

# Advancing Accessibility: Four Core Pillars of Success

*The clock is ticking. The 2026–2027 deadlines for compliance with the updated digital accessibility requirements under Title II of the ADA are fast approaching. The work ahead for districts may be significant, but the opportunity is even greater. Acting now enables districts to not only meet legal obligations but also demonstrate a powerful and visible commitment to equity and inclusion.*



Meaningful progress in digital accessibility doesn't happen through a single sequence of steps, but through coordinated, districtwide actions that reinforce one another. Districts leading this work show that progress accelerates when accessibility is built into systems, not added on. No matter where a district begins, the following are high-impact actions that can create lasting, systemic change.

## 1 Embrace Digital Accessibility as a Shared Responsibility

As echoed throughout survey comments from members, the responsibility for digital accessibility is “massive” and “too much for one department,” especially considering how digital tools permeate all aspects of education. Achieving comprehensive digital accessibility requires integrating it into the very fabric of district operations — not just communications — and moving from reactive solutions to an intentional, proactive “accessibility-by-design” mindset.

School communicators have long championed accessibility and advocated for inclusive practices, even as they have struggled to raise awareness among their district colleagues. The DOJ's new rule can serve as the catalyst to shift culture from good intentions to a shared moral and legal commitment. To build that foundation of shared accountability, districts should:

- 💡 **Secure leadership buy-in:** Superintendents and senior leaders should establish digital accessibility as a clear organizational priority, providing guidance and accountability across the district. Consistent messaging from leadership reinforces that accessibility is everyone's responsibility, not just a communications or special education concern.

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- 💡 **Establish an accessibility steering committee:** Create a cross-functional team that brings together representatives from IT, communications, special education (including the district's ADA/Title II coordinator), procurement, HR and curriculum to ensure that accessibility is

## Leadership Matters: More Insights from the Field

“Even the most passionate digital accessibility advocates in school PR hit a wall when those around them aren’t aware of accessibility as an issue,” said Emily Popek, APR, a member of NSPRA’s Accreditation Committee and one of NSPRA’s representatives to the Universal Accreditation Board.

Popek, who also leads a professional learning community (PLC) for K-12 school PR professionals on digital accessibility in her professional capacity, says the group often discusses the limits of what communication teams can control.

“We see the issues and try to sound the alarm, but so much is out of our lane,” Popek said. “We can’t ensure accessibility for digital library systems, learning management software or sports scheduling tools. When leaders make accessibility a clear priority – and provide the time, training and tools to address it – it makes all the difference.”

In her experience, securing active leadership support is consistently one of the biggest challenges her PLC members face. Many note that their district leaders either don’t fully understand accessibility or are unsure how to begin addressing it. Without clear priorities, sufficient resources and visible commitment from leaders, accessibility efforts remain an uphill battle for communications teams and the broader district.

embedded in every system and decision. This group should not be merely advisory but should have authority to implement necessary procedures and practices — and to recommend any policy changes to the board — that promote accessibility throughout district operations.

 **Adopt clear policies:** Develop and communicate an institution-wide accessibility policy and guidelines for all staff that make accessibility a mandatory expectation and everyone’s responsibility. This policy need not be in place before substantive work begins; rather, its adoption formalizes and reinforces the district’s commitment.

Together, these actions establish the governance, policies and processes necessary to make accessibility an operational norm, setting the stage for sustainable implementation through training, procurement and ongoing monitoring.

## Digital Accessibility: A Team Sport



Building a culture of accessibility is not a solo performance. It's a team effort. Every player has a role, and if one player drops the ball, the whole team feels it.

**District leaders are the coaches.** They set the vision, call the plays and make sure accessibility is a non-negotiable part of the game plan. Without their leadership, the team can't move in the same direction.

**Procurement and business officials are the scouts.** They bring in new talent – the tools, platforms and technologies – and have to make sure those “recruits” meet accessibility standards from day one.

**Communications and IT teams are the defenders.** They guard against risk by testing, implementing and monitoring systems to ensure accessibility holds strong under pressure.

### Teachers are the playmakers.

They're on the front lines, adapting content and spotting accessibility barriers that might keep students or their guardians on the sidelines.

### Students and their families are both fans and players.

They are the reason the game exists. Their voices keep the team accountable, and their experiences determine whether the team is winning or losing.

When all these roles come together, accessibility becomes more than compliance. It becomes culture. As with any good team, success comes from practice, communication and a shared commitment to the win – ensuring every student and family can fully participate.

## 2 Change Procurement Practices – NOW

The well-known saying, “When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging,” applies perfectly to accessibility. Districts may not be able to fix everything at once, but they can control what comes next. Procurement is the single most impactful lever for rapid change.

Buying (or renewing) inaccessible technology can erase months of progress and create even more work down the road, as staff scramble to find workarounds or retrofit accessibility after the fact. Just like

cost, functionality and vendor reputation, accessibility must factor into purchasing decisions.

Yet in many districts, this is more aspiration than reality. According to research from the American Federation for the Blind, during the COVID-19 pandemic, families reported that their school-age children used an average of nearly five different digital tools to participate in hybrid or online learning, and that more than half of those tools were inaccessible. In NSPRA's digital accessibility survey, one participant described a “100% disconnect” between staff concerned with accessibility and those managing purchases

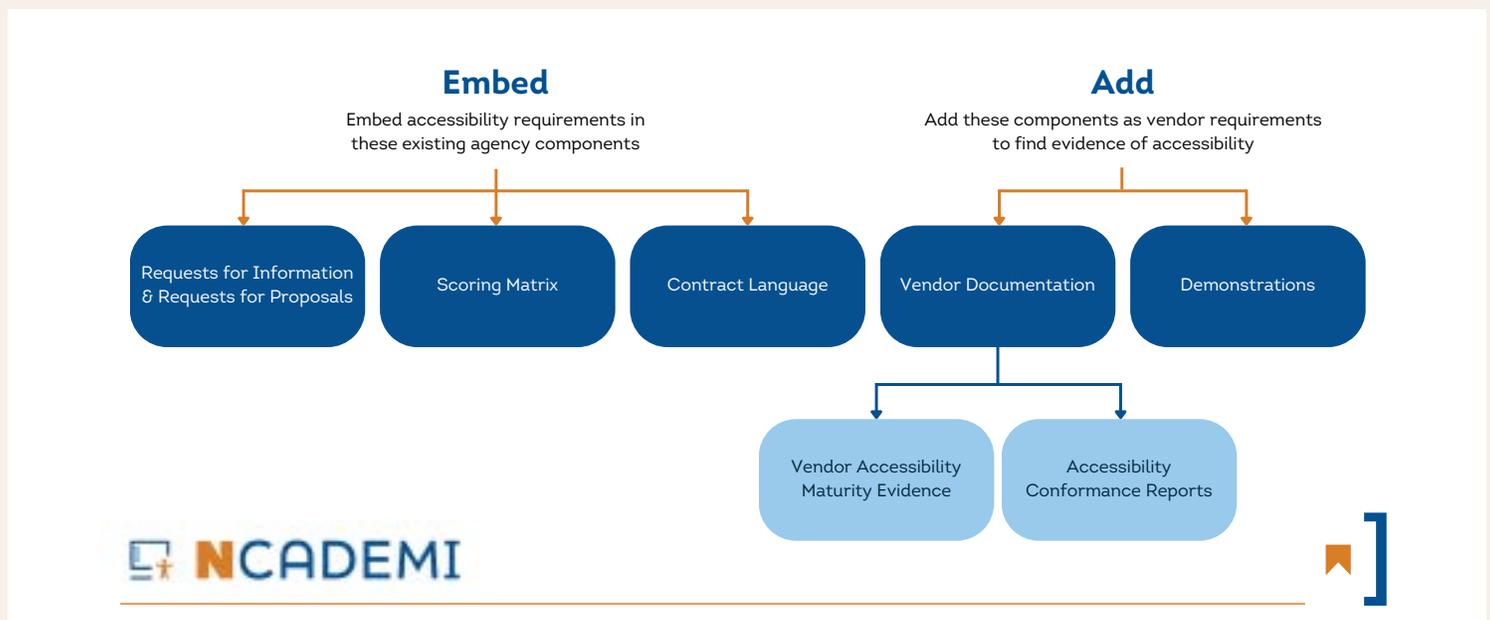
and contracts. Another noted that “vendors claim accessibility, but I don’t think they’re honest or well-versed in what this means,” reflecting widespread frustration and skepticism about vendor accountability.

That frustration may at times be justified, but it’s not insurmountable. Districts should move decisively to close the gap by embedding accessibility requirements into existing procurement tools, requiring documentation that verifies compliance and treating vendor claims with the same rigor applied to financial or security assurances.

With consistent expectations and verification, accessible procurement can become standard practice rather than an afterthought. The National Center on Accessible Digital Educational Materials & Instruction ([NCADEMI](#)), a federally funded technical assistance center, recommends an “embed and add” strategy for operationalizing accessibility in purchasing, as explained below.

## “EMBED AND ADD” IN ACTION

In its April 2025 publication, [Including Accessibility in All Components of Procurement: A Guide for State Educational Agencies and School Districts](#), NCADEMI outlines the “embed and add” strategy — an approach that integrates accessibility requirements directly into existing procurement processes and supplements them with additional verification steps to ensure compliance. The following figure<sup>1</sup> illustrates how districts can put the “embed and add” strategy into practice. More detail is provided on [page 25](#) of this report.



<sup>1</sup>Citation: National Center on Accessible Digital Educational Materials & Instruction and National Instructional Materials Access Center. (2025, April). Including Accessibility in All Components of Procurement: A Guide for State Educational Agencies and School Districts. Logan, UT: Author. Retrieved October 2025 from <https://ncademi.org/resources/publications/procurement/>. Used with permission.

### 3 Implement Comprehensive Training for All Staff

Survey findings underscore that training is central to advancing digital accessibility:

- 94%** of respondents cited lack of training as a barrier, while
- 92%** said staff training, more than any other resource, would help overcome accessibility challenges.

These results highlight the need for a comprehensive, organization-wide training program to build consistent awareness, understanding and application of accessibility practices across all roles and departments.

Training should address accessible content creation (e.g., captions, transcripts, color contrast, alt text and proper header styles) as well as the selection and use of tools or platforms that maintain content accessibility. For instance, teachers often adopt free classroom apps outside of formal procurement processes, which means they may not meet accessibility standards. Professional learning that helps staff experience accessibility barriers, such as navigating a web page while wearing a blindfold, can foster more intentional, inclusive choices.

Training cannot be “one and done” but should be embedded in new employee onboarding and offered to existing employees on an ongoing basis, customized and adapted as technology and workflows change. In short, employees should understand that knowledge and implementation of accessibility best practices is essential to performing one’s duties.

*“A vendor can build an accessible system but there is not always follow through or training to ensure that we implement the platform in an accessible way.”*

- Survey Respondent

### TRAINING THAT BUILDS HABITS

Worcester Public Schools (WPS) in Massachusetts illustrates how districts often begin accessibility work with a tangible, high-impact project such as the website.

When OCR contacted the district in 2023 about website accessibility, WPS was already preparing a website overhaul and a phased rollout of a new communications platform. Chief Communications Officer Dan O’Brien explains, “Because our website and digital communications were being audited by the Office for Civil Rights, ADA compliance was mandatory.”

Staff education focused on practical, ongoing guidance to start rather than policing every communication. WPS used regular webinars, tutorials and targeted outreach for staff groups most involved with family communications, while early adopters piloted new tools.

O’Brien emphasizes that the website is just the first step. “Accessibility is a continuous process,” he says. “Take time to learn the basics and best practices. Educate yourself before you educate others, and leave staff with something tangible, which they can refer to later.” He also stresses keeping expectations realistic, adding, “When working with OCR, they wanted to see considerable improvement, but even our representatives acknowledged that 100% compliance is not a reasonable expectation. It’s more about big-picture practices that are trained and socialized with those doing the most communication.”

## 4 Conduct Regular Digital Accessibility Audits

To advance digital accessibility, districts first need a clear understanding of where they stand. A digital accessibility audit provides this clarity by systematically reviewing a district's digital ecosystem — including websites, learning platforms, instructional materials, communication systems and employee tools — to identify gaps, barriers and areas that do not meet accessibility standards.

Audits serve multiple purposes:

- ✓ **Assessment:** They show districts their current level of compliance and highlight where remediation is needed.
- ✓ **Planning:** They help prioritize efforts, focusing first on areas that will have the greatest impact.
- ✓ **Accountability:** Regular audits allow districts to monitor progress, track changes and sustain the shared responsibility across departments.

A typical accessibility audit follows these steps:

- 1. Inventory all digital platforms** (website, LMS, apps, communication tools, etc.) and content (uploaded documents, text, etc.).
- 2. Conduct automated accessibility scans** using accessibility evaluation tools like [WAVE](#) or [aXe](#).
- 3. Conduct manual and user testing** with students and staff with disabilities.
- 4. Prioritize fixes** by impact (e.g., student-facing tools first).



*Districts making the most progress in accessibility consistently rely on automated testing tools. In fact, 90% of survey respondents who said they are well on their way to compliance use these tools, compared to just 60% of others. This finding underscores the importance of combining both automated and manual approaches for a complete picture of accessibility.*

- 5. Document findings,** assign responsibilities and set deadlines.
- 6. Reassess regularly** on at least an annual cycle.

The narrow exceptions outlined in the updated Title II regulations can also help districts triage their efforts and focus initial remediation where it will have the greatest impact. [See next page.]