

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | POLICY NO: 1.1 |
| Adopted | 2001 |
| Projected Review Date | 2030 |
| Revisions | 2016, 2026 |

POLICY: BARRIER-FREE PHYSICAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR STUDENTS

PURPOSE:

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) is committed to providing learning and working environments that are welcoming, respectful, accessible, and free from discrimination and harassment.

We will strive to have learning environments that are physically and culturally accessible, equitable, inclusive and learner-centered by removing and preventing physical accessibility barriers impeding students with disabilities from fully participating in and fully benefiting from all aspects of education. Barrier-free physical learning environments should be considered in the development of other policies related to physical space on and off school property (including school excursions). HWDSB is committed to meeting the physical accessibility needs of students with disabilities in a timely and responsive manner to ensure all students can fully participate and thrive in learning spaces.

HWDSB recognizes the importance of upholding the rights and educational wellness of Indigenous students and families. This includes acknowledging the unique histories, cultures, and experiences of Indigenous communities, and support the development of barrier-free physical learning environments that reflect and support Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (e.g., land-based learning, use of circles).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

- Building inclusive, barrier-free learning environments begins with valuing, seeking out and integrating student perspectives.
- Ensuring students and parents/guardians/caregivers are active partners in the shared decision-making process for students with disabilities.
- Ensuring students with disabilities have the right to dignity, respect, equality, choice, voice and full participation in a barrier-free environment.
- Identifying and removing physical barriers that impede students' access to educational services to ensure our duty to accommodate. This may include environmental comfort and sensory accessibility.
- Collaborating and proactive planning with students and parents/guardians/caregivers for student accommodations as part of the student's transition planning.
- Designing physical learning spaces and instructional practices from a Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- Ensuring every effort will be made to accommodate students in their home school. Where this is not possible, HWDSB will collaborate with students and parents/guardians/caregivers on placement within programs or classrooms throughout Hamilton Wentworth District School Board.
- Recognizing and committing to understanding that barriers to equity and inclusion are often intensified by intersecting identities such as race, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of diversity.
- All decisions within this Policy will align with the Ontario Human Rights Code and HWDSB's Human Rights Policy, Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA), Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) and HWDSB's Privacy Policy.

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

- Student voice will inform the planning and evaluation of barrier-free physical learning environments.
- Students and parents/guardians/caregivers will be active partners in the shared decision-making process for students with disabilities.
- HWDSB will provide students with disabilities an environment which maximizes inclusion, integration, full participation, dignity, respect and honours voice and lived experiences.
- Accessibility needs of students will be met in a timely way, which is clearly communicated with the student and parents/guardians/caregivers.
- HWDSB will have an ongoing plan for new construction and renovation projects that includes barrier-free physical learning environments.

RESPONSIBILITY:

Director of Education
Members of Executive Council

TERMINOLOGY:

Barriers: According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), a barrier is not the disability itself, but rather any external obstacle that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in society. Barriers may be:

- Physical – such as inaccessible buildings or spaces.
- Attitudinal – including stereotypes, stigma, or discriminatory attitudes.
- Systemic – embedded in policies, procedures, or practices.
- Technological – such as digital platforms that are not accessible.
- Communication – including formats or methods that are not inclusive of all abilities.

HWDSB recognizes these barriers and is committed to identifying, removing, and preventing them to support full participation, dignity, and inclusion for all students with disabilities.

Duty to Accommodate: A legal obligation under the Ontario Human Rights Code requiring organizations to identify and remove barriers and make necessary adjustments to policies, practices, and physical environments so that individuals protected under the Code—such as students with disabilities—can participate equally and fully. Accommodation must be provided up to the point of undue hardship.

Environmental Comfort: The degree to which a physical space supports the well-being, safety, and full participation of students with disabilities. This area of barrier removal considers the unique and individualized needs of students with disabilities to promote inclusion.

Intersectionality: Recognized as the understanding that each person simultaneously exists within multiple and overlapping identities.

Multi-Year Accessibility Plan: As part of the Ontario with Disabilities Act (2002), all school boards in Ontario are required to prepare an annual accessibility plan, after consultation with people with disabilities, and to make the plan public in December. This plan is used to meet the requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005), where all public-sector organizations, as well as private and non-profit organizations with 50 or more employees, must create written multi-year accessibility plans, update them annually and post them on their websites, if they have one.

Sensory Accessibility: The intentional adaptation of physical and learning environments to support individuals with diverse sensory processing needs. This includes minimizing sensory overload and providing options that promote comfort, regulation, and engagement for every student. This area of barrier removal considers the unique and individualized needs of students with disabilities to promote inclusion

Student Advisory Circles: Student Advisory Circles provide a platform for students with disabilities to share their direct experiences, offer feedback, and contribute to decisions that shape welcoming, more accessible and inclusive learning environments in HWDSB. They are small, safe groups where students with diverse disabilities and backgrounds can talk about special education support, services, and programs with a trusted adult they already know.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A conceptual and instructional framework designed to make learning accessible to all students by avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach. It is based on the core principles of multiple means of engagement, representation of information and action and expression.

ACTION REQUIRED:

- Update and maintain a Procedure aligned to this policy that is accessible and culturally responsive to the HWDSB community and communicated annually.
- Develop communication material on Policy and Procedures for students.

- Accessibility training for students and staff.
- Publicly share progress on barrier-free physical learning environments through the HWDSB Annual Accessibility Report on the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan. This report will be posted on the HWDSB website by January 1st each year, in compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).
- Actively seek feedback from the Student Advisory Circles and Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) to inform and strengthen programs, services, and supports for students with disabilities.
- Review policy effectiveness through inclusive consultation as part of the Policy review process.

PROGRESS INDICATORS:

| Intended Outcome | Assessment |
|--|---|
| Student voice will inform the planning and evaluation of barrier-free physical learning environments. | Student Voice Surveys Student Advisory Circles |
| Students and parents/guardians/caregivers will be active partners in the shared decision-making process for students with disabilities. | Student Voice Surveys Parent and Family Voice Surveys Student and Staff Affinity Group(s) Student Advisory Circles Staff Advisory Groups |
| HWDSB will provide students with disabilities an environment which maximizes inclusion, integration, full participation, dignity, respect and honours voice and lived experiences. | Student Voice Surveys Parent and Family Voice Surveys Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) PowerSchool Special Programs – Facility accommodation tracking Student and Staff Affinity Groups Student Advisory Circles Staff Advisory Groups |
| Accessibility needs of students will be met in a timely way, which is clearly communicated with the student and parents/guardians/caregivers. | Student Voice Surveys Parent Voice Surveys SEAC PowerSchool Special Programs – Facility accommodation tracking Student and Staff Affinity Groups Student Advisory Circles Staff Advisory Groups |
| HWDSB will have an ongoing plan for new construction and renovation projects that | Multi-Year Accessibility Plan Long-Term Facilities Plan |

| | |
|---|--|
| includes barrier-free physical learning environments. | |
|---|--|

REFERENCES:

Government Documents

Education Act

Ontario Human Rights Code

OHRC – Policy: Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities

Proposed K–12 Education Standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA)

Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA),

Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) and HWDSB’s Privacy Policy.

Revisions:

Policy Review & Template Migration, February 2026