Access Ready Education

When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990, the Internet as we know it today did not exist as the ubiquitous infrastructure for information. Neither did the possibility of an information and communications technology (ICT) driven schoolhouse. Today the Internet plays a critical role in the daily educational life of American students and educators.

Access Ready INC. is an independent, non-profit, cross-disability education and advocacy organization promoting a policy of inclusion and accessibility of information and communications technology (ICT). Access Ready's strategies include technical findings, policy discussions, best practices, and advocacy efforts made available to the public through www.accessready.org, its social media stream, and other public relations efforts.

Access Ready asks the question, "If physical facilities in this country must be built in accordance with accessibility standards, why not information and communications technology?" Businesses, employers, and federal, state, and local governments are becoming increasingly dependent on information and communications technology to provide goods and services. For people with disabilities, accessible information and communications technology is a necessity, not a luxury or a convenience, which fosters independence, economic self-sufficiency, and active, meaningful participation in civic life.

What is an Access Ready Environment?

An access Ready Environment is where access for people with disabilities at the physical and technological levels is a matter of forethought, design, inclusion and planning instead of a condition of afterthought, delay and discrimination resulting in risk to all concerned.

Increasingly, many educational entities covered under Titles II and III of the ADA and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are using IT to create and provide access within and to the virtual and physical classroom. To support this educational technology, the teacher-facing and staff-facing systems of educational institutions are also driven by ICT. An Access Ready Policy will help advance seamless accessibility across both sides of the ICT used in the educational landscape.

Public Access

Information available on the Internet has become a gateway to education. Schools at all levels are increasingly offering programs and classroom instruction through websites and apps. Colleges and universities offer degree programs online and some exist exclusively on the Internet. In addition, in-class educational technology, such as e-books, digital feedback, polling, and testing tools, customized and

virtual learning experiences, and online collaboration platforms, has dramatically expanded access to, and success of, education.

However, despite the requirements of the ADA and IDEA, the ICT used by many schools is difficult or impossible for individuals with disabilities to use because of the barriers raised by inaccessibility. Being unable to access websites and educational technology puts students with disabilities at a great disadvantage in today's technology-driven schoolhouse. In addition, because accessible educational technology is inherently more flexible, it offers tremendous benefits to all learners - those with and without disabilities - to take in information, demonstrate proficiency, and fully engage in learning in the way that works best for them. Indeed, accessible ICT may be the greatest step forward in education since the printing press.

Even if educators do not offer classes online, many rely on the Internet in the application

process for prospective students, class selection, housing arrangements, course and extracurricular registration, assignments, and discussion groups, and for other administrative and logistical functions where students and staff must participate. It is a fact that the Internet is dramatically changing the way that educational entities serve their constituents.

The recent COVID pandemic brought this home to millions in very stark ways. When we were all told to go home to live, work, learn, teach and shop many people with disabilities found the inaccessibility of websites and other ICT based services severely limited their abilities.

For many, it is now difficult to imagine a world without the unprecedented access to educational information that the web and ICT provide. Don't students with disabilities deserve the same access? For educators to ignore students with disabilities as a constituency for educational services at all levels is a tremendous mistake. This minority now

represents twenty-five percent of the general population according to the Centers for Disease Control. An Access Ready policy can move public and private education in the right direction.

By adopting an Access Ready Policy educators can achieve and maintain accessibility of their online and educational technology. The Access Ready Environment is one where IT is designed and purchased accessibly from the outset - when it is easiest, least expensive, and most effective - and is not an afterthought. In addition, an Access Ready policy provides a strategic approach to incorporating accessibility into existing technology over time. Embracing an Access Ready policy can accomplish this over reasonable budget cycles without real difficulty. Finally, because becoming accessible is only the beginning - without policies in place to maintain it, the effort is wasted - an Access Ready policy helps

ensure accessibility barriers will not reemerge over time.

Staff Access

The availability of online services not only makes life easier for students and parents, but also enables educational institutions to operate more effectively, efficiently and cost-effectively. In school settings, communications via the Internet are increasingly the way teachers and administrators assess learning, communicate grades, assignments, and administrative matters, and design their curricula.

People with disabilities represent a vast untapped talent pool ready to join the workforce. Given the rehabilitation and educational investment made by taxpayers to prepare people with disabilities for careers in the education field, it is foolish for schools not to seek out qualified individuals with disabilities to work in the field of education.

Again, the COVID pandemic has pushed forward the need for employees who can and want to work from home. This is a perfect scenario for workers with disabilities in this employee deprived recruitment environment.

An Access Ready policy makes it possible for schools to ensure they can take advantage of the full pool of qualified educational staff and that those staff can fully and effectively fulfill their jobs.

An Access Ready Policy that applies to educational ICT will help schools better serve their students with and without disabilities and will help them attract and utilize the best educators and workers. Accessible education is the silver bullet. Without it, students with disabilities will too often be forced to drop out, be unemployed or underemployed, and rely on public benefits. With accessible educational technology, on the other hand, the promise of the ADA to provide an equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities to participate in and

benefit from all aspects of American, educational, civic and economic life can be achieved in today's technologically advanced society.

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