ABBOTSFORD
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Three-Year Accessibility Plan

2023

Acknowledgement

Éy swáyel. We acknowledge that the Abbotsford School District is located on the traditional and unceded territory of the Semá:th First Nation and Máthxwi First Nation. With this, we respect the longstanding relationships that Indigenous Nations have to this land, as they are the original caretakers.

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About Our School District Community

Located in the heart of the Fraser Valley, the Abbotsford School District has [46 schools](#) that are attended by over 20,000 full and part-time students. As the largest employer in the city, we have over 2,500 full and part-time staff who are committed to helping students succeed.

We offer a variety of quality programs to meet unique learning needs that engage students in stimulating and relevant educational experiences. We support our students with disabilities through school-based inclusive education programs.

Our leadership team and staff are committed to providing a positive educational experience that fosters each child's learning in an accessible and inclusive environment.

The Abbotsford School District is governed by an elected seven-person Board of Education. Board members serve as School Trustees and are responsible for establishing policies and setting the strategic vision for the organization.

Message from the Superintendent

Abbotsford School District is committed to providing a learning and working environment that supports all students and staff and ensures our wonderfully diverse community can engage with us meaningfully and without barriers. A key part of this work is the development of a Three-Year Accessibility Plan. This plan identifies system needs, priorities, and action plans. It draws on feedback from our school community and the work of the Accessibility Committee to enhance equity of access to programming and facilities.

Our Accessibility Committee is a diverse and multi-disciplinary team that meets regularly to review priorities and to develop and monitor action items referenced in the Three-Year Accessibility Plan. The plan is based on the pillars of the Accessibility Act, with the aim of supporting equal opportunity for persons with disabilities by identifying, removing, and preventing barriers to access.

We recognize the importance of accessibility not only for those with disabilities but also for the benefit of the entire community. We are dedicated to advancing the efforts of the Accessibility Committee to improve equity and ease of access to services and access to our facilities. Through the actions in this Three-Year Accessibility Plan, we commit to continuous improvements in developing an environment that supports all students, staff, and the larger school community.

Sincerely,

Sean Nosek

Superintendent of Schools/CEO

Definitions

- **Accessibility**: The state of having programs, services, and environments that allow all individuals to participate fully in society without encountering barriers.
- **Accessibility Committee**: An official group formed by one or more organizations in collaboration with people with disabilities to create an accessibility plan and feedback mechanism.
- **Accessibility Plan**: A plan developed by an accessibility committee that identifies challenges and solutions for addressing accessibility barriers.
- **Barrier**: Anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects. This includes physical/architectural environment, attitudinal, information, communications, policy or practice, and technological barriers. Types of barriers:

  a. **Physical/Environmental Barrier:** A barrier resulting from architectural design, outdoor spaces, which can include certain smells or sounds, internal lighting, the configuration of class and meeting rooms, and the size and width of doorways.

  b. **Attitudinal Barrier:** A barrier that arises from the attitudes of staff, students, and the school community, including discriminatory behaviours and a lack of disability awareness.

  c. **Communication Barrier:** A barrier that arises when communicating or delivering information in person, by telephone or online, interacting with teachers, peers, receptionists, or other staff, and receiving training.

  d. **Information Barrier:** A barrier that arises from inaccessible signage, fonts, brochures, forms, manuals, websites, fax transmissions, equipment labels, computer screens, etc.

  e. **Policy or Practice Barrier:** Rules, regulations, and protocols that prevent a person from performing the essential requirements of their job, classwork, or participating in society. Policy, practice, and procedures that prevent a student from accessing the curriculum and fully participating in the school community.

  f. **Technological Barrier:** Barriers that result from the use of inaccessible devices, platforms, software programs, photocopiers, fax machines, telephones, and switches, including the lack of assistive technologies.

- **Disability**: The state of being unable to participate fully and equally in society as a result of the interaction between a person with a disability and a barrier. See Appendix A for additional information.

Framework Guiding Our Work

The Abbotsford School District accessibility plan builds on global, national, provincial, and school/district-specific actions to promote and support accessibility.

Global Context - United Nations

In 2006, the United Nations led efforts to adopt the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In 2010, Canada ratified the CRPD and described it as follows:

"The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an international human rights treaty aimed at protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. Parties to the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are required to promote and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights of persons with disabilities including full equality under the law."

Canadian Context in Legislation

In 1985, disability was included in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in 1986, Persons with Disabilities were included in the new federal Employment Equity Act. The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) came into force in 2019, with the overarching goal of realizing a barrier-free Canada by 2040. This Act applies to federally regulated entities. The ACA has seven focus areas, and was developed based on the following guiding principles:

1. All persons must be treated with dignity regardless of their disabilities.
2. All persons must have the same opportunity to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have regardless of their disabilities.
3. All persons must have barrier-free access to full and equal participation in society, regardless of their disabilities.
4. All persons must have meaningful options and be free to make their own choices, with support if they desire, regardless of their disabilities.
5. Laws, policies, programs, services, and structures must take into account the disabilities of persons, the different ways that persons interact with their environments, and the multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination faced by persons.

6. People with disabilities must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services, and structures.
7. The development and revision of accessibility standards and the making of regulations must be done with the objective of achieving the highest level of accessibility for people with disabilities.

BC Context and Legislation - Accessible BC Act

The Accessible British Columbia Regulation, under the Accessible British Columbia Act, came into force on September 1st, 2022. These regulations identify schools as prescribed organizations and require school districts and independent schools to have an accessibility committee, an accessibility plan, and a tool to receive feedback on accessibility by September 1st, 2023. The goal of the Act is to improve opportunities for people with disabilities and involve them in identifying, removing, and preventing barriers to their full participation in the life of the province.

Principles in the Accessible BC Act

The Accessible BC Act includes a list of principles that must be considered as organizations develop an accessibility plan. The definitions are adapted from the foundational document [BC Framework for Accessibility Legislation](#).

- **Adaptability**: Accessibility plans should reflect that disability and accessibility are evolving concepts that change as services, technology, and attitudes change.
- **Collaboration**: Promoting accessible communities is a shared responsibility and everyone has a role to play. Accessibility plans should create opportunities for organizations and communities to work together to promote access and inclusion.
- **Diversity**: Every person is unique. People with disabilities are individuals with varied backgrounds. Individual characteristics including race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and lived experience greatly inform the experiences of individuals. Accessibility plans should acknowledge the principles of intersectionality and diversity within the disability community.
- **Inclusion**: All British Columbians, including persons with disabilities, should be able to participate fully and equally in their communities.
- **Self-determination**: Accessibility plans should seek to empower people with disabilities to make their own choices and pursue the lives they wish to live.

- **Universal Design**: The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design defines universal design as "the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability." An accessibility plan should be designed to meet the needs of all people who interact with the organization.

Our Commitment to Accessibility

At the Abbotsford School District, we are committed to providing an environment that is accessible for all members of our diverse community, including people with disabilities We recognize the importance of conscious planning, design, and effort in ensuring that barriers are removed and not replaced.

Our school district is committed to working collaboratively with the community to provide equitable treatment to people with disabilities in a way that respects their dignity. To achieve this goal, we have outlined the following commitments:

- Engage with staff, community members, and people with disabilities in the development and review of our accessibility plan.
- Increase opportunities for staff to learn about disabilities and how to remove and prevent barriers.
- Continually improve accessibility for people with disabilities in our school community.

Our Approach

Our approach is grounded in the core provincial principles of accessibility, including adaptability, collaboration, diversity, inclusion, self-determination, and universal design.

In April 2023, we began the process of establishing an Accessibility Advisory Committee and identifying barriers to accessibility in our school district community. This process involved:

- Consultation with occupational therapists and physiotherapists regarding student-specific needs.
- Calling for applications for members of the accessibility committee.
- Preliminary assessments of the current physical and environmental accessibility of some of our schools.
- Holding key discussions to identify barriers to accessibility.
- Developing the district-wide feedback tool.
- Prioritization of actions to be taken.
- Establishing a monitoring and evaluation process.

Our approach is designed to recognize the gaps and opportunities to improve accessibility in our community. By engaging in thoughtful planning, meaningful engagement, training, and direct action, we aim to deliver lasting accessibility improvements.

About Our Committee

Purpose of the Accessibility Advisory Committee

The purpose of the accessibility committee is to work collaboratively to assess and improve community accessibility, focusing on the experiences of individuals with disabilities while encompassing the whole organization. The accessibility committee also advises the District Administrator/Board on strategies to reduce social, physical, sensory, and other barriers that prevent people from fully participating in all aspects of school community life.

Recruitment of the Accessibility Advisory Committee members

Under the Accessible BC Act, the selection of accessibility committee members must, to the extent possible, align with the following goals:

- At least half the members are persons with disabilities or individuals who support or are from organizations that support persons with disabilities;
- At least one member is an indigenous person; and
- Members reflect the diversity of persons in BC.

The Accessibility Advisory Committee was officially formed in June 2023. The Committee was publicly registered with the BC Accessibility Hub in July 2023. Current members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee are listed below.

Accessibility Advisory Committee Membership

We would like to thank the following committee members for their time and commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

Michelle Gehring, *District Principal of Learning Support Services*

Erica Tjart, *Teacher, Abbotsford Teachers Union*

Julie Fanucchi, *Support Staff, Teamsters*

Tanya Tighe, *Sr. Manager, Occupational Health & Safety*

Mike VanEgmond, *Social Worker, Children & Youth with Support Needs*

Stephanie Ridd, *Physiotherapist, Fraser Valley Child Development Centre*

Theresa Whyte, *Orientation & Mobility Specialist*

Desiree Gauld, *Parent*

Megan Steenhuisen, *Parent*

Catherine Parekh, *Parent*

Consultation Conducted

A draft Accessibility Plan was posted on the School District Engage portal to seek public feedback on the plan prior to its completion. Additional consultation was conducted with key individuals from within the school district and its partners. The committee is planning additional surveys and interviews to be conducted in Fall 2023 that will further assist with the identification of barriers.

Barrier Identification Methodologies

The Accessibility Advisory Committee implemented the following methods to identify barriers:

- A District Accessibility feedback tool was developed and posted to the District Engage Website. Information about the tool was shared with district and school stakeholders. (ie. students, staff, outside professionals, and parents/guardians).
- The Accessibility Advisory Committee collaborated to suggest priority areas to target in the accessibility plan.
- A draft Accessibility Plan was shared with Senior Management who gave the final approval of priority areas for the plan.
- A review of current policies and practices that promote accessibility and inclusion was conducted by key staff members.
- The Accessibility Advisory Committee will review the input and feedback from the feedback tool as well as future surveys and assessments.

  Establishing additional processes for the identification of barriers will be part of the Committee's work moving forward. These may include student, parent, and staff surveys and an accessibility site audit.

Feedback

Feedback Mechanism Development

The Abbotsford School District has developed an online feedback tool that includes a series of questions about accessibility that students, staff, and members of the school district community can complete to report an accessibility concern. The feedback tool is posted to the Engage Portal on the main page of the district website and an information announcement about the tool has been provided to students, staff, and parents/guardians. Feedback can be anonymous, or people can add their names and contact information if they wish to be contacted. The following is the content of the reporting link to identify current or future accessibility issues.

Report an Accessibility Barrier

At the Abbotsford School District, we want to learn about specific barriers that people face when they're trying to:

- Access a school program, building, or school information.
- Receive a service or support.

Your responses to the questions below will be reviewed by the Abbotsford School District Accessibility Advisory Committee for their consideration. This information can be submitted anonymously, or you can provide your contact details at the bottom of this form if you wish to be contacted.

1. Please provide the date the barrier was experienced.
2. Please indicate the specific location the barrier was experienced.
3. What were you or someone you know trying to access?
4. Accessibility barrier details. [Be as specific as possible].
5. Do you have any recommendations for what would make it better?
6. Please provide your name, e-mail, or phone number if you would like to be contacted. (Optional)

Thank you for providing your valuable feedback! You will be contacted shortly if you have provided your contact details.

Accessibility Accomplishments and Barriers

Key Discussion Themes - Accessibility Accomplishments

The guiding principles of the Accessible BC Act inform the Abbotsford School District's programs, policies, practices, and services to reduce and minimize barriers to accessibility for people with disabilities. We strive to create an environment that is accessible and to ensure continuous improvement in accessibility. There are several initiatives at the Abbotsford School District to identify, remove, and prevent various for people with disabilities. The following is a synopsis of some of the major achievements noted in the Feedback:

A. Information and communication

1. Our schools' libraries maintain a suite of documents accessible to school staff outlining the various methods by which the librarian can support student and staff requests for accessible library resources, such as audiobooks, high-interest/low vocabulary books, and closed caption videos.
2. The school district partners with SET-BC and ARC-BC to provide accessible tools and resources to support student engagement.
3. All webpages of the Abbotsford School District have been reformatted to support accessibility through the following:

   a. Colour contrasts that are accessible.
   b. Increased font sizes.
   c. Alternate text for images that convey meaning and are not just decorative.
   d. Navigation elements are consistent throughout the site.
   e. Fixed navigation based on click/tap, rather than hover (no more cascading menus).
   f. Form fields have accurate labels.
   g. Headings are used in a logical order (H1, H2, H3 etc.)

B. School Policies and Practices

1. Adaptations and accommodations for students
   a. Student accommodation requirements are continuously assessed on a case-by-case basis and use all relevant information to respond to each scenario.

b. The district has established practices and procedures by which accommodations are offered throughout our schools.
c. Schools are shifting to a universal design approach to access many accommodations, making tools and differentiated strategies readily available and accessible.

2. Mental health and well-being supports
a. The district recognizes the importance of mental health and well-being of its students and staff, especially as the world has experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects. Ongoing initiatives are being explored to assess and improve the mental health of students and staff to ensure support and positive outcomes.
b. Training programs are offered to staff to promote student mental health, improve personal mental health and well-being, and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.
c. Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction is a program offered to staff throughout the school year.
d. Mental health clinicians are employed at the middle school level to support emerging mental health needs and training.
e. Contracted Children & Youth Mental Health Clinicians offer training and support across our elementary and secondary schools.
f. The District SEL team facilitates professional learning opportunities throughout the year with the goal of transforming student learning and engagement by embedding SEL-informed practices in every classroom across the district. Each school has identified an SEL Ambassador to also support this work.

3. Accessibility awareness training
a. Ongoing training continues to be provided to staff and students that supports accessibility awareness, obligations, and inclusive environments.
b. Workshops promoting and supporting Universal Design for Learning are offered throughout the school year.

C. Physical and Architectural Environments

1. The district maintains a building accessibility database and updates it regularly.
2. The district has invested in several upgrades to existing facilities to new standards that support accessible school communities. Investments have been

targeted to upgrade washroom accessibility, ramps and/or operators, elevator renewal and upgrades, as well as new elevators, and parking and curb cut enhancements to support main entrance access improvements.

3. Emergency strobe lights have been installed in high-volume spaces.
4. All new builds are designed and constructed using a universal design approach for accessibility.
5. Classrooms of students designated as hard of hearing have sound fields.

Key Discussion Themes – Accessibility Barriers

A. Information and Communication Barriers

1. Some community members identified that it was difficult to navigate the school and district websites and to locate the information they hoped to access. Several people with low vision and with English as a second language had to rely on family members to read or translate information on the websites.
2. Communication with students and parents /guardians about assignments was provided inconsistently in various classes, resulting in some students not knowing or understanding what they needed to do for homework.
3. Some staff indicated they needed more training to help them interact with students with specific disabilities.

B. Physical and Architecture Environment Barriers

1. Sound fields are generally only available in classrooms that have students with diagnosed hearing impairments.
2. Side doors are often not accessible, and students in wheelchairs can only use the main entrance doors.
3. Accessible parking stalls often do not have curb cuts nearby or do not have enough space between a vehicle and the curb for a wheelchair to fit.
4. Playgrounds are often surrounded by railway ties and a wheelchair cannot get in, and often have woodchips or bark mulch as a base.
5. Not all doors have push buttons and often they are not activated or are not conveniently located.
6. Markings on curbs are faded or non-existent.

C. Attitudinal Barriers

1. Some students identified that they felt misunderstood by staff who made assumptions that they were lazy, uncooperative, or lacked motivation.
2. Reluctance of staff to accommodate, saying "It's not fair, that's cheating", especially if the accommodation is not specifically mentioned in an IEP.
3. Reluctance for special equipment to be in a classroom because it takes up a lot of space, ie. a wheelchair desk.
4. No or little consideration is given when planning field trips to ensure all students can participate meaningfully.
5. Reluctance of adults to grow their learning in SEL and inclusive practices.

Technology Barriers

1. Teachers and students are not familiar with accessibility features on district /school laptops and computers such as voice-to-text, text-to-speech, web readers, and other features.
2. Inequitable access to technology.
3. Students who need more regular access to technology don't necessarily get it because the technology is being shared with the whole class, and sometimes between classes.

E. School Policy and Practice Barriers

1. Parents/guardians and staff identified a gap in staff training on a variety of disabilities and accessibility issues.
2. A systemic transition planning process is not evident for all students with disabilities.
3. Emergency evacuation protocols, individual plans, and evacuation equipment are not in place for students with various disabilities.

Our Three-Year Plan

Overview

This accessibility plan outlines the measures that the Abbotsford School District will take to remove and prevent barriers and to promote inclusion for individuals with disabilities in our school district community. The plan is based on the accessibility principles of adaptability, collaboration, diversity, inclusion, self-determination, and universal design, as set out in the Accessible BC Act.

Accessibility priorities

The Accessibility Advisory Committee acknowledges both that a lot of good work has already been done to address accessibility barriers and that there is still much work to do. To evoke meaningful and lasting change, the Committee is recommending only a few priority actions to start, with the expectation that further actions will arise as the district engages more intentionally in this work. Based on the feedback gathered from staff, parents/guardians, and students, the accessibility committee has identified the following areas as the top priority for improving accessibility in the school district community.

A. **Priority #1: Physical and Architectural**
   The Abbotsford School District will improve the accessibility of the physical architectural environment for all individuals, including those with disabilities, starting with the following action:
   a. Conduct a full Site Accessibility Audit at every school district location, to get a better overview of accessibility needs and strengths across the district.
B. **Priority #2: Attitudinal**
   The Abbotsford School District will seek to remove attitudinal barriers through ongoing learning opportunities for staff, starting with the following actions:
   b. Develop priorities for staff training.
   c. Host a resource training session by the Accessible Resource Centre (ARC-BC).

C. **Priority #3: School Policy and Practice**

   The Abbotsford School District will improve its policies and practices to ensure alignment with the principles of accessibility, and to address any identified gaps in staff training or knowledge on accessibility issues, starting with the following action:

   a. Develop an emergency evacuation plan template for people with disabilities.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Accessibility Advisory Committee meets quarterly, or more often, if necessary, to review progress and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan's implementation and plan for increased accessibility throughout the school. The committee will ensure the following steps are taken regarding the three-year accessibility plan:

1. Prepare an annual status report on the progress of the measures taken to implement the plan.
2. Review and update the three-year accessibility plan every three years in consultation with persons with disabilities and other relevant community members.

(i) **How to Give Us Feedback**

In addition to the public availability of the plan, the Abbotsford School District will continue to post an annual status report on the progress of the three-year accessibility plan on the district website. Accessible formats of the plan will be made available upon request. Questions, comments, or feedback regarding the accessibility plan may be directed to:

Michelle Gehring (she/her/hers) – District Principal of Learning Support Services

Michelle.gehring@abbyschools.ca

Appendices

Appendix A: About Disability

The Disability Continuum

There is no universally accepted meaning for the word disability. However, the Ontario Human Rights Code provides definitions of disability that form our guiding principles. Definitions of disability can be placed on a continuum. At one end, disability is explained in terms of medical conditions (medical model). On the opposite end, disability is explained in terms of the social and physical context in which it occurs (environmental model).

The medical model focuses on deficiencies, symptoms, and treatments. The World Health Organization's 1976 definition of disability, for example, is "any restriction or lack of ability (resulting from an impairment) to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being". Medical model definitions promote the idea that disability is a deviation from the norm. Many people with disabilities are troubled by definitions that regard disability as abnormal, preferring instead to portray disability as commonplace, natural, and in fact, inevitable. As people age, they experience gradual declines in visual acuity, auditory sensitivity, range of motion, bodily strength, and mental powers. Significant functional limitations affect almost half of the people between the ages of 55 and 79, and over 70% of people over 80 (World Health Organization report titled "Aging and Health", 2015). Beyond middle age, disability is the norm.

The environmental model explains disability in relation to social and physical contexts. In this view, the environment, not an individual's medical condition, causes disability. For example, during an electrical blackout, a person who is completely blind can effortlessly navigate around the home, hammer nails, and, if a Braille user, read a novel. A sighted person would be unable to perform these tasks easily, if at all. In this example, the environment disables the sighted person. The environmental model emphasizes that people with disabilities are capable individuals, and it is the barriers in the built-in human environments, not their medical conditions, that create disability. Disability occurs when the world is designed only for a certain way of living, without considering the natural variation among human beings. Barriers are created by humans, and modifying how we live, the tools we use, and our

understanding of the proper way to do things can eliminate or minimize design problems that cause barriers. Systematic barriers can be eliminated by modifying policies, plans, and processes. Attitudes that cause barriers can be addressed through disability awareness, respect, and positive interactions with people with disabilities.

Appendix B: Suggested References/Resources

Global, Canadian, and Local Accessibility Context and Legislation

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Canada Ratifies UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- British Columbia Framework for Accessibility Legislation
- Accessible British Columbia Act
- BC Accessibility Legislation Plain Language Summary

Accessibility Planning Resources for Schools and School Boards

- BC Accessibility Hub
- Universal Design
- Universal Design for Learning
- Special Education Technology BC (SET-BC)
- Accessible Resource Centre (ARC-BC)
- Standards Council of Canada
- B6521-95 Barrier-Free Design
- A Guide to Creating Accessible Play Spaces (Rick Hansen Foundation)
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)
- Canadian Hard of Hearing Association
- Canadian Hearing Services
- Auditory Outreach Provincial Resource Program
- Provincial Inclusion Outreach Program (Complex Needs)
- Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
- Brain Injury Canada
- Spinal Cord Injury Canada
- Tourette Canada
- Kelty Mental Health (BC Children's Hospital)

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