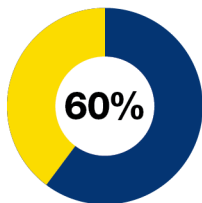


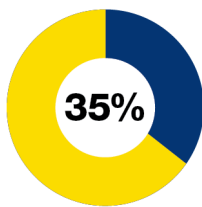
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Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

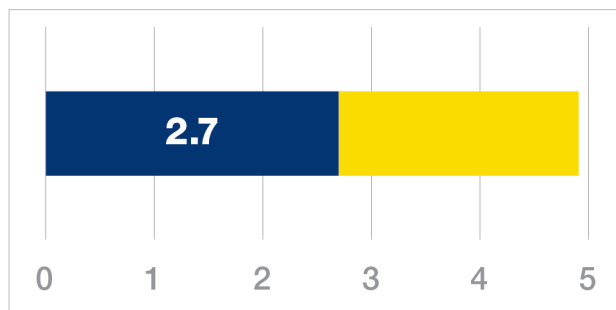
Digital Inclusion for Blind and Low Vision Students



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*

Tips for Families

In the words of other 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*

“I feel like the pandemic has made my children stronger. They have built their tech skills. It’s given them time to delve into their interests.”—*[English-speaking parent of an 11-year-old and an 8-year-old with low vision and additional disabilities]*

Wherever you may fall on the spectrum of responses to virtual instruction, you are in good company. Whether you’re fighting for solutions to accessibility hurdles, or trying to keep the successes uncovered through the pandemic, your advocacy alongside your child will help build a world of no limits. Digital content has been a source of frustration, but it’s also a powerful opportunity for barrier-free access to the same content as peers. Know that your child has the right to be able to fully use these educational materials. Appropriate accommodations should be available to your student across environments, and should be as consistent as feasible from learning activities to the assessments that measure them.

Advocacy strategies shown to work

- Focusing the team on the shared goal can build a helpful base for problem solving. Remember and remind: everyone wants the student to have access to learning.
- Keep organized lists of accessibility shortfalls, when did they occur and how did they impact learning. Identifying technology that is working well can also be very helpful to the team in finding the best solutions.
- Ask about contingency plans if educational environments will change.

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- You have the right to bring an advocate with you. Parents and consumers groups may be able to recommend an advocate in your area. For more on rights during the IEP process, find an explanation of your procedural safeguards from the Parent Center Hub.
- Ask for meetings as needs arise. Your child does not need to struggle until next year's IEP meeting rolls around.
- Prepare for meetings by reviewing documents. Make notes for yourself about key points you want to address with the team.
- Be assertive rather than aggressive. It is easier to find collaborative solutions if no one at the table is feeling defensive.
- Be sure to read documents carefully before you sign them. If asked to sign a document during the same meeting it was created, you can ask to take it home and review it, and agree on a date where you will return a signed copy or a response.
- Conclude meetings by confirming agreements and action items to keep everyone on the same page. Send a follow up email with the same information.

Involvement

A silver lining to the fluctuations in educational environment seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was many families getting more detailed insights into their child's school experiences. If you feel like you have seen a new window into how your child accesses curriculum, you are in good company. Many teachers have found this experience inspiring them to continue improved collaborations with families as they come back to the in-person classroom.

Expanded Core Curriculum for Visual Impairment (ECC)

The ECC includes a range of skills commonly impacted by blindness or low vision. The ECC is usually represented by nine domains: assistive technology, career education, compensatory skills (including braille), independent living skills, orientation and mobility (O&M), recreation and leisure, self-determination, sensory efficiency, and social interaction skills. Not all areas of the ECC can be robustly addressed across educational technology media. Orientation and mobility is a commonly given example of a domain of the ECC that suffered under the transition to online. Students may need additional in-person instruction in the ECC in coming years to catch up on lost learning.

Find More Resources for Advocating with Your Child

Find resources with key links to education issues at [AFB.org/ToolkitResources](https://www.AFB.org/ToolkitResources)

Individualized Education Programs (IEP): Plan for Digital Inclusion

Digital access is a fundamental step to curricular access in all 21st century schools. Blindness and low vision often directly impact access to the curriculum. It might help to think of accessing content as a chain linking the student to their curriculum.

Accessible materials – Technology – Learner technology skills.

The IEP is the educational team's cohesive plan of a student's goals and the services and accommodations the school will provide to reach them. The chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Be informed of parents' rights during the IEP process.

You can request a meeting at any time.

You can sign that you were "in attendance only" without agreeing to the contents right away. That way you can take the IEP home to review prior to signing your agreement.

Include Digital Access Throughout the IEP

The following suggestions are ways to include digital access in each of the different parts of the IEP:

- Present level of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP): Document what has worked well for access, what technology skills are mastered, and points of frequent frustration with digital inclusion.
- Annual goals: plan for technology and assistive technology instruction, state clearly what assistive technologies will be used while meeting other goals.



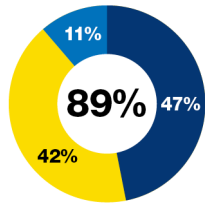
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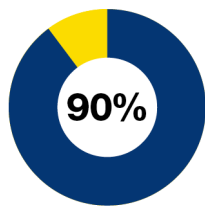
- Program modifications & supports: state who will train or support educators in preparing accessible materials. Document the time staff will be given to make necessary modifications.
- Accommodations: be clear about what formats are accessible, how long in advance they need to be provided to access them appropriately, what back up technology will be in place in case there is a disruption to the primary AT, etc.
- Align accommodations during instruction, during assessment, and across school environments so there is a consistent system. Include plans for access if teaching switches to virtual or hybrid learning.
- Accommodations may also be needed to access school engagement such as the check out in the lunch line, online grade portals, school email, activity schedules, etc. Blind and low vision students should have access to the same information as their sighted peers, at the same time.



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

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.

Advocacy in the Community

In addition to advocating with teachers and IEP teams, sometimes people encounter accessibility issues that motivate them to advocate on a larger scale. Determine the root: **what is causing the barrier?** Brainstorm possible solutions. Choose the right audience: *someone with the power to influence the specific policies or implementation causing the problem*. Use the best method to communicate your thoughts, whether in person, a phone call, a letter, a public comment, etc. While the following do not cover every case, they may help you approach crafting your advocacy plan.

Examples of issues that may be beyond the control of your IEP:

- The science curriculum that is used across the district is inaccessible. Your school district or state has a policy that prevents students from taking full advantage of their O&M services in the community. (department chair, curriculum director, or school board)
- Statewide standardized testing uses software that is not accessible to you (statewide department of public instruction, state representatives)



Lawmakers want to hear from you, and often they don't know much about the needs of blind and low vision students. There are lots of people who influence education in your community. These people may include:

Your school board member, the local school superintendent, your mayor, your state legislature, your state department of education.

Each administrator and lawmaker may have a different way for you to make your voice heard. For example, you may testify in front of a committee or call an individual office. You can send a letter or email to just about everyone.

Tips for reaching out.

- Tell your or your child's story. What is the problem, what solutions have been tried, and what change would you like to see?
- If you can, bring examples of policies or practices that other schools or districts have adopted that you would like to see your school adopt.
- Try to be polite but vocal and provide a way for people to contact you.

**Find out more about what to expect when
speaking to elected officials.**

Find your elected official:

<https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>
