, they teamed up with Finalsite for a complete website audit and content overhaul to ensure their site was compliant. The site now meets the required WCAG 2.0 AA standards.

“At East Hartford Public Schools, we are being proactive to update our district website to meet accessibility requirements. Finalsite has been a supportive partner helping us to identify accessibility problems and work on corrections. Our next steps will be to focus on training site editors and considering a site monitoring tool to help us keep our website accessible for all users.”

CHERYL LOOKE
INFORMATION TECHNICIAN | EHPS

Step #2: Website Checkup

With your team in place and a basic understanding of website accessibility guidelines it's time to give your website(s) a complete check-up. Start your website review using [the WCAG 2.0 Accessibility Principles](#) as your guide for reviewing your web content. For each web page ask the following questions based on the WCAG 2.0 principles:

1. **Are there text alternatives for non-text content?** Do we have descriptive [Alt Text](#) for photos?
2. **Are there captions and other alternatives for multimedia?** Do we provide captions and/or transcripts for videos?
3. **Is content easy to see and hear?** Are the contrast and colors of your site and any audio players sensitive to needs of users with disabilities?
4. **Is functionality available from a keyboard?** Can users access all content from a keyboard?
5. **Do users have enough time to read and use the content?** Some users with disabilities may need more time to complete forms or understand content.
6. **Is any content flashing that may cause seizures?** Flashing text or other content can be a trigger to a seizure for some users.
7. **Can users easily navigate, find content, and determine where they are?** Users with disabilities may face added challenges when trying to understand complex navigation to get them to content they are seeking.
8. **Is all text readable and understandable?** Users with visual or cognitive disabilities may have difficulty with non-standard fonts or overly complex sentence structures.
9. **Does our content appear and operate in predictable ways?** Users with disabilities need an understandable navigation path to avoid getting lost on your site.
10. **Are users helped to avoid and correct mistakes** on forms and other inputs?
11. **Is our content compatible with current and future user tools?** Is your site compatible with a variety of common and current web browsers?

PRIORITIZE YOUR WEBSITE CHECK-UP

With hundreds — and in some cases, thousands — of pages to review and audit for WCAG 2.0 compliance, it will be important to develop a prioritized plan and schedule for your website review. Start with your most visited pages on your site and working back from there.

Your accessibility review should focus on identifying any accessibility requirement problems in these areas:

- **Basic organization**
- **Titles and menus**
- **Images and videos**
- **Text size and contrast**
- **Forms**

USE A WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY EVALUATION TOOL

Fortunately, there are many automated website scanning tools that have been developed to identify accessibility issues using the WCAG 2.0 standards. A Google search will lead you to several [free tools](#) that can scan your website for accessibility issues. **But beware, each tool has limitations and automation does not replace the need for a human to evaluate the usability of your website and to prioritize the many problems each of these tools will inevitably identify.**

To ensure that your new website is ADA compliant from the start, be sure to seek out a CMS provider that can deliver an ADA compliant site with a content management platform that will help editors keep your site compliant. For complex websites with legal liability for accessibility under ADA requirements, districts should invest in a CMS provider that not only delivers fully compliant websites but also offers training and support to keep your site accessible over time.

Finalsite has recognized the need to offer its clients website accessibility evaluation tools that do more than just identify errors. Working with Finalsite, school districts will have access to an exclusive partnership with AudioEye, the industry-leading accessibility software for schools. This exclusive partnership means schools don't have to sacrifice a beautiful website in order to have an accessible website. Finalsite selected AudioEye as its preferred partner for their advanced suite of tools that simplify and guarantee web accessibility, including:

The Ally Toolbar: This toolbar is added to every website to allow website visitors to customize their website experience based on their needs.

Accessibility Certification: When you partner with Finalsite and AudioEye, you'll earn an accessibility certification to display on your website once your website has reached full accessibility.

Scan and Fix Software: Unlike other accessibility partners that have scan and report software (and you still have to do the manual updates), AudioEye's scan and fix software automatically identifies and fixes any accessibility issue on your website.

FINALSITE ACCESSIBILITY PARTNER: AUDIOEYE

Finalsite has a strong partnership with AudioEye, the industry leader in website accessibility.

"AudioEye's technology-first approach to digital accessibility has proven effective from the very start and should serve as a trusted model for all school districts seeking to conform with ADA-related laws and striving to ensure the highest level of access and usability for the students, teachers, faculty, and communities they serve. When it comes to identifying issues of accessibility, the test results are reliable and accurate; when it comes to fixing issues of accessibility, the AudioEye remediation technology is cost-effective and the impact is immediate. The knowledgeable AudioEye team has also been instrumental in assisting Seattle Public Schools in navigating the complex digital accessibility landscape, assisting the district in conforming with WCAG 2.0 AA, and, for the years to come, establishing a sustainable accessibility strategy that will ensure enhanced usability and equal access to the information and services made available from the district's highly diverse and robust digital ecosystem."

MICHAEL MILLER

**ACCESSIBILITY COORDINATOR SEATTLE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Step #3: Update and Maintain Your Website With Ongoing Monitoring

After accessibility errors on your website are identified through a detailed site scan, the real work begins. Be prepared: initial accessibility scans will yield a long list of errors and problems. By working with a CMS provider like Finalsite, you can work to prioritize the revisions and updates that will take your district and school websites to higher levels of compliance.

Finalsite has chosen web governance partners who can simplify the accessibility transformation so that even your non-technical team members, such as school site editors, will understand where the accessibility errors are with a simplified error correction process, ensuring that all users can fix issues with confidence.

A complete accessibility overhaul of a large district website and its individual school websites may take weeks or months to complete. With a plan that uses a compliance scanning tool, and by prioritizing and sharing compliance repairs with your team, an accessible website is within reach with minimal disruption to the everyday work of keeping the information on your site fresh and interesting.

Be aware that a periodic scan for website compliance issues is not enough to ensure your district is safe from an OCR investigation or possible litigation from accessibility advocate groups.

Over time, your website should be automatically scanned on a frequent basis to provide timely updates on the fixes necessary to keep your site compliant and accessible to all. These automated scanning features, offered by Finalsite web governance partners, will continue to identify issues that come up as site editors at district departments and schools continue to add and edit content across your website.

BUILDING AN ADA COMPLIANT WEBSITE ON THE FINALSITE PLATFORM

During the deployment process, you'll meet with your Project Manager and Designer to build a great website while adhering to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 standards.

We'll take the time to walk you through which design elements help and hurt accessibility, and advise your team on best practices for adhering to ADA compliance guidelines including photo ALT text and setting up granular permissions to ensure non-compliant content isn't published.

It's important to note that although our team and platform work to adhere to WCAG 2.0 standards, some aspects of full ADA compliance depend on content updates performed by site admins and site users.

Therefore, it is important that your district put a thorough editing and approval process in place for content being published to your public website.

Conclusion

Public school websites are the primary communication tool to share the many positive stories that are happening in schools and universities across the country. Parents, students and the public rely on school websites for easy access to information about school events and accomplishments. And, school websites are a critical marketing tool for schools to attract new students who will generate revenue for the continuation of important educational programs that benefit all students.

Public educational institutions are now on notice that compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act can't be delayed; school websites now must be accessible by January 2018. Transforming large complex school websites to full accessibility is certainly a challenging task, but it is now a necessary endeavor for every public school district.

In 2017, school districts can take on this challenge by learning the requirements, doing a website check-up, fixing the errors and setting up on-going monitoring. Partnering with an experienced website CMS provider who offers a choice of best in class website compliance partners, can help public schools simplify and expedite the path to fully compliant and accessible school websites.

RELATED ARTICLES

[Ten Tips For Improving Your District's Website](#)

[Five Tips for a Successful Public School Website Redesign](#)

[How To Make A Web Accessibility Strategy](#)

[No More Excuses](#)

FIVE STEP MONITORING PLAN

1. **Purchase a CMS with granular permissions:** Granular permissions will allow you to choose which individuals have editing or publishing rights, and to which pages, making it easy to see who is making edits to pages.
2. **Choose an easy-to-use CMS:** When following WCAG 2.0 standards is made easy by your CMS — like Finalsite's — webmasters are more likely to adhere to set standards.
3. **Conduct a training:** Pull all your webmasters together for a 60-minute training on WCAG 2.0, ADA and your CMS. Provide webmasters with a handout or cheatsheet of what they need to do for each new piece of website content.
4. **Put an editing and approval process in place:** Come up with a new process that doesn't bog down your workload, but also allows you to have the opportunity to review content before it is live on the public site.
5. **Purchase a tool:** Having a tool to scan your website will ensure all the safeguards you put in place are working effectively and that your website is compliant.



About Finalsite

We're a group of nearly 200, a team of talented marketing experts, award-winning web designers, meticulous project managers, attentive support staff, code-savvy front-end developers, and "school people" with years of experience serving the best schools in the world. We view the size of our company as large enough to handle your school's needs in an instant, but small enough to remember your first name.

Since 1998, Finalsite has grown to be the leader in the K-12 independent and international school space, serving more than 2,000 schools and educational institutions. Our web software, award-winning design, time-saving integrations and expert consulting services provide schools with a complete platform for telling their story online.

Learn more at www.finalsite.com



MELISSA KLOTER | DESIGNER

Melissa is a graphic designer and writer who loves the challenge of pixel-perfect visual communication. As Product Marketing Specialist at Finalsite, Melissa uses her design and writing skills to create a variety of marketing materials on Finalsite's products and services, as well as writing and designing content for blogs, e-books, and whitepapers.



MIA MAJOR | CONTRIBUTOR

As Finalsite's Content Marketing Manager, Mia plans and executes a variety of inbound marketing and digital content strategies. Mia specializes in helping schools find new ways to share their stories online through web design, social media, copywriting, photography and videography. She is the author of numerous blogs, and Finalsite's popular eBook, The Website Redesign Playbook.