



Hamilton Wentworth District School Board

Annual Accessibility Report January 2024-December 2024

Introduction

Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) has continued its commitment to meet and support the objectives of AODA, 2005. This report is grounded in the Board Mission, Vision and Values and is part of the HWDSB Human Rights and Equity Action Plan.

The purpose of this report is to identify practices and accomplishments in removing barriers for all members of our community thereby continuing to create an environment that builds and respects the independence, inclusion and integration of everyone.

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
- 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, 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 to reinforce the importance of public information being presented using 'plain language.'

Information and Communication Accomplishments (Student-Focused)

To support student accessibility and communication, many different pieces of equipment were purchased during this reporting period. All SEA devices (iPads and laptops) have access to 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, braille reading programs, special apps to allow involvement in secondary music programs, as well as support for students diagnosed with Cortical Vision Impairment.

Students who receive a SEA iPad or laptop can 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.

Throughout this reporting period, HWDSB continued to fund a Post-Secondary Navigation lead, in accordance with the K-12 Standards Development Committee's recommendation for accessible transitions for students with disabilities in kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12). The Team Lead is responsible for working collaboratively with system educator teams, local post-secondary academic institutions, provincial associations and educational service partners to support the transition and accessibility requirements of students with disabilities, as they exit secondary school. The focus of this work is transition planning and coordinating numerous activities, undertaken by students, families and academic institutions, that are intended to support academic achievement, health and well-being through numerous transition periods in a student's life. This includes the pathway to post secondary education, work, adult services, independent/supported living and community participation. Board led initiatives include organized post secondary institution tours connecting students to Accessible Learning services in the post secondary institution, as well as networking events with RARC (Regional Assessment Resource Centre), Developmental Services Organization and the Community Transition Network collaborative of Hamilton.

Employment Accomplishments (Staff-Focused)

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 support and accommodations during the recruitment, assessment and selection process. Work accommodation is in alignment with the Ontario Human Rights Code and is 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 accommodation during the interview process and throughout their employment. Employees are consulted to provide and arrange accessible formats and communication support where necessary. Individualized workplace emergency response information is also provided to employees, upon request.

Throughout this reporting period, HWDSB has also continued to support ProjectSEARCH. ProjectSEARCH 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 (Staff-Focused)

AODA training remains an important part of the onboarding process at HWDSB. 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 receive 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 (Student-Focused)

Hamilton-Wentworth Student Transportation Services (HWSTS) ensures safe, accessible and efficient transportation services for eligible HWDSB students. In the current reporting period, HWSTS has made significant accessibility improvements, including updating their website to comply with AODA standards. The website now features enhanced font contrast for better readability and an “Accessibility” tab on the home page for easier navigation.

During this report period (Spring of 2024), the Special Education, Inclusion and Equity Department also launched a multi-year approval pilot project for eligible students in Special Education Classes who require Personalized Transportation. Eligible students include those with mobility/accessibility and/or safety requirements.

In their annual communication with school principals, Special Education staff indicate student eligibility for multi-year approval. Personalized Transportation Forms for students who qualify for multi-year approval is handled at the system level to ensure no interruption to transportation. Early receipt of student transportation plans is crucial for maintaining high transportation service standards and minimizing delays in setting up transport for students with specialized needs.

HWSTS is currently in the third year of a three-year Specialized Transportation Services Agreement with two local taxi providers. This partnership enhances the safety, efficiency and effectiveness of the services.

Design of Physical Environment Accomplishments (Student-Focused)

Throughout 2023 and 2024, HWDSB’s Facility Services Department has continued to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to ensure that new facilities are designed to comply with the Ontario Building Code requirements for accessibility. In addition, Facility Services continues to improve accessibility within the existing inventory of schools and administrative buildings when completing capital projects.

The HWDSB Multi-Year Capital Plan incorporates budgeting to increase the overall accessibility of buildings through ongoing school renewal, maintenance, repairs, and special accommodation projects. Given the large inventory, age, and condition of the facilities, various factors are considered while developing the Accessibility Plan, such as: Facility Condition Index (a Ministry mandated program that considers building assessments), and results of Pupil Accommodation Reviews, proximity and special accommodation requests. The Facility Services Department works closely with Special Education, Inclusion and Equity 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 and stair lifts at various locations, installation of exterior ramps and planned integration of accessible parking.

Accessibility project updates are shared through a trustee-led committee on a quarterly basis where staff share the planned, in progress, and completed accessibility projects and their values. For 2024/25, this work will continue with multiple projects planned for implementation including, but not limited to:

Description	Location
New Elevator Installation	AM Cunningham Elementary School
New Elevator Installation	Bennetto Elementary School
New Elevator Installation	Parkdale Elementary School
Renovated Universal Washrooms	Multiple Locations
Renovated Universal Changerooms	Multiple Locations
Exterior Ramp Installation	Multiple Locations

New Initiative Accomplishments (Student-Focused)

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

- To meet the goals set out in last year’s annual plan, HWDSB enhanced their AODA planning committee during this reporting period. The multidisciplinary team met on an ongoing basis to update the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan and efficiently track ongoing accessibility projects.
- The Student Accessibility Accommodation Form was created in the digital special education platform PowerSchool Special Programs. This form records both the students’ accessibility requirements and the facility/structural accommodations requested, approved and completed. This enables efficient system-level data tracking and monitoring of student accommodation requirements and the corresponding facility adjustments.
- New Special Education referral forms were also developed in the digital special education platform, PowerSchool Special Programs, for the following teams within the Special Education, Inclusion and Equity Department: Behaviour Analytics, Centre for Success, Blind and Low Vision, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Psychological Services and Speech and Language Services. These new referral forms allow enhanced data tracking and monitoring at both the school and system levels to support the understanding of student special education and accessibility requirements.

Next steps

Hamilton Wentworth District School Board remains strongly committed to meeting the objectives of 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:

- 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 accessibility education standard under the AODA. This is an ongoing endeavour; HWDSB’s Executive Council has 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

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 everyone. It is available to the public on the Board website and is available in alternative formats upon request.