

Hamilton Wentworth District School Board

Annual Accessibility Report 2023

Introduction

The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board has continued its commitment to meet and support the objectives of the AODA, 2005. The purpose of this report is to identify the practises and accomplishments aimed at removing barriers for all members of our community thereby continuing to create an environment that builds and respects the independence, inclusion and integration of all.

Objectives

This report supports and reflects the objectives of the HWDSB Multi-Year Accessibility Plan (2022-2027) to:

- Describe the process by which HWDSB will identify, remove and prevent barriers;
- Review recent efforts by HWDSB to remove and prevent barriers;
- Describe the measures HWDSB will take in the period of January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2024 to identify, remove and prevent barriers
- Make a commitment to provide an annual status report on HWDSB's implementation of the multi-year accessibility plan;
- Make a commitment to review and update the multi-year accessibility plan at least once every five years; and
- Describe how HWDSB will make this accessibility plan available to the public.

Information and Communication Accomplishments (Staff-Focused)

The HWDSB website is compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and this is an ongoing commitment. During this reporting period, HWDSB's Communication Standards Program was officially launched. The program focuses on ensuring accessible communication standards, including: easy to understanding 'plain' language, translation services through MCIS, culturally responsive engagement and AODA compatible formats.

The following accessibility resources have continued to be available to all staff and students: MS Teams accessibility and immersive reader features (e.g., text to speech features, magnification of text font, language translation, and picture dictionary options for word choice); Brightspace Learning Management System (i.e., The Hub), which conforms to web content accessibility guidelines 2.0 level AAA standards; HWDSB's virtual library, which offers a variety of accessibility resources in both audio and visual formats; resources purchased for remote learning (e.g., Bayfield, Spark Reading, Edwin), which are in digital format to ensure accessibility features are available to all learners.

Within the next school year, HWDSB plans to continue to focus on communication standards. Specifically, HWDSB will continue to review CNIB accessibility guidelines, as well as to reinforce the importance of public information being presented using 'plain language.'

Information and Communication Accomplishments (Student-Focused)

In order to support student accessibility and communication, many different pieces of equipment were purchased between June 2019 and April 2023. For example, 435 laptops and 1860 iPads were received as a result of Specialized Equipment Amount (SEA) claims. All SEA devices (iPads and laptops) have access to the Microsoft Suite with assistive features like the immersive reader, the math tool and voice to text capabilities. Student devices also have access to apps such as: Sora for audio books, ClaroPDF for Optical Character Recognition, Explain Everything for presenting information using a variety of modes, virtual math manipulatives to allow for visual representations. Additionally, many students have Snapcore, ProloQuo, and Boardmaker on their devices to ensure accessibility to efficient communication. Deaf and Hard of hearing students have access to assistive hearing devices and students diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder may have access to FM systems in the classroom. Blind and Low Vision students have access to specialized equipment like brailers, a braille reading program, special apps to allow involvement in secondary music programs, as well as supports for students diagnosed with Cortical Vision Impairment.

Students who receive a SEA Ipad or laptop are able to participate in multi-tiered assistive technology training through the Centre for Success. This includes access to learning modules and videos for introductory training sessions, as well as access to the Centre for Success Tier 1 HUB course. Students can also be referred to the Centre for Success itinerant team to receive Tier 2 in-person training at their homeschool. Dependent on student response to Tier 1 and 2 interventions, some individuals with Learning Disabilities may then be referred to the Centre for Success Tier 3 program for more intensive support.

Employment Accomplishments

Hamilton Wentworth District School Board is committed to ensuring that people with disabilities have the same opportunity of access to our services and employment. HWDSB's employment policies and practices remain inclusive of people with disabilities. As such, applicants are informed about available supports and accommodations during the recruitment, assessment and selection process. Work accommodations are in alignment with the Ontario Human Rights Code and are intended to actively prevent and/or remove barriers that impede employees with disabilities from participating fully in their employment.

HWDSB continues to ensure that all employees are aware of the procedure to request accommodations during the course of the interview process and throughout their employment. Employees are consulted in order to provide and arrange for accessible formats and communication supports where necessary. Individualized workplace emergency response information is also provided to employees, upon request.

Throughout this reporting period, HWDSB has also continued to support Project SEARCH. Project SEARCH is a business-led, one-year, transition-to-work program for young people with developmental or intellectual disabilities. The main objective is to prepare individuals for employment with job skills training through a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on career training. This program has taken place entirely at the workplace, including the HWDSB Education Centre. Some of the Project SEARCH graduates are now permanent employees at HWDSB.

Customer Service Accomplishments

AODA training remains an important part of the onboarding process at HWDSB. As of September 2020, all new hires and post-secondary placement students have participated in mandatory training prior to beginning their placement. Electronic training records are recorded through the Brightspace Learning Management System (i.e., The Hub), while physical copies of these records are held within the employee files. The AODA training is appropriate for the duties of the participants and meets the requirements of the accessibility standards.

During this reporting period, HWDSB continued to comply with the Accessible Customer Service Standards and adhere to customer service requirements. All new hires have received AODA (accessible Customer Service) training during the onboarding process, and employees have received training throughout employment. The AODA training is reviewed and revised as necessary.

Transportation Accomplishments

Hamilton-Wentworth Student Transportation Services (HWSTS) is responsible for the provision of safe, accessible and efficient transportation services to eligible students at HWDSB. During the current reporting period, accessibility accomplishments in transportation include revisions to the HWSTS website to meet AODA standards. The website font has been modified based on CNIB guidelines and assistive technology features have been reviewed to maximize accessibility and inclusion.

The approval process for specialized transportation access has also been improved during the past school year. HWSTS staff have taken a proactive approach to contacting school personnel prior to annual transportation planning, which has resulted in a timely and accurate completion of digitalized student transportation plans. Receiving student transportation plans as early as possible has helped to create high level transportation services standards, as well as minimize delays for students with specialized needs.

Also during this reporting period, HWSTS has continued to actively review best practices for procuring specialized transportation service (e.g., taxis) to assist in supporting students with specialized needs. Based on operational analysis, HWSTS has secured a three year Specialized Transportation Services Agreement with two additional taxi providers to increase safety, efficiency and effectiveness of services.

Design of Physical Environment Accomplishments

Throughout 2022 and 2023, HWDSB's Facilities Services has continued to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to ensure that new facilities are designed to comply with the Ontario Building Code requirements for accessibility.

The HWDSB multi-year Capital Plan incorporates budgeting to increase the overall accessibility of buildings through ongoing maintenance repairs and special accommodation projects. Given the large inventory and age of the facilities, various factors are considered while developing the accessibility plan, such as: Facility Condition Index, results of Pupil Accommodation reviews, proximity and special accommodation requests. The Facilities Management Division works closely with Specialized Services to create, monitor and continually update the plan.

Some school-based projects that have been completed during this reporting period include: the installation of new touchless door operator systems, renovations of existing washroom and change rooms to accommodate accessibility, installation of stage lifts at various location and planned integration of accessible parking. Similar projects across more schools in the system will continue throughout 2023.

New Initiative Accomplishments

During this reporting period, the following HWDSB initiatives have been introduced in an effort to continue to create a school environment that builds and respects independence, inclusion and integration of all.

- As per recommendations from the K-12 Standards Development Committee (K-12 SDC), HWDSB hired a Post-Secondary Navigation Team Lead. The Team Lead is responsible for working collaboratively with an educator team and local post-secondary and provincial associations and educational service partners to support the transition and accessibility requirements of students with disabilities, as they exit secondary school to continue their education and life journey.
- HWDSB piloted a secondary course titled, “An Interdisciplinary Approach to Disability Studies and Human Rights (Course Code: IDC301A).” The purpose of the course is to guide students to develop the skills required to solve problems, make decisions and present findings in the areas of disability studies and human rights. Another focus of the curriculum is to increase awareness of a variety of viewpoints and investigate career opportunities in disability studies and human rights.
- HWDSB hosted the first annual “Celebrating Inclusion 360 Forum”, with the goal of bringing together students from across the board to celebrate inclusion, disability pride and allyship. Conference activities included guest speakers, wellness spa, art activities and other engaging opportunities.

Next steps

The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board remains strongly committed to meeting the objectives of the AODA, 2005 and creating an environment that respects the independence, inclusion and integration of all. The following list outlines next steps that will be taken to continue to meet the goals that are outlined in HWDSB’s Multi-Year Accessibility Plan:

- Consult with students and relevant board staff to collect feedback on accessibility projects. Seek out feedback from a diverse group of individuals, including those with disabilities, to ensure that accessibility projects are inclusive and take a variety of perspectives into consideration.
- Continue to review the recommendations provided through the Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) Education Standards, the new accessibility education standard under the AODA. This is an ongoing endeavour; HWDSB’s Executive Council has already provided feedback based on the initial draft of these standards and will continue to prioritize their AODA work as updates of this document become available.
- Enhance the process of tracking and understanding student accessibility needs from preschool to graduation, through: digitalization of IEPs, IEP audits, strengthening student voice in the IEP and IPRC processes and continuing to review data tracking programs such as Power School and Special Programs.

- Ensure that a diverse planning committee meets on an ongoing basis to update the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan and efficiently track ongoing projects that will be included in the annual status report.

Summary

This report is strong evidence of Hamilton Wentworth District School Board's ongoing commitment to removing barriers for all members of our community and continuing to create an environment that builds and respects the independence, inclusion and integration of all. It is available to the public on the Board website and is available in alternative formats upon request.