

# Greater Victoria School District Accessibility Plan 2023—2026



One *Learning* Community



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This document’s layout follows the principles of accessible design, based on the recommendations of the Government of Canada’s [Guidance on the Accessible Canada Regulations](#).

# Territorial Acknowledgement

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The Greater Victoria School District No. 61 (GVSD) resides on the traditional territory of the lək'wəŋən (Lekwungen) people. We would like to recognize and acknowledge the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, on whose traditional territories we live, we learn, and we do our work. Hay'sxw'qa—thank you.



# Introduction

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In the Greater Victoria School District, we are committed to providing a responsive and safe learning and working environment that supports all students and staff and provides equitable opportunities to support our diverse community.

A key element to supporting our community is the development of a Three-Year Accessibility Plan. This plan will identify system needs, priorities, and measurable actions, and will draw on feedback from our school community and the work of the Accessibility Advisory Group to guide district work in implementing this plan.

We recognize the importance of accessibility not only for those with disabilities and/or accessibility needs, but also for the benefit of the entire community. Through the actions in this Three-Year Accessibility Plan, we commit to continuous improvements in developing a learning and working environment that equitably supports all students, staff, and the larger school community.

# About our School District Community

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The Greater Victoria School District resides on the traditional territory of the lək'wəŋən (Lekwungen) people which is located in the capital city of British Columbia and includes the municipalities of Esquimalt, Oak Bay, Victoria, View Royal and a portion of Saanich and Highlands. As a district we value diversity, strive for inclusion, and pursue equity of access and opportunity for all students.

As a learning community, we are deeply committed to each student having the opportunity to fulfill their potential and pursue their aspirations. We are proud to provide quality education programs for approximately 20,000 students at 49 schools. Additionally, we offer a variety of Programs of Choice, including French Immersion, Sport Academies, Challenge, Leadership programs, and programming opportunities for students with disabilities or diverse abilities at Victor School, Arbutus Global Middle School, and Reynolds High School. In addition, StrongStart Centre programming is available at six elementary schools—George Jay, Craigflower, James Bay, Macaulay, McKenzie, and View Royal. Our community also includes many local agency partners that support our work with children and families.

GVSD is committed to supporting Indigenous learners by promoting practices informed by Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing. Our partnerships with local Indigenous communities are formalized through the education agreements we have with the Songhees First Nation, Esquimalt First Nation, Métis Nation Greater Victoria (MNGV) and the Urban Peoples' House Indigenous Advisory (UPHIA).



# Message from the Superintendent

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I am pleased to share the Greater Victoria School District's Three-Year Accessibility Plan, an important provincially mandated initiative that supports our commitment to creating inclusive and welcoming environments for every member of our learning community. As a learning community, GVSD is deeply committed to each student and staff having the opportunity to fulfill their potential and pursue their aspirations. This commitment requires us to ensure that all parts of our district are accessible, including our communications, programs and services, and learning and working environments, not only for those with disabilities and/or accessibility needs, but also for the benefit of the entire community.

The actions in this Three-Year Accessibility Plan will serve as our road map as we work to develop a learning and working environment that equitably supports all students, staff, and the larger school community.



Deb Whitten

Superintendent, Greater Victoria School District



# Definitions

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**Accessibility:** The state of having programs, services, and environments that allow all individuals to participate fully in society without encountering barriers.

**Accessibility Advisory Group:** The official group of stakeholders, formed under the Accessible BC Act, to advise staff and make recommendations on the Accessibility Plan and district feedback mechanism.

**Accessibility Working Group:** The staff responsible for implementing the Accessibility Plan priorities.

**Accessibility Plan:** The plan developed in consultation with the Accessibility Advisory Group that identifies challenges and solutions for addressing accessibility barriers.

**Barrier:** Anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of their disability. This includes physical/environmental, attitudinal, information, communications, policy or practice, and technological barriers.



## Types of barriers:

- **Physical/Environmental Barrier:** A barrier resulting from building design, smells/sounds, lighting, the area adjacent to the building, shape of rooms, the size of doorways, and so on.
- **Attitudinal Barrier:** A barrier that arises from the attitudes of staff, students, and the school community, including discriminatory behaviours and a lack of disability awareness.
- **Communication Barrier:** A barrier that arises from difficulties receiving information in person, by telephone, or online, interacting with teachers, peers, receptionists, or other staff, and receiving training
- **Information Barrier:** A barrier that arises from inaccessible signage, fonts, brochures, forms, manuals, websites, fax transmissions, equipment labels, computer screens, etc.

- **Policy or Practice Barrier:** Rules, regulations, and protocols that prevent a person from performing the essential elements of their job, classwork, or participating in society. Policy, practice, and procedures that prevent a student from accessing the curriculum and fully participating in the school community.
- **Technological Barrier:** Barriers resulting from inaccessible devices, platforms, software programs, computers, photocopiers, fax machines, telephones, and switches, including the lack of assistive technologies.
- **Disability:** The state of being unable to participate fully and equally in society as a result of the interaction between an impairment and a barrier. (For more information about disability and types of disability and support, refer to [Appendix A: About Disability.](#))
- **Impairment:** A physical, sensory, mental, intellectual, cognitive difference, whether permanent, temporary, or episodic.

# Framework Guiding our Work

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The GVSD accessibility plan builds on global, national, provincial, and school district specific actions to promote and support accessibility.

## Global Context—United Nations

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion within the workplace and within the larger community. The United Nations has been instrumental in leading the importance of disability as a global health issue. In 2006, the United Nations led efforts to adopt the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In 2010, Canada ratified the CRPD and described the CRPD as follows:

“The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an international human right treaty aimed at protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. Parties to the Convention of the rights of Persons with Disabilities are required to promote and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights of persons with disabilities including full equality under the law.”

# Canadian Context and Legislation—Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Nationally, Canadian accessibility legislation started in 1985 where disability was included in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in 1986, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) were included in the new federal Employment Equity Act. The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) came into force in 2019, with the overarching goal to realize a barrier-free Canada by 2040. This act applies to federally regulated entities. The ACA has seven focus areas, and was developed based on the following guiding principles:

1. All persons must be treated with dignity regardless of their disabilities.
2. All persons must have the same opportunity to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have regardless of their disabilities.
3. All persons must have barrier-free access to full and equal participation in society, regardless of their disabilities.

4. All persons must have meaningful options and be free to make their own choices, with support if they desire, regardless of their disabilities.
5. Laws, policies, programs, services, and structures must take into account the disabilities of persons, the different ways that persons interact with their environments and the multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination faced by persons.
6. PWDs must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services, and structures.
7. The development and revision of accessibility standards and the making of regulations must be done with the objective of achieving the highest level of accessibility for PWDs.

## **B.C. Context and Legislation— Accessible B.C. Act**

The Accessible British Columbia Act, enacted in June 2021, and initially the accessibility planning requirements only applied to provincial government organizations. The act’s goal is to improve opportunities for people with disabilities and involve them in identifying, removing, and preventing barriers to their full participation in the life of the province.

The Accessible British Columbia Regulation, under the Accessible British Columbia Act, came into force on September 1, 2022. These regulations identify schools as accessible organizations, and school districts and independent schools will be required to have an Accessibility Advisory Group, an Accessibility Plan, and a tool to receive feedback on accessibility by September 1, 2023.

## Principles in the Accessible B.C. Act

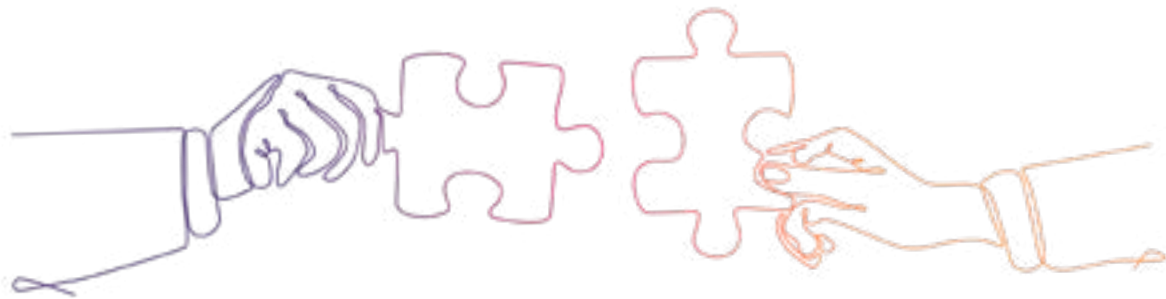
The Accessible B.C. Act includes a list of principles that must be considered as organizations develop an accessibility plan. The Definitions are adapted from the foundational document [BC Framework for Accessibility Legislation](#).

- **Adaptability:** Accessibility plans should reflect that disability and accessibility are evolving concepts that change as services, technology, and attitudes change.
- **Collaboration:** Promoting accessible communities is a shared responsibility and everyone has a role to play. Accessibility plans should create opportunities for organizations and communities to work together to promote access and inclusion.
- **Diversity:** Every person is unique. People with disabilities are individuals with varied backgrounds. Individual characteristics including race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and lived experience greatly inform the experiences of individuals. Accessibility plans should



acknowledge the principle of intersectionality and the diversity within the disability community.

- **Inclusion:** All British Columbians, including persons with disabilities, should be able to participate fully and equally in their communities.
- **Self-Determination:** Accessibility plans should seek to empower people with disabilities to make their own choices and pursue the lives they wish to live.
- **Universal Design:** The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design defines Universal Design as “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.” An accessibility plan should be designed to meet the needs of all people who interact with the organization.



# Our Commitment to Accessibility

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The Greater Victoria School District is committed to providing an environment that is accessible and practical for all members of our diverse learning community. We recognize the importance of conscious planning, design, and effort in ensuring that barriers are removed, and accessibility is increased.

GVSD is committed to working collaboratively with the community to provide equitable treatment to people with disabilities and/or accessibility needs in a way that respects their dignity. To achieve this goal, we have outlined the following commitments:

- Engage with staff, community members and people with disabilities in the development of, ongoing review and updating of the GVSD Accessibility Plan.
- Continually improve accessibility for people with disabilities in our school community through the implementation of our accessibility plan.

# Our Approach

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In the Greater Victoria School District, we believe that all members of our community have the right to be treated with dignity, given an opportunity to participate, and provided with access to learning and community. Our approach is grounded in the core provincial principles of accessibility (including adaptability, collaboration, diversity, inclusion, self-determination, and universal design), and is designed to recognize the gaps and opportunities to improve accessibility in our community.

In the spring of 2023, a District Accessibility Working Group, consisting of key staff from the departments responsible for implementing identified recommendations and actions was established. In the summer and early fall of 2023, we began drafting the district accessibility plan and planning for the establishment of the Accessibility Advisory Group.

This process involved:

- Review of the existing accessibility data for our schools and district
- Holding key discussions to identify barriers to accessibility
- Calling for applications for members of the Accessibility Advisory Group
- Developing an accessibility barrier feedback tool on our website

The Advisory Group's work in the 2023-2024 school year will be to:

- Provide input into the development of a district-wide survey (fall 2023)
- Prioritization of actions to be taken (early 2024)
- Establishing a monitoring and evaluation process (spring 2024)

By engaging in thoughtful planning, meaningful engagement, and direct action, we aim to deliver lasting accessibility improvements for all members of our community.

# About our Advisory Group

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## Purpose of the Accessibility Advisory Group

Under the Accessible B.C. Act, organizations must establish an accessibility advisory group to assist with identifying and preventing barriers to individuals in or interacting with the organization.

The purpose of the GVSD Accessibility Advisory Group is to work collaboratively to assess and improve community accessibility, focusing on the experiences of individuals with disabilities and/or accessibility needs while encompassing the whole community. The Accessibility Advisory Group also advises the District Accessibility Working Group on strategies to reduce social, physical, sensory, and other barriers that prevent people from fully participating in all aspects of school community life.



# Recruitment of the Accessibility Advisory Group Members

Under the Accessible B.C. Act, the selection of Accessibility Advisory Group members must, to the extent possible, align with the following goals:

- At least half the members are persons with disabilities (PWD), or individuals who support or are from organizations that support PWDs;
- At least one member is an Indigenous person; and,
- Members reflect the diversity of people in B.C.

A callout for applications to the Accessibility Advisory Group was conducted in September 2023 to recruit a diverse representation as outlined above. Our Accessibility Advisory Group includes four parents and four students, staff representation from the Greater Victoria Teachers Association, Vancouver Island Health Authority and CUPE 947, as well as staff from the Indigenous Education and Learning Support Departments. We would like to thank our advisory group members for their time and commitment to enhancing accessibility in the Greater Victoria School District.

# Barrier Identification and Consultation Conducted

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The following methods are being used to identify barriers:

- **District Accessibility Feedback Tool**—A feedback tool was developed and posted to the district website. Information about the tool was shared with district and school stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, outside professionals, and parents/guardians).
- School district leadership, district departments, school administrators, and Accessibility Advisory Group provided input on district accessibility strengths and stretches.
- A survey was developed and made available to staff, parents/caregivers, students, education partners, and community members.
- **Accessibility Advisory Group**—The Accessibility Advisory Group will review the input and feedback from the survey, assessment, and feedback tool.



# Feedback Mechanisms

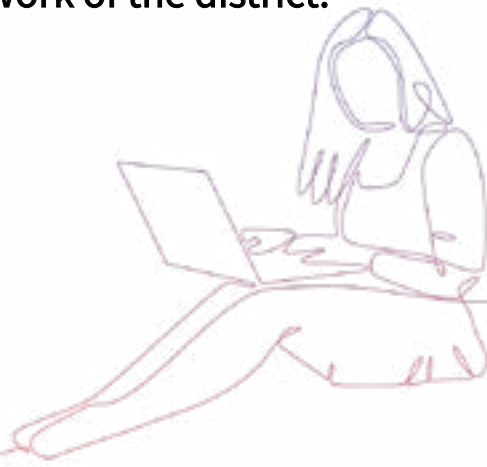
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## Online Accessibility Feedback Mechanism

GVSD developed an [online feedback tool](#), that is posted on the district website, which provides an opportunity for students, staff, and members of the school district community to report an accessibility barrier. Feedback can be anonymous, or people can add their name and contact information if they wish to be contacted. Data collected through this tool is shared with the Accessibility Advisory Group (stakeholders) and the District Accessibility Working Group (staff).

## Accessibility Survey

An accessibility survey has been developed which will allow students, parents/caregivers, staff, education partners, and community members to provide information on accessibility barriers and successes. Information gathered through this survey will inform the district accessibility plan and guide the work of the district.



# Accessibility Accomplishments and Barriers

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## Accessibility Accomplishments

The guiding principles of inclusive practice inform the Greater Victoria's School District's programs, policies, practices, and services to reduce and minimize barriers to accessibility for people with disabilities and/or accessibility needs. We strive to create an environment that is accessible and to ensure continuous improvement in accessibility.

Included below are initial discussion themes on accessibility accomplishments. They are a synopsis of some of the accomplishments gathered through conversations with members of the Accessibility Advisory Group and district school administrators. These will be expanded upon when additional data is available.

## Information and Communication

- Information on the accessibility act has been shared with students, parents/guardians, community members, and district staff through the district website.
- District website includes google translate as an accessibility feature.
- Increased awareness of and access to communications in various formats is increasing. For example—braille signage in schools, communication boards on playgrounds, enhanced collaboration with Intercultural Association of Victoria.
- A Welcome Centre for newcomers has been created as an entry point for immigrant and refugee students new to Victoria and to support a successful transition into local schools through a trauma informed lens.

## Built Environment

- Ongoing collaboration between the Departments of Facilities and Learning Support to ensure that physical environment accommodations required by a student occur in a timely manner.
- Consideration of accessible environments is a component of new school construction or renovation.
- The Inclusion for Learning Strategy has enabled the district to take an inventory and make improvements to accessibility at a number of schools, including the creation of alternate learning spaces for students, workspaces for staff, and the creation of accessible washrooms.
- Creation of purpose-built Indigenous spaces in schools.

## Mental Health and Well-Being Supports

- Children and Youth in Care Standard of Practice created to better track and support Children and Youth in Care in GVSD.
- Increased access to Non-Violent Crisis Intervention (NCI) training for all staff.
- Targeted transition supports are in place to support identified students (e.g., Spring-Up).
- Several initiatives are in place to improve the mental health and well-being of students and staff including a partnership with PISE to support student and family physical and mental health and the provision of mental wellness resources and training for every grade.

## School Policies and Practices

- Each school has a School-Based Team who collaborate with District Learning Support Staff to assess and respond to student accommodation requirements on a case-by-case basis.
- Practices and procedures are in place to ensure support is provided for learners with and without formal special education designations.
- Enhanced early learning support is provided through Early Childhood Educators and the District Principal for Early Learning.
- The district provides comprehensive transition processes for students by collaborating with external childcare agencies and through increased opportunity for dialogue at onsite childcare centres.
- The increased adoption of Universal Design for learning principles in schools along with growing cultural awareness is leading to schools becoming more inclusive.

## Attitudinal

- There is a greater and growing awareness and general understanding of accessibility and disability, with staff pursuing professional learning focused on how to better support learners with disabilities, and/or use a trauma-informed approach.



# Accessibility Barriers

Included below are initial discussion themes on accessibility barriers. They are a synopsis of some of the barriers noted through conversations with members of the Accessibility Advisory Group and district school administrators. These will be expanded upon when additional data is available.

## Information and Communication Barriers

- Some community members identified that it was difficult to navigate the school and district websites and to locate information they hoped to access.
- Several people with low vision and with English as a second language had to rely on family members to read or translate information on the websites.
- Email communication to parents/guardians and staff are not always written in language that is easy to understand and is sometimes confusing.

## Built Environment

- There are barriers to accessing outdoor spaces for children with physical and sensory disabilities in our schools. This includes lack of easy access to current playgrounds and play spaces, secure fencing and gates, automatic doors, ramps, and accessible loading and parking spaces.
- As schools continue to experience high enrollment, access to break-out spaces or quiet spaces that support self-regulation is a challenge.
- The aged building infrastructure presents challenges for accessibility due to operational unreliability (e.g., old elevators) or inappropriate design for accessibility needs standards of today.

## Mental Health and Well-Being Supports

- Some staff indicated they needed more learning opportunities to help them interact with students with specific disabilities, particularly in the area of mental health and trauma-informed approaches.
- Greater access for students to mental health information and supports.
- Individuals with disabilities and/or accessibility needs sometimes lack access to support and interventions for general mental wellness, as well as specific concerns such as anxiety and prosocial behaviours.

## School Policies and Practices

- A variety of learning opportunities for staff are needed to ensure they are designing programs to support our diverse learners, including students with disabilities and complex support needs.
- Lack of flexible alternatives for student learning (e.g. hybrid options in early grades, online and/or asynchronous learning opportunities in catchment schools).
- The level of support and specialist staffing to meet student needs is constrained by recruitment and retention, as well as financial limitation.
- Ongoing review of district policies and regulations is needed.

## Attitudinal

- Attitudinal barriers still exist, such as a lack of awareness and understanding of the diverse array of disabilities, from visible to invisible, from physical to mental.



# Our Three-Year Plan

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## Overview

This Accessibility Plan outlines the measures that the Greater Victoria School District will take to remove and prevent barriers and to promote inclusion for individuals with disabilities and/or accessibility needs in our school district community. The plan is based on the Accessibility Principles of Adaptability, Collaboration, Diversity, Inclusion, Self-Determination, and Universal Design, as set out in the Accessible B.C. Act.

## Identifying Accessibility Priorities

As part of their work in the spring of 2024, the Accessibility Advisory Group reviewed information gathered from the Accessibility Plan Survey and district accessibility feedback tool.

The Accessibility Advisory Group and school administrators provided input into creating priorities for improving accessibility in the school district. The priorities listed on the following pages are a commitment to action.

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Maximizing the Involvement of Students and Staff with Accessibility Needs</b>
Objective	Increase involvement of students and staff with accessibility needs in identifying, preventing, and removing barriers.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold a student-led event (like Student Forum on Inclusion and Anti-Racism).</li> <li>• Strategize new ways to involve students and staff in providing feedback and identifying barriers to accessibility.</li> </ul>



<b>Priority</b>	<b>Improving Access to Information and Communications</b>
Objective	Take steps to ensure persons with accessibility needs can access communications delivered by the Greater Victoria School District.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with IT department to update and streamline District and school websites, with the goal of meeting Web Content Accessibility Guidelines Level 2.</li> <li>• Explore further options for document translation.</li> <li>• Provide guidance to staff in schools to improve awareness and consistency when sharing information with families.</li> </ul>

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Creating a Culute of Accessibility and Inclusion</b>
Objective	Develop a shared understanding of accessibility and disability.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use District and school-level social media accounts and websites to promote events like AccessAbility Week and Indigenous Disability Awareness Month.</li> <li>• Identify and provide learning opportunities and resources for staff related lesson planning on accessibility and meaningful inclusive practices.</li> <li>• Feature the <i>Report an Accessibility Barrier</i> button more prominently on the District website; include links to this button on each school’s website.</li> <li>• Include an option to attach a photo to the <i>Report an Accessibility Barrier</i> form on the District website.</li> <li>• Add an option for parents/students to report if they are leaving the District due to accessibility issues.</li> </ul>

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Improving the Physical Environment</b>
Objective	Improve the accessibility of the physical environment for all individuals, including those with disabilities and accessibility needs, in all District buildings.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with Facilities department to establish a physical plant “minimum standard”.</li> <li>• Use this standard to review accessibility in all schools.</li> <li>• Work with Facilities and Finance departments to develop an improvement plan and timeline; ensure incorporation of accessibility improvements into the District’s Long-Term Facilities Plan.</li> <li>• Consider the “accessibility minimum standard” in all future renovations and construction of new buildings.</li> </ul>

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Reviewing and Revising Policies and Practices</b>
Objective	Review and revise District policies and practices to ensure alignment with the principles of accessibility.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase staff training for those who work most closely with students with disabilities and accessibility needs.</li> <li>• Explore ways to increase staff knowledge of <a href="#"><u>Universal Design for Learning (UDL)</u></a>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ UDL is an approach to planning, instruction, and assessment practices that minimizes barriers and optimizes learning for all.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Create and implement a response procedure for reported barriers to accessibility.</li> <li>• Review and, where needed, update current policy, regulations and procedures respecting the duty to accommodate new and existing staff.</li> <li>• Review and update emergency procedures and protocols to consistently account for the needs of people with disabilities and diverse abilities.</li> </ul>

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Enhancing Pedagogy through Technology</b>
Objective	Develop strategies to ensure learning is accessible for all students.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct an assistive technology audit with the District ITL Department.</li> <li>• Develop a plan and strategies to improve online and any time access to learning/courses.</li> </ul>

The Accessibility Advisory Group will review progress reports from District staff and advise on evaluating the effectiveness of the plan’s implementation. The Advisory Group will ensure the following steps are taken by District staff regarding the Three-Year Accessibility Plan:

1. Prepare an annual status report on the progress of the measures taken to implement the plan and present the report at an Educational Policy & Directions meeting.
2. Review and update the Three-Year Accessibility Plan by June 2027, in consultation with the Accessibility Advisory Group and persons with disabilities and other relevant community members. Present the updated plan to the Board of Education.

# Progress Report

Progress on each priority will be recorded through annual updates of this report starting in the spring of 2025.

# Monitoring and Evaluation

The Accessibility Advisory Group will meet quarterly to review progress and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan's implementation and plan for increased accessibility throughout the school. The Advisory Group will ensure the following steps are taken regarding the Three-Year Accessibility Plan:

1. Prepare an annual status report on the progress of the measures taken to implement the plan.
2. Review and update the Three-Year Accessibility Plan every three years in consultation with persons with disabilities and other relevant community members.



## How to Give Us Feedback

Feedback on the Accessibility Plan is encouraged through the [Accessibility webpage](#) of the Greater Victoria School District website. Paper copies are available by downloading a [printable PDF copy](#), or requesting a paper copy at the School Board Office or local school. To report a specific accessibility barrier, please complete [this form](#) on our website.

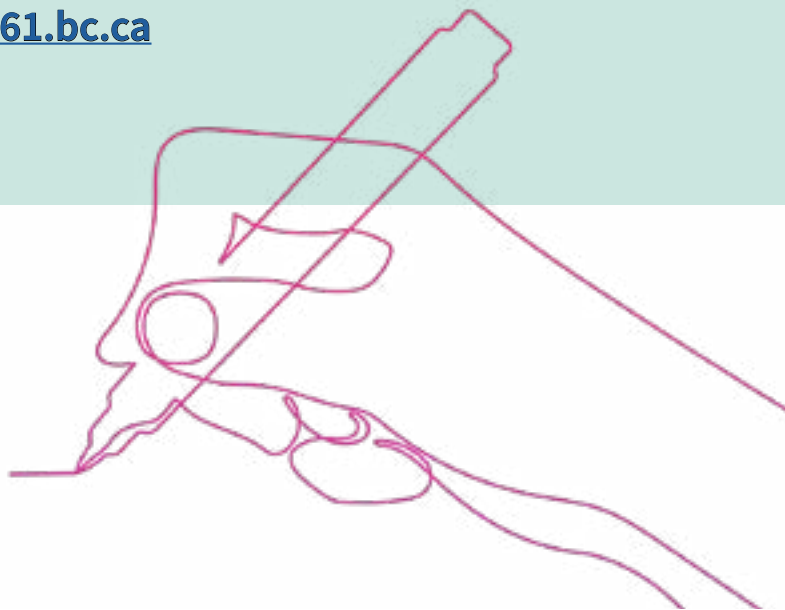
**Questions, comments, or feedback regarding the Accessibility Plan may be directed to:**

Sean McCartney

District Principal, Greater Victoria School District

[semccartney@sd61.bc.ca](mailto:semccartney@sd61.bc.ca)

250-475-4120





# Appendix A: About Disability

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## The Disability Continuum

There is no universally accepted meaning for the word “disability”. However, the Ontario Human Rights Code provides definitions of disability that form our guiding principles. Definitions of disability can be placed on a continuum. At one end, disability is explained in terms of medical conditions (medical model). At the opposite end, disability is explained in terms of the social and physical contexts in which it occurs (environmental model).

The medical model focuses on deficiencies, symptoms and treatments. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) 1976 definition for disability, for example, is “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.” Medical model definitions promote the idea that disability is a deviation from the norm.

Many people with disabilities are troubled by definitions that regard disability as abnormal, preferring instead to portray disability as

commonplace, natural, and in fact, inevitable. As people age, they experience gradual declines in visual acuity, auditory sensitivity, range of motion, bodily strength, and mental powers.

Significant functional limitations affect almost half of people between the ages of 55 and 79, and over 70% of people over 80 (World Health Organization (WHO) report titled “Ageing and health”, 2015). Beyond middle age, disability is the norm. The environmental model explains disability in relation to social and physical contexts. In this view, the environment, not an individual’s medical condition, causes disability. For example, during an electrical blackout, a person who is completely blind can effortlessly navigate around the home, hammer nails, and, if a braille user, read a novel.

A sighted person would be unable to perform these tasks easily, if at all. In this example, the environment disables the sighted person.

The environmental model emphasizes that people with disabilities are capable individuals, and it is the barriers in the built and human environments, not their medical conditions, that create disability. Disability occurs when the world is designed only for a certain way of living, without considering the natural variation among human

beings. Barriers are created by humans, and modifying how we live, the tools we use, and our understanding of the proper way to do things can eliminate or minimize design problems that cause barriers. Systematic barriers can be eliminated by modifying policies, plans, and processes. Attitudes that cause barriers can be addressed through disability awareness, respect, and positive interactions with people with disabilities.

## Types of Disability and Functional Limitations

A person's disability may make it physically or cognitively challenging to perform everyday tasks such as operating a keyboard, reading a sign, differentiating colours, distinguishing sounds, climbing stairs, grasping small items, remembering words, or doing arithmetic.

There are many kinds of disabilities, including physical, sensory, hearing, mental health, developmental and learning. Disabilities can be visible or invisible.

## Visual Disabilities

Visual disabilities reduce one's ability to see clearly. Very few people are totally blind. Some have limited vision such as tunnel vision, where a person has a loss of peripheral or side vision, or a lack of central vision, which means they cannot see straight ahead. Some can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light. Impaired vision can restrict a person's ability to read signs, locate landmarks, or see hazards. In some cases, it may be difficult to tell if a person has a visual disability. Others may use a guide dog or white cane.

### **Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with visual disabilities:**

- Identify yourself when you approach the person and speak directly to them.
- Speak normally and clearly.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.
- Unless it is an emergency, only touch the person if you have been given permission.
- If you offer assistance, wait until you receive permission.
- Offer your arm (the elbow) to guide the person and walk slowly.

- Service animals are working and have to pay attention at all times. Refrain from engaging with the animal.
- If you're giving directions or verbal information, be precise and clear. For example, if you're approaching a door or an obstacle, say so.
- Don't just assume the individual can't see you.
- When entering a room, show the individual to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient the person to the environment around them.
- Ensure you say good-bye prior to leaving the individual.
- Be patient. Things may take a little longer.

## Hard of Hearing and Deafness

People who have hearing loss may be deaf or hard of hearing.

Like other disabilities, hearing loss has a wide variety of degrees.

People who are hard of hearing may require assistive devices when communicating. While some people may use sign language, notes, or hearing aids when communicating, others may also use email, pagers, TTY telephone service, or Bell Canada Relay Service.

## **Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing:**

- Always ask how you can help. Don't shout.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- Attract the person's attention before speaking. The best way is a gentle touch on the shoulder or gently waving your hand.
- Make sure you are in a well-lighted area where the person can see your face.
- Look at and speak directly to the person. Address the person, not their interpreter.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier, for example a pen and paper.
- Keep your face clearly visible when speaking.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- Service animals are working and have to pay attention at all times. Refrain from engaging with the animal.
- Any personal (e.g., financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.

- Be patient. Communication for people who are deaf is different because their first language may not be English. It may be American Sign Language (ASL).
- If the person uses a hearing aid, try to speak in an area with few competing sounds.

## Physical Disabilities

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities and not all require a wheelchair. For example, people who have arthritis, heart or lung conditions, or amputations may also have difficulty moving, standing, or sitting. It may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

### **Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with physical disabilities:**

- Speak normally and directly to the person rather than someone who is with them.
- People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things. Ask before you help.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.
- Be patient and be sure you understand their needs.

- Unless it is an emergency, refrain from touching any assistive devices, including wheelchairs.
- Provide the person with information about accessible features of the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.).

## Intellectual Disabilities

People with intellectual or developmental disabilities may have difficulty doing many things most of us take for granted. These disabilities can mildly or profoundly limit one’s ability to learn. You may not be able to know that someone has one of these disabilities unless you are told, or you notice the way people act, ask questions, or their body language.

### **Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with intellectual disabilities:**

- As much as possible, treat the person with an intellectual disability like anyone else. They may understand more than you think, and they will appreciate you treating them with respect.
- Don’t assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.



- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Make sure the person understands what you've said.
- If you can't understand what's being said, ask again.
- Give one piece of information at a time.
- Be polite and patient.
- Speak directly to the person, not to someone who is with the person.

## Learning or Cognitive Disabilities

Learning or cognitive disabilities can result in a host of different communication difficulties for people. They can be subtle, as in having difficulty reading, or more pronounced, but they can interfere with the person's ability to receive, express, or process information. You may not be able to know that someone has one of these disabilities unless you are told, or you notice the way people act, ask questions, or their body language.

### **Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with learning or cognitive disabilities:**

- Patience and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.

- Recognize that some people with communication difficulties use augmentative communication systems such as Signed English and Picture Exchange System.
- When you know that someone with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can best help.
- Speak normally and clearly, and directly to the person.
- Take some time—people with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Try to find ways to provide information in a way that works best for them. For example, have a paper and pen handy.
- If you're dealing with a child, be patient, encouraging, and supportive.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.
- Be courteous and patient and the person will let you know how to best provide service in a way that works for them.

## Mental Health Disabilities

People with mental health disabilities look like anyone else. You won't know that the person has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it. But if someone is experiencing difficulty in controlling

their symptoms or is in a crisis, you may need to help out. Be calm and professional and let the person tell you how you can best help.

**Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with mental health disabilities:**

- Treat people with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be confident and reassuring and listen to persons with a mental health disability and their needs.
- If someone appears to be in a crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.
- Take the person with a mental health disability seriously, and work with them to meet their needs.

## **Speech and Language Disabilities**

Some people have communication challenges. It could be the result of cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or another condition that makes it difficult to pronounce words, causes slurring or stuttering, or not being able to express oneself or understand written or spoken language. Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards, sign language, or other assistive devices.

## **Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with speech and language disabilities:**

- Just because a person has one disability doesn't mean they have another. For example, if a person has difficulty speaking, make no assumption they have an intellectual disability as well.
- If you don't understand, ask the person to repeat the information.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- If you are able, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- Take some time. Be patient and polite and give the person whatever time they need to get their point across.
- Allow the individual to finish their sentences themselves without interruption.
- Patience, respect, and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.

## **Deaf-Blind Disabilities**

A person who is deafblind cannot see or hear to some extent. This results in greater difficulties in accessing information and managing daily activities. Most people who are deafblind will be accompanied by an intervener, a professional who helps with communicating.

Interveners are trained in special sign language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet, or finger spelling, and may guide and interpret for their client.

**Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people who are deafblind:**

- Make no assumptions about what a person can or cannot do. Some deaf-blind people have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.
- A deaf-blind person is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with them.
- Speak directly to the person, as you normally would, not to the intervener.
- Identify yourself to the intervener when you approach the person who is deaf-blind.
- Don’t touch service animals—they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Unless it’s an emergency, refrain from touching a deaf-blind person without permission.

# Appendix B: Suggested References/ Resources

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## Global, Canadian, and Local Accessibility Context and Legislation

- [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)
- [Canada Ratifies UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)
- [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#)
- [British Columbia Framework for Accessibility Legislation](#)
- [Accessible British Columbia Act](#)
- [BC Accessibility Legislation Plan Language Summary](#)

## Accessibility Planning Resources for Schools and School Boards

- [BC Accessibility Hub](#)
- [Universal Design](#)
- [Special Education Technology BC \(SET BC\)](#)
- [Accessible Resource Centre—BC](#)
- [Standards Council of Canada](#)

- [B6521-95 Barrier-Free Design](#)
- [A Guide to Creating Accessible Play Spaces](#) (Rick Hansen Foundation)
- [Canadian National Institute for the Blind \(CNIB\)](#)
- [Canadian Hard of Hearing Association](#)
- [Canadian Hearing Services](#)
- [Auditory Outreach Provincial Resource Program](#)
- [Provincial Inclusion Outreach Program](#) (Complex Needs)
- [Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada](#)
- [Learning Disabilities Association of Canada](#)
- [Brain Injury Canada](#)
- [Spinal Cord Injury Canada](#)
- [Tourette Canada](#)
- [Kelty Mental Health](#) (BC Children's Hospital)
- [Gifted Children's Association of BC](#)

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