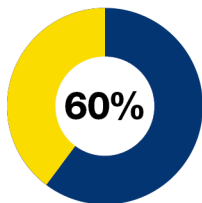


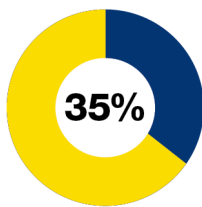
AFB American Foundation[®] for the Blind

Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

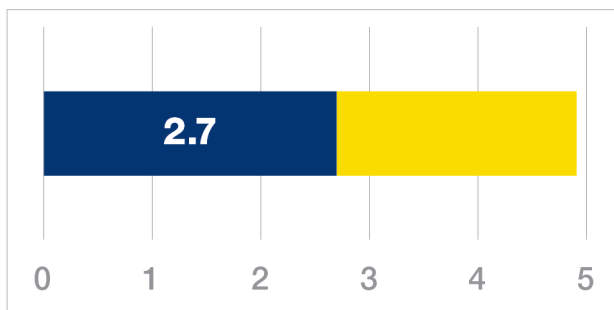
Digital Inclusion for Blind and Low Vision Students



Nearly **60%** of educators reported that their blind and low vision students **could not access at least one classroom digital learning tool.**



35% of educators reported their students **could not access at least two tools.**



Families reported their children used an average of **4.9 different digital tools or programs** during the pandemic. On average, **2.7 were said to be inaccessible.**

What are the consequences of digital learning tools that are not fully accessible?

- Students are unable to complete required assignments.
- Students need continuous support from a family member to complete work.
- Students feel frustrated, discouraged, or excluded because they cannot participate and access lessons like their peers.
- Blind parents cannot fully support their children.
- Teachers have to invest extra resources in creating alternatives.

Data Source: *Three Access and Engagement* studies conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind in Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Summer/Fall 2021. See www.afb.org/AccessEngagement

In Their Own Words: Experiences of Teachers and Parents

“I’ve become an advocate, it’s my job to make the world accessible until he can do it himself. I’ve developed a great deal of anger, I’m just done. The ADA’s been law for 30 years and some people don’t care.”—*Family member of a 12-year-old blind child with other disabilities*

“Tech sucks. Nearly all of the platforms districts and teachers are using to provide instruction are inaccessible. I’ve reached out to [2 companies], to make them aware of this issue, but all I ever get is an apology and that they are working to make their sites inclusive to everyone. I don’t think they have the slightest clue of where to begin.”—*Educator*

“[One Program] was not set up for a screen reader, had videos that were not audio described. We spoke with their OIT department about accessibility issues but were told they couldn’t implement them.”—*Family member of a 16-18 year-old blind child*

“My son has really struggled with [his learning management system]. I know there are some accessibility features built into [it], but it is not user friendly for children with VI.”
—*Family member of a child with low vision, 13-15 years old*

“It was difficult for me to view my son’s online portal from his school. I struggled with assisting my son and in turn that stressed him out. [...] When he had school through online methods, I had trouble seeing, but his teacher did help me through emails.”—*A parent with a visual impairment*

“My biggest frustration is overall accessibility. Example, the class is assigned an online science simulation on creating circuits that is produced by a curriculum company. The science simulation is visual with no auditory information and the only way to connect the pieces is by using finger gestures. My child can’t see the parts so can’t do the assignment. The common answer for this situation is to exempt my child because it is too visual. Why? [...] Why does my child not have the opportunity to learn ideas and concepts because companies don’t make things accessible, schools buy those inaccessible programs and then don’t provide an alternative way to learn the same information?”—*Family member of a 16-18 year-old child with low vision*

Planning for Access

Inaccessible digital materials disrupt or delay access to learning opportunities. Secondary to the learning loss for students, compliance lawsuits can be costly for educational agencies. Often, when inaccessible curriculum or tools are used, extra staff time is spent bridging the divide with labor intensive accommodations, and complicated work arounds. Tools that are born accessible provide the most efficient, and cost effective, path to educate all children.

Administrative Policies that Foster Access

- ✓ Prioritize accessibility in purchasing EdTech
- ✓ Require curricula (purchased or teacher-made) to meet accessibility best-practices such as WCAG 2.1 Guidelines
- ✓ Provide staff development opportunities to update accessibility skills
- ✓ Contingency plan for the multiple types of technology used by students with IEPs and 504 Plans
- ✓ Identify sources of technical support for accessibility, in house or provided as a component of purchase agreements. Ensure support materials are available in relevant languages.
- ✓ Prioritize assistive technology and general technology education for students with disabilities.
- ✓ Survey student plans to monitor the master list of access technologies that must interface with curricula and EdTech.

Reducing the number of educational technologies implemented at any one grade level, and selecting for technologies that are fully accessible, is the fastest path to improved digital inclusion. Remember, families identified that more than half of the educational technologies students used were not fully accessible.

Find resources at www.AFB.org/ToolkitResources

Maintaining the Vision Education Professions

“As a professional, COVID-19 has blurred the lines of work and personal life. It has been very easy to become overwhelmed with all of the online work, technology issues, and having to quickly teach student[s] new technology and programs that the district is trying to use that isn’t accessible. It has also made the job of an itinerant increasingly isolating with online learning.”—*Quote from a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI)*

- Administrators should set the tone for all staff when it comes to mental health.
 - Encourage staff members to check in with each other.
 - Make counseling available.
 - Take time to acknowledge the stress most individuals are feeling.
- Ensuring teams are working together to provide holistic support to students and families now and moving forward into delivering education post-pandemic.
- Vision professionals and other educators need support from administrators to maintain a healthy work-home balance.
- Listen to teacher feedback about what will allow them to maintain their productivity through the return to in-person, and reduce stress.
- Otherwise, professionals may burn out and leave the profession. Resources must be allocated.
- Policymakers, administrators, and community service providers must work together to address food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or employment insecurity experienced during the pandemic.
- Allow continued remote work as appropriate. Use mitigation measures when in-person learning occurs.

Buying for Inclusion: Focusing on Accessibility in Procurement

Why does accessibility matter in procurement?

The procurement process significantly influences whether:

- Digital learning tools and platforms are accessible;
- Students have access to appropriate hardware, such as large screens; and
- Assistive and accessible technologies are delivered in a timely manner.

Teachers cannot meet student needs without the right equipment.

Teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) have reported:

“All the students got the smallest size Chromebook possible. I was requesting a lot of extra equipment for my students because the Chromebook wasn’t accessible.... Last spring break when COVID hit, the district did a great job getting the kids equipment right away. But when they purchased for 2020–2021, the VI kids weren’t thought about. Once we could justify, they were great. It took way too long because everyone was ordering tech at the same time.”

“Software platforms are really inaccessible. They were made for university students. Super irritating. They should be way more accessible and a universal requirement for a school district to only purchase accessible software. Makes it so much harder for my kids to access the content.”

Examples of accessibility challenges for blind and low vision students

- Programs that must be controlled by a mouse rather than a keyboard or other input devices.
- Videos and pictures without text or audio descriptions.
- Unlabeled buttons and forms.
- Timed quizzes or games that move too quickly for the student.
- Devices, like Chromebooks, with screens that are too small for someone with low vision to read or effectively use a magnifier on.

There are many other barriers, such as a lack of captions or information overload, that affect people with disabilities other than blindness.

Improving procurement to promote accessibility

- ✓ Amend policies and procedures to prioritize accessibility
- ✓ Take an inventory and develop a plan for accessibility
- ✓ Build a cross-organizational culture of accessibility and inclusion
- ✓ Define your accessibility requirements
- ✓ Understand Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates (VPAT)
- ✓ Evaluate the accessibility of products under consideration
- ✓ Embed accessibility requirements in vendor relationships and contracts
- ✓ Conduct accessibility testing, document problems, and communicate

Find these Resources and more at www.AFB.org/ToolkitResources

- AIR's Digital Accessibility Toolkit: What Education Leaders Need to Know
- Disability:IN's Disability:INclusive Workplaces Accessible Technology Procurement Toolkit
- U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Video Series on Digital Access

Email AFB: research@afb.org



Digital Access in the In-Person Environment

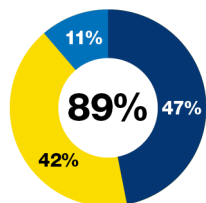
As activities transition back to in person, it's important that the lessons learned in the pandemic inform the next steps. Having many activities take place virtually illuminated the need for information to be accessible. However, information, documents, and resources need to continue to be accessible throughout in-person settings as well, so that students who are blind or have low vision will have access to the curriculum.

- Set high expectations for students.
- Provide students early access to accessible materials.
 - Projections may need to be previewed in advance, as well as followed on a personal device.
 - At-A-Glance style information takes much longer to perceive and interpret tactually or auditorily.
 - Videos need audio description & captioning. Live presentations, demonstrations, or teacher-led modelling often benefit from audio description as well.
- Provide vision professionals materials with enough lead time to prepare braille, large print, or alternative accessible media, usually weeks.
- Leverage universal design for learning principles, such as multiple modes of engagement, representation, and expression, to make sure all students can be active in the learning process.
 - Have a plan for making information produced by students accessible to their peers in real time.

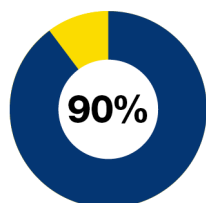
Excusing a child from an assignment may give them access to the same grade in the class, but it doesn't give them access to the same learning. Providing paths for participation, engagement, and inclusion should always be part of the plan.

Find resource links at www.AFB.org/ToolkitResources

Social and Emotional Resilience



47% of the educators indicated that 1%–25% of their students experienced social or emotional challenges, and **42% reported challenges for more than 25% of their students.**



90% of the educators surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the 2020–2021 **school year was more emotionally challenging for them than previous years.**

Emotional Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Loneliness and isolation resulted from cancellation of scheduled in-person activities.
- Fear and anxiety around COVID were common in children and families.
- Social reluctance increased for some children, especially those who were in key developmental stages.
- Familial stress increased, due to uncertainty in schedules, resources, education, economic situations, etc. This may be more pronounced for families with children with multiple disabilities or complex needs.
- Some children found social groups in virtual spaces as a result of exploring their interests during the pandemic.
- Some online environments eliminated typical barriers associated with blindness, such as transportation issues and social stigma.

Ways to support post-pandemic adjustment

- ✓ Acknowledge and validate the stresses
- ✓ Ensure collaboration to provide holistic support to students and families now and moving forward
- ✓ Social groups
- ✓ Access to counselors

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Resources for social and emotional connection post pandemic

Each of the following organizations offers a way to connect with other youth who are blind or have low vision, their parents, and adults who are blind or have low vision. Find resource links at www.AFB.org/ToolkitResources

Crisis Lines Available

Call 988 if you, or someone you care about, is experiencing a mental health crisis. You can also text 988, or chat using an online service at 988lifeline.org/chat.

