Overview

About five years ago, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) began investigating a collection of web and media accessibility complaints filed against hundreds of universities and large school districts—ours among them.

Our communications department used this opportunity to do more than just install quick fixes and resolve this filing. We now had a business case for incorporating accessibility from the start in our web projects, helping the district meet its legal and moral obligations in the present and future. Our multi-year project included many phases and sub-projects, culminating in the redesign of the district’s public website in 2021.
**Process**

**RESEARCH**

Our initial research phase included the following steps:

- Interviewing lawyers from OCR to clarify our legal obligations.
- Studying Section 504 and its Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG) requirements.
- Identifying testing tools and guidelines, and then accurately gauging our web properties’ accessibility.
- Investigating other districts’ remediation efforts and accessibility policies.
- Leveraging our Student Services department to survey parents’ and students’ unmet accessibility needs.

By the end of the research phase, we established the following accessibility goals for our department:

- Develop a method to expedite manual testing of current and future web properties. This method must include all Level AA success criteria from WCAG 2.0, the standard for Section 504 compliance.
- Retrofit our district website and caption our existing YouTube/Vimeo videos to meet or exceed all WCAG 2.0 AA standards, and then demonstrate this compliance to OCR.
- Produce a new district website that exceeds our current WCAG 2.0 obligations—extending to include the updated WCAG 2.1 standards, which will eventually be adopted as Section 504 requirements.

**PLANNING**

We developed a multi-year plan to guide us from meeting our base legal obligations to a long-term goal of surpassing those requirements and futureproofing our online properties:

- Develop and document a simplified, thorough testing methodology for current and future web properties.
- Update current websites to resolve the complaint against our district—making additional improvements beyond the minimum requirements when able.
- Caption all existing and future video recordings posted online.
- Create a new district site template that exceeds our current legal needs, meets our moral obligations to the community, and futureproofs our web properties for anticipated changes in Section 504 requirements for years to come.
- Train content managers to continue posting accessible content to district sites.

Our strategy was to make accessibility the primary focus of all web production, going forward. The district’s public websites were already created and maintained in-house by our lead web designer/developer (Greg Gibson), which gave us more control over timelines, tasks, and outcomes than we’d have working with a vendor. It also meant additional budgeting would not be necessary for our websites.

However, we didn’t yet have an in-house video specialist. So, the department received approval to hire a media producer to create new videos, add captions to all existing and future recordings, and assist with other graphic design tasks (e.g., ensuring proper color contrast in assets).

Our executive directors of communications (Janet Buglio, previously, and Lisa Barry, currently) managed the project: scheduling sub-projects, coordinating inter-departmental assistance, and ensuring that team members received ample time and resources to prioritize accessibility.
Outside of the department, we arranged assistance from our Student Services department, who would provide feedback on our sites. And we assembled a communications committee, comprising the executive director, principals from all levels, and school board members.

Our target audience was broad, because so many people use our sites: parents, students, staff, board members, and the community. Until our complaint was resolved, we also had to keep OCR in mind.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Over the next several years, we completed all our planned tasks, plus a few additional sub-projects:

- Developed our own web conformance guidelines to streamline the testing process (The Indian Prairie Web Accessibility Checklist) and have shared this document with other districts. We open-sourced the project, so organizations are welcome to adapt and improve the checklist.
- Retrofitted our current websites and videos with the changes specified by OCR and had them verify that our properties aligned with their requirements, resolving the complaint against us.
- Hired a media specialist (Clayton Urbanick) to manage video, audio, and graphical assets.
- Produced a barebones, image-free “lite” version of our district site, targeting users with cognitive and visual deficiencies. The site was also extremely quick to load for users with low data speeds.
- Created a dedicated webpage (linked from every other page on our site) explaining our accessibility responsibilities and offering visitors alternate ways to consume/receive digital content.
- Trained content managers in taking steps to ensure accessibility, like adding alternate text to images for users with visual disabilities.

**EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS**

Upon finishing each phase of the project, we evaluated its success in meeting our stated goals:

- The Indian Prairie Web Accessibility checklist met our goal of developing a methodology for testing our sites quickly and thoroughly. OCR’s lawyers confirmed that the checklist was successful in helping us resolve the initial complaint filed against our district.
- Our website retrofits allowed our sites to pass 100% of automated and manual WCAG 2.0 tests performed by us and OCR.
- Our new media producer captioned our videos to the satisfaction of OCR.
- The redesigned district site passes 100% of automated and manual tests for WCAG 2.1, meaning our site is not only conformant in the present, but meets the future benchmarks for Section 504. Before launch, it received the approval of our communications committee and a group of accessibility focus testers.

Accessibility is an ongoing process, as we’re always creating new web properties, maintaining the sites, and adding content. New content managers and media creators need training and support in posting accessible content. We’re documenting our development processes for the benefit of our successors—or our forgetful future selves! And we’re keeping abreast of new guidelines, with WCAG 2.2 already well on the path to finalization and WCAG 3.0 not far behind.

We’ve found that incorporating accessibility from the get-go in digital projects has made them better for all users. So, we’ll continue to make accessibility our top priority when creating digital properties.
Resources

IPSD 204 WEBSITES AND MEDIA

- District Website: [https://www.ipsd.org](https://www.ipsd.org)
- District Accessibility Statement: [https://www.ipsd.org/Subpage.aspx/Accessibility](https://www.ipsd.org/Subpage.aspx/Accessibility)
- IPSD 204 on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/IndianPrairie204](https://www.youtube.com/IndianPrairie204)
- IPSD 204 Lite Site: [https://lite.ipsd.org/](https://lite.ipsd.org/)

AUTOMATED ACCESSIBILITY TEST RESULTS (MARCH 2022)

To demonstrate how our district website fares in terms of accessibility, we ran some automated tests on our district homepage and the homepages of some of our comparable districts.

We used Google Lighthouse and WebAIM’s WAVE tool (which OCR used when initially testing our web accessibility). Sites must score perfectly to pass accessibility testing. In other words, an accessibility score below 100 in Lighthouse or the presence of any errors in WAVE means the site has failed.

**Indian Prairie School District 204**

*Google Lighthouse:*

![Google Lighthouse scores](image)

- Performance: 97
- Accessibility: 100
- Best Practices: 100
- SEO: 100

*WebAIM WAVE:*

![WebAIM WAVE summary](image)

- Errors: 0
- Contrast Errors: 0
Comparable District 1

<table>
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<th>Performance</th>
<th>Accessibility</th>
<th>Best Practices</th>
<th>SEO</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>80</td>
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Summary

Errors: 0
Contrast Errors: 16

Comparable District 2

<table>
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<th>Performance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

Errors: 3
Contrast Errors: 0
Comparative District 3

- Performance: 84
- Accessibility: 92
- Best Practices: 75
- SEO: 91

Summary:
- Errors: 0
- Contrast Errors: 35

Comparative District 4

- Performance: 75
- Accessibility: 88
- Best Practices: 83
- SEO: 75

Summary:
- Errors: 12
- Contrast Errors: 6