



Ensure coronavirus protocols you implement on campus meet ADA accessibility requirements

School districts across the country that are putting temporary structures on their school campuses and finding bigger spaces to convene to help with social distancing of students can't forget about the mandates of the ADA.

"Accessibility means more than just a physical structure," said Rachel M. Weisberg, a staff attorney at Equip for Equality, a nonprofit disability advocacy group. "Even if something isn't the wall or the doorframe, but it's a plexiglass or temporary shelving built in to keep folks away from each other, make sure it's accessible for students and staff."

Consider the following.

- **Ensure an accessible route.** If you are setting up physical structures such as pods or plexiglass barriers on or between desks to help maintain social distancing, make sure the route around them is accessible. For instance, the route must be at least 36 inches wide; have a clear space so that two people who use wheelchairs can pass one another; and have a ramp, lift, or elevator, if there are any level changes, among other requirements, Weisberg said. (*See related story.*) Make sure no objects protrude into the route, such as coats hanging on a coat rack or the long end of desk protruding out, she said.

Also, think about the amount of turning space available for a person in a wheelchair to get under his desk, said Bebe Novich, manager of the Voting Access Chicago Program at Equip for Equality. "A 5 foot by 5 foot circle is required if the person must get around the side of their desk to get under it," she said. Classrooms should have wheelchair seating locations and accessible desks as well. If those aren't available, have a station with proper wheelchair clearance between any plexiglass barriers.

- **Choose places that are already accessible ...** When relocating classes in older schools, choose rooms that are accessible to get to, sit in, and work in, Novich said. "I've heard about schools trying to concentrate on using bigger rooms like gyms and auditoriums," she said. "Many should be accessible, but you can't count on it. Look into it first."

For example, don't use a gym with stairs that would bar students with physical disabilities from entering and don't choose a room with no visual fire alarms for students who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. Also don't forget to ensure bathrooms are accessible for both males and females, she said.

"For older schools, you really have to think about it," Novich said. "Every room won't be fully accessible, so you have to choose them carefully."

- **... or choose places that can easily be made accessible.** If you can't choose a location that is permanently physically accessible, then making it accessible is the next best alternative, Weisberg said. For a gym that does have stairs, for example, you might install a permanent or temporary ramp.

"Given the circumstances, folks are looking to different alternatives," Weisberg said. "Sometimes temporary solutions can be better than nothing."

- **Modify the outdoors.** Many districts in temperate areas are planning to move some instruction outside. "It can be done," Weisberg said, "but it will require proactive measures from school staff in terms of architectural access." To start, remember to ensure an accessible route to any activities you will hold outside. Ask yourself if the level of the route changes and needs to be ramped. Can you do a permanent ramp or a temporary one?

The ADA also requires that the ground outside be stable, firm, and slip resistant, which means it must be clear of gravel or mud and cannot have wide cracks or broken pavement, Weisberg said. "Mushy grass or gravel can be challenging," she said. "Think of the impact of someone using wheelchair, whether it would be workable for them." Coverings that make areas with gravel or grass accessible to wheelchairs are available for purchase, Novich said.

- **Adjust accommodations for outside areas.** Paying attention to class outside may be difficult for a student who has a hearing impairment because of the increase in external noise, Weisberg said. If the student uses a device to help him hear that requires internet access, be sure a reliable Wi-Fi signal is available for it. Being outside may also be challenging for students with certain allergies, so think through a workable solution to accommodate them, she said.

See related story:

- [Do you have accessible routes on campus?](#)

See also:

- [Smart Starts -- SmartStart: Facility Accessibility under Section 504 and the ADA](#)
- [Policy and Guidance -- 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design - 09/15/2010](#)
- [Making School Accessible: Practical Ways to Achieve Section 504 and ADA Compliance](#), A *DirectSTEP*[®] eLearning course from LRP

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