

Available in alternate formats.
Please contact NLESD
Phone: (709) 758-2372
Email: hhillier@nlesd.ca

ACCESSIBILITY PLAN

2023



Message from the Superintendent of Schools

In 2021, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador introduced the **Accessibility Act NL**. The goal of the Act is to prevent and remove barriers that restrict persons with disabilities from fully participating in society. The Act outlines responsibilities for prescribed public sector bodies. As required by the Act, the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD) is responsible for developing a plan to address accessibility in our schools.

I am pleased to present the NLESD plan for improving accessibility across various aspects of our school system. This multi-year plan, developed with contributions from staff, students and community partners, builds on work that has already been done. It outlines priorities that will guide future work and enhance inclusivity and accessibility for all members of our community.

In our plan, we have committed to:

1. Increasing awareness of accessibility in all aspects of District operations, including in attitudes, actions, and the built environment.
2. Identifying barriers to accessibility with a view to their elimination where possible, or mitigation where not.

I want to extend special thanks to the members of our Advisory Group as well as the representatives on our Cross-Divisional Working Group. Your interest and input will help to shape our work in the months to come, and we look forward to working with students, staff, parents and guardians and our community stakeholders in continuing to advance inclusion and accessibility in our schools.

Terry Hall
Superintendent of Schools (Interim)

About the NLESD

Under the Accessibility Act NL (2021), a school board established or continued under the Schools Act, 1997 is considered a public body.

Vision

The NLESD is an educational leader preparing all students to achieve to their fullest potential in an inclusive, safe and caring environment.

Lines of Business

Programs and Human Resources

- Delivery of curriculum, student programs and services
- Recruitment and hiring of staff; implementation of collective agreements and performance appraisal programs

Corporate Services

- Management of financial resources
- Acquisition of materials/equipment/services
- Payroll
- Information technology
- Student transportation
- Properties, facilities and capital priorities.

Students-Schools-Staff

The NLESD operates 252 schools (including four alternate sites) across the province, and serves almost 64,000 students from Kindergarten to Level 4. It employs more than 10,000 full-time, part-time and casual teaching and support staff.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced the integration of the NLESD with Government in 2021. Work is currently underway to complete the integration of the District into Core Government in January, 2024. **NLSchools** will oversee the K-L4 education system for schools formerly under the jurisdiction of the NLESD.

Planning Process

GNL Planning Guide

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador released a planning guide in May 2023 to support the implementation of the Accessibility Act NL.

Public bodies are required to develop an accessibility plan within two years of the Act becoming law, and make it public. The Plan is to be updated every three years. Public bodies are also required to consult with persons with disabilities, or representatives from organizations of persons with disabilities, in the development and implementation of accessibility plans.

NLESD - Accessibility Working Group

The NLESD established a small working group in 2023, to facilitate the development of a plan. The working group is comprised of appointed representatives of the various divisions that operate within NLESD:

- Communications
- Facilities
- Human Resources
- Policy and Planning
- Programs
- Student Services
- Student Transportation

Other employees are consulted or assist with the work of the group, as necessary. The Director of Facilities and the Manager of Policy and Planning with the NLESD were appointed by the Superintendent of Schools as lead facilitators. The Working Group met bi-weekly from July to December, 2023.

See Appendix A

NLESD - Accessibility Advisory Group

Stakeholders for the Accessibility Plan include (but are not limited to) students, families, employees, and external agencies who represent people with disabilities and other community partners. The NLESD confirmed an Accessibility Advisory Group in September of 2023. The Advisory Group included a student, former student, two parents, two employees, a COD NL representative (Coalition of Persons with Disabilities, Newfoundland and Labrador) and a NLFSC representative (Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils). The lead facilitators for the Working Group also served as co-facilitators for the Advisory Group and provided administrative support. The Advisory Group met monthly from October 2023 to January 2024.

See Appendix B

NLESD Accessibility Plan

Purpose of Plan

The purpose of the NLESD Accessibility Plan is to provide a framework for enhancing accessibility for people with disabilities to our school system. It identifies ongoing initiatives and priority areas for improvement. The Plan outlines multi-year goals and is intended to inform further discussion, consultation and planning throughout the organization.

Feedback

The NLESD obtained feedback on issues and priorities for the Plan through consultation with our Advisory Group, consultation with our Working Group, through a Google survey (NLESD Divisions) and through a ThoughtExchange survey (COD NL and FSCNL) members.

Participants were asked for their input on identifying the current barriers to accessibility and priorities for the Accessibility Plan. The most common types of barriers identified were with respect to Attitude and Awareness, Teaching and Learning-Student Services, Communications, Human Resources, Built Environment, and Student Transportation.

The NLESD is committed to working collaboratively with its stakeholders to improve access and address barriers. While current initiatives have enhanced inclusion and improved accessibility for many, the NLESD recognizes that there is still much work to be done. The Plan will need to be flexible and evolve as awareness, resources and technology evolves, and the NLESD is integrated into Core Government.

Statement of Commitment

Striving towards full participation for all persons in the school environment, by focusing on barrier identification and removal rather than on disabilities.

Priorities

The NLESD Accessibility Plan focuses on the priorities outlined below. The NLESD will develop action plans for each priority, with work commencing in Year 1 (2024) and continuing as needed. The Plan may need to be revised in response to emerging needs and priorities, and when there are updates to accessibility standards,

1. Attitude and Awareness

Goal

Build awareness and support for accessibility and understanding of the barriers experienced by Persons with Disabilities.

Current Initiatives

- Professional learning and training on a variety of topics to support accessibility and inclusion are offered for teaching and other staff.
- More cross-divisional consultation and problem-solving now occurs between Programs, Student Services, Human Resources, Facilities and Student Transportation staff, to better address issues that arise for individual students. This has led to increased awareness of barriers to accessibility by staff in all divisions.

Barriers

- Not all staff understand disabilities (visible and non-visible) and the accommodations needed to create equitable access.
- Sometimes renovations and resources are required to make a school more accessible. However, in other circumstances it requires awareness and understanding, and the ability to make smaller changes on a daily basis.
- The input of persons with disabilities is important to improving accessibility. Staff may not always have the ability to identify barriers.

Actions

- In partnership with community stakeholders, develop a Professional Learning (PL) Framework and related PL session(s), to be delivered to all staff, starting with managerial staff. The purpose of the professional learning will be to:

- Outline public body responsibilities under the Accessibility Act NL and government policies.
- Increase awareness of barriers that exist in the school environment.
- Outline current initiatives of the NLESD to address accessibility.
- Encourage participants to evaluate their own attitudes and actions related to accessibility.
- Engage staff, particularly managerial staff, in ensuring no new barriers are created, as well as eliminating or mitigating existing barriers.
- Build 'Train the Trainer' capacity for ongoing PL delivery.

Lead Divisions: Human Resources, Student Services

2. Teaching and Learning-Student Services

Goal

Enhance student access to teaching and learning.

Current Initiatives

- The NLESD is supporting the implementation of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Framework, which enables flexibility in the way students access material, engage with it, and show what they know. In a UDL classroom, many different materials and resources may be used to engage students such as flexible workspaces, accessible digital tools for reading and writing, and student choice in learning experiences. UDL inspired assessments offer multiple means for students to express what they know and are able to do.
- The NLESD is also supporting the implementation of the Responsive Teaching and Learning (RTL) Provincial Policy, an evidence-based approach that focuses on gathering data, reflecting upon student progress and teacher practice and making plans for improvement.
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Services now include Itinerant Teachers, Teaching and Learning Assistants, and Auditory Verbal Therapists (AVTs), capacity building with staff in American Sign Language (ASL), and two DHH CLASSROOM sites: East Point Elementary and St. Paul's Junior High, with a

third (Holy Heart of Mary) to be established as the students progress to high school.

- Blind and Visually Impaired (BVI) Services include Itinerant Teachers and virtual orientation and mobility services. There is focus on expanded technology use for students and staff.
- Chromebooks have been provided to all students in junior and senior high, and there has been a significant increase in the provision and use of assistive technologies K-12, and professional learning related to its use.
- The Student Services Division facilitates individual programming (e.g. Individual Education Plan or IEP) and transition planning for students (e.g. entry into Kindergarten, transition between schools and grade levels). The Division also coordinates services (speech language, educational psychology, comprehensive school health, assistive technology, alternate transportation, home teaching and CDLI – in special circumstances), as well as resource allocations.

Barriers

- Staff shortages may impact student programming and coordination of services.
- Each school has unique issues and situations. An individualized approach is necessary to support accessibility for students.
- If a student is not able to self-advocate, or does not have someone to effectively advocate on their behalf, the identification of their needs may not be as robust.
- Students should have access to learning in ways that work for them, including for those who may be homebound and those who need more visual and audio learning tools.

Actions

- Develop and implement cross-divisional contingencies (Programs, Student Services, Human Resources, Student Transportation), to help maintain consistent student programming and services during persistent staff shortages.
- Build capacity in Universal Design for Learning through continued professional learning and support for staff.
- Compile a provincial inventory of specialized equipment, to enable better redistribution to schools.

- Strengthen community-based partnerships to problem-solve barriers to teaching and learning.

Lead Divisions: Programs, Student Services

3. Communications

Goal

Enhance communications with internal and external stakeholders.

Current Initiatives

- The NLESD website interface has been improved and translation services, font size changes, text to speech, color changes and responsive design for mobile systems is available for the public website.
- Google Chrome is the common platform for teaching and learning and district operations, and features a variety of accessibility features.
- There is increased American Sign Language (ASL) translation for activities (e.g. public board meetings), and the district is building capacity with staff in ASL.
- Various social media platforms (e.g. Facebook) are used to share information with the public.
- Text, email, phone calls and other tools are used to share information with parents and guardians as appropriate.

Barriers

- Documents and presentations may not be available in an accessible format.
- Signage within buildings needs to be enhanced.
- Information needs to be provided in multiple ways.
- Staff, parents or guardians and community members may not be aware of the resources available to assist with communications and teaching and learning. They may need guidance on where to look.
- Access to high-speed internet varies across the Province.

Actions

- Align public website and communications materials with Government of Newfoundland and Labrador guidelines and policies on Accessibility.
- Confirm and communicate standards for plain and inclusive language and incorporate them into internal and external communications wherever possible.
- Complete audit of school websites to identify areas for improvement.

Lead Division: Communications

4. Human Resources

Goal

Enhance recruitment and hiring practices for NLESD employees, to remove accessibility barriers for potential employees.

Current Initiatives

- The hiring process has been enhanced with visual aids, reading, translation and provision of a written set of questions for job interviews.
- The accommodations process for employees has been enhanced, taking into consideration ergonomic assessments, equipment needs and other family and medical needs.
- There are more user-friendly and accessible functions in the online Staffroom.
- Professional learning has been enhanced with more variety, closed caption, visuals, color contrast, alt text, etc.
- Accessible communications guidelines are now applied to the development of OHS materials (e.g. Newsletter).
- A more flexible work environment is considered where possible (e.g. start times).

Barriers

- There may be challenges to offering accommodations for people in certain jobs and buildings, which may impact a person's ability to apply on a position or an employee's return to work.
- More professional learning and training is needed for teachers and other staff on supporting accessibility.

- Need to ensure human resource communications and platforms are accessible and support persons with disabilities to apply for jobs.

Actions

- Review and begin to incorporate relevant Government of Newfoundland and Labrador policies and guidelines on employment accessibility and equity.
- Publish guidelines on how job applicants can request accommodation.
- Review job opportunity distribution to ensure ads are shared with various stakeholder groups.
- In consultation with a User of Assistive Technology, conduct a scan of hiring sites and information, and obtain feedback for improvement.

Lead Division: Human Resources

5. Built Environment

Goal

Enhance school physical environments and outdoor spaces to improve accessibility for students, staff and the broader school community.

Current Initiatives

- Any new school construction and major renovations of NLESD facilities exceed minimum standards and apply Universal Design principles.
- Funding from the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure has enabled the NLESD to complete numerous accessibility projects in schools in the past five years. On building exteriors, these projects range from improvement of barrier free space markings to an increase in accessible outdoor play and learning spaces and the provision of accessible playground equipment. Inside schools, the projects include installing high visibility stair treads, washroom accessibility improvements, and equipment repairs.
- In consultation with Student Services, Facilities staff assess school sites to ensure readiness for students in September, particularly those transitioning through school feeder systems.

- Fire alarms in many schools have integrated strobe lights vs simply horns, and any future upgrades will include that by default.
- There is ongoing review of parking lots and barrier free (blue zone) spaces.
- Acoustic tiles and sound field systems have been added in specific schools and the number of sensory spaces has been increased.

Barriers

- Older buildings are problematic, as they were not built with accessibility in mind. Consequently, even with upgrades since original construction, a school property and building, and the classrooms and common spaces within, may have varying levels of accessibility.
- Limited accessibility in school spaces may impede student actual and perceived independence.
- A zoned school may not be able to accommodate a student with disabilities. In such cases, students may not be able to attend school with their friends/zoned classmates.
- Wayfinding needs to be improved in most schools.
- It is challenging to respond to issues affecting accessibility needs in a timely and consistent manner (e.g. limited number of elevator/lift repair contractors).

Actions

- Continue annual project and maintenance work to remove barriers and enhance physical environments (e.g. ramping entrances, adding automatic door operators, washroom improvements, etc.)
- Conduct evaluation of accessibility status of NLESD schools, to confirm baseline data, support barrier identification and mitigation or removal and make information available for students and families.
- Incorporate accessibility considerations into plans for all future renovations.

Lead Division: Facilities

6. Student Transportation

Goal

Enhance student transportation for students with disabilities.

Current Initiatives

- Through government funding, the NLESD has obtained more full-size, wheelchair accessible buses, enabling an increased number of students with disabilities to travel on regular buses with their peers.
- The NLESD is implementing the provincial government's new policy eliminating the 1.6 km Family Responsibility Zone for schools. Almost 6000 additional students were eligible for transportation this school year, with full implementation planned for 2024.

Barriers

- Barriers still exist in transportation for students with both physical and cognitive disabilities. Important to support students wherever possible to go on the bus with their classmates.
- More wheelchair accessible buses are needed.

Actions

- Continue to increase the number of accessible buses and to fully eliminate the 1.6 Family Responsibility Zone.
- Develop handbook for staff, parents and guardians on the transportation of students with disabilities.
- Conduct jurisdictional scan of student transportation in other Canadian school districts, to identify best practices for improving the transportation of students with disabilities.
- Develop a framework for individual transportation plans for students with disabilities, with the ultimate goal of transitioning students to the conventional means of transportation with their peers where possible.

Lead Division: Student Transportation

Monitoring and Evaluation

Consultation

The NLESD recognizes that ongoing consultation with persons with disabilities is crucial as we work to eliminate barriers to accessibility. The NLESD will collaborate with stakeholders to support implementation of the Accessibility Plan, and an Advisory Group, including persons with disabilities, will be invited to provide input on progress at the end of Year 1.

Communication

The NLESD Accessibility Plan will be posted to the NLESD public website and will be shared with all Managers and School Administrators.

Monitoring

Overall monitoring will rest with the Superintendent of Schools, to assess progress against the identified goals and any challenges or lessons learned.

Reporting

A progress report on implementation of the Plan will be published by January 2025. The Plan will be reviewed and updated as required by the Accessibility Act NL.

Summary

The NLESD Accessibility Plan as outlined above is aligned with the Accessibility Act NL. The Plan provides a Framework for improving accessibility to our school system for persons with disabilities and supports action in several key areas.

Through the planning process we heard about current initiatives supporting the 2SLGBTQIA+ student community, services supporting newcomers to our NL school system, and concerns regarding mental health and students affected by poverty and food insecurity. However, this Plan focuses on accessibility for persons with disabilities, as defined in the Accessibility Act NL. Other challenges to accessibility and student engagement will continue to be addressed through policies and practices that support inclusion, diversity and equity.

Definitions

Accessibility

As defined in the Government of Canada's Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology, accessibility is the quality of an environment that enables a person to access it with ease.

Accessibility Plan

As defined in the Accessibility Act: A plan to address the prevention, identification and removal of barriers in the policies, programs, practices and services of a public body;

Accommodation

In the context of the workplace:

The Government of Canada's Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology defines accommodation as a measure taken by management based on the personal circumstances of an employee that is designed to enable them to carry out their duties and fully participate in work-related activities.

Examples include acquiring or modifying equipment, software or devices, modifying work schedules, or providing assistance through support services.

In the context of providing services to the public:

Accommodation is any technical aid or device, personal support, disability-related support or other accommodation a person may require to fully participate in meetings, events and information sessions.

Examples include accessible meeting rooms, accessible formats for documents, ASL interpreters, live captioning, and decision-making supporters.

Tip: when promoting events, use tag lines to let people know that disability-related accommodations can be provided to support their access and participation.

Assistive Technology

Learning Disabilities Association NL:

Assistive Technologies (AT) are assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices for people with disabilities. In the context of learning disabilities, AT includes any device, software or equipment that helps persons with learning disabilities. work around their challenges by providing/improving access to learning. Devices such as computers, tablets and laptops, as well as software such as Text-to-Voice, Word Prediction, Spell Check, and Dictionary, are examples of AT.

Department of Education:

Assistive technology (AT) includes any equipment that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a student with an exceptionality. It can be high or low tech and is intended to promote greater independence.

Barrier

Means anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in society, Including:

- i. A physical barrier,
- ii. An architectural barrier,
- iii. An information or communications barrier,
- iv. An attitudinal barrier,
- v. A technological barrier,
- vi. A barrier established or perpetuated by an Act, regulations, a policy or practice.

Disability

Includes a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation that is permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, that, in interaction with a barrier, prevents a person from fully participating in society.

Diversity

Diversity is defined as “the presence of a wide range of human qualities within a group, organization or society. The dimensions of diversity include... ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation and socio-economic status

Equity

Department of Education (My GSA, Terms and Concepts):

A condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences. (OME)

Inclusion

As defined in the Government of Canada’s Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology, inclusion is the practice of using proactive measures to create an environment where people feel welcomed, respected and valued, and to foster a sense of belonging and engagement. This practice involves changing the environment by removing barriers so that each person has equal access to opportunities and resources and can achieve their full potential.

Department of Education:

Defines **Inclusive Education** as a philosophy that promotes:

- the right of all students to attend school with their peers, and to receive appropriate and quality programming;
- a continuum of supports and services in the most appropriate setting (large group, small group, individualized) respecting the dignity of the child;
- a welcoming school culture where all members of the school community feel they belong, realize their potential, and contribute to the life of the school;
- an atmosphere which respects and values the participation of all members of the school community;
 - a school community which celebrates diversity; and
 - a safe and caring school environment

These tenets apply to all members of the school community regardless of economic status, gender, racial or religious background, sexual orientation, academic ability or other facet of diversity.

Universal Design

As described by its founder, Ronald Mace, Universal Design is defined as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Ronald Mace, 1988). Universal design principles can be applied to any product, environment, or communication, including built environment, web pages, and education curricula. Accessible generally refers to minimum code requirements - focused on specifications for objects such as door widths and counter heights that once achieved are considered complete.

Conversely, Universal Design starts with the users of the environment in mind - seeking what features provide the greatest benefit to the most people. A process that begins with the person vs the object or disability is clearly superior.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all by setting clear, rigorous goals, anticipating barriers; and proactively designing to minimize those barriers.

Appendix A

Accessibility Working Group Representatives

Name	Division	Position
Robyn Breen	Student Services/Programs	Director of Student Services – Avalon/HQ
Gordon Barbour	Student Transportation	Senior Manager of Student Transportation - Provincial
Gary Cahill	OHS/Human Resources	Director of HR – Employee Safety and Wellness
Heather Hillier	Policy and Planning/ Corporate Services	Manager of Policy and Planning – Avalon Office/HQ (Co-Facilitator)
Greg Howard	Communications/Corporate Services	Manager of Communications – Avalon/HQ
Jim Sinnott	Facilities	Director of Facilities (Co-Facilitator)

Appendix B

Advisory Group Representatives

Name	Role	Location
Rob Alvarez	Student	Labrador
Heather Hillier	Manager of Policy and Planning (Co-Facilitator)	Central
Lindsay Janes	Employee (Teacher -Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation – CDLI)	Avalon
Cassandra McGrath	Former Student	Avalon
Danette Payne	Parent	Western
Denise Pike	NL Federation of School Councils (NLFSC)	Avalon/Provincial
Wanda Lee Poole	Employee (Program Specialist – Student Services K-12)	Avalon/Provincial
Nancy Reid	Coalition of Persons with Disabilities (COD NL)	Avalon/Provincial
Cherie Stirton	Parent	Central
Jim Sinnott	Director of Facilities (Co-Facilitator)	Avalon/Provincial