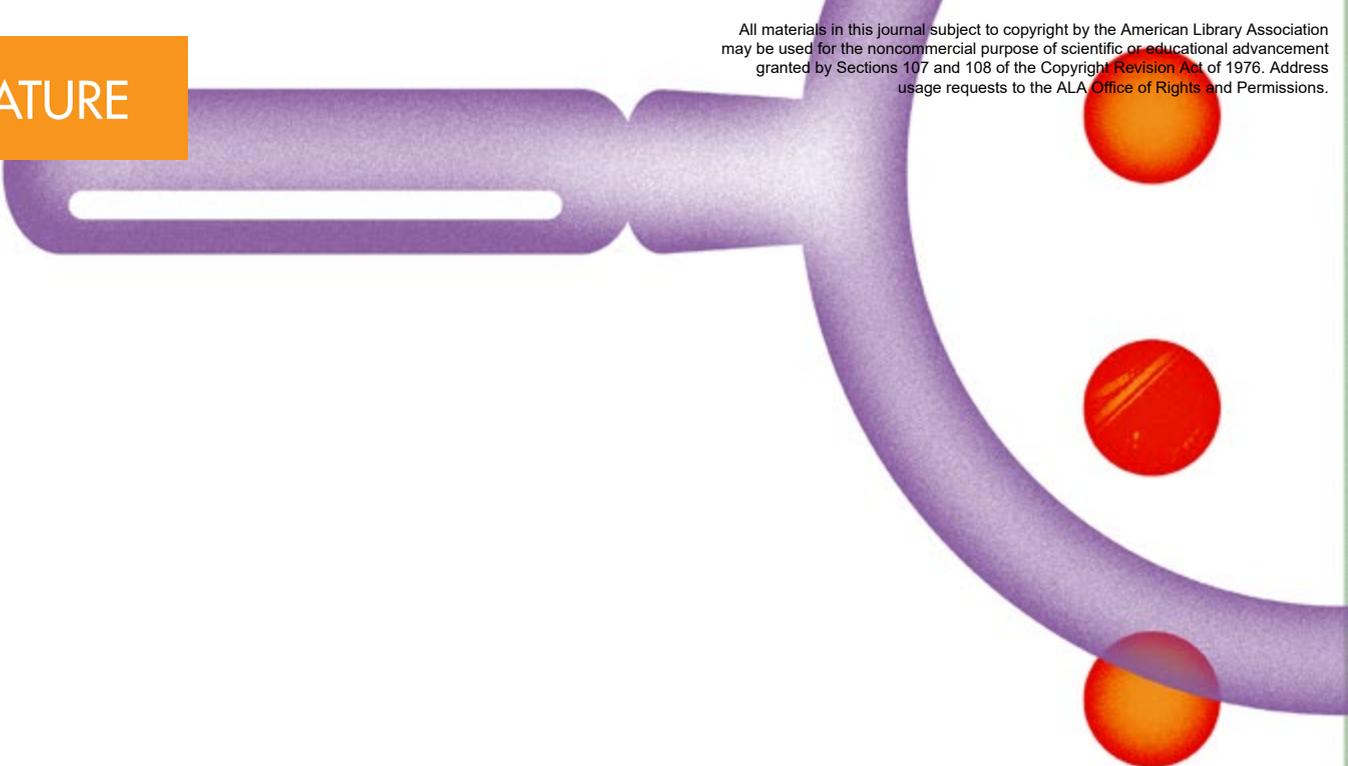# Equal Access + Equal Opportunity = Success for All Learners

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Collection development is the core of every school library, and successful school librarians know that meeting all learner needs can contribute to their success. Successful school libraries curate print and digital resources and resources that all learners can access. Providing access to all resources is the heart of school libraries. A school library with an enormous collection of print and digital resources that is inaccessible to every learner, is equivalent to an empty collection. A school library that contains computers and learning management systems for teaching and learning but no assistive technology functionality is equivalent to one that provides no access to these resources.

When curating a collection, it is critical to know what resources will be needed to support learners of all abilities. Barriers prevent access. "No one should have to ask for access, it should just be there" (Matlin 2017). Learners need resources that allow them independence and the ability to participate in the learning process.

When curating their collections school librarians must consider learners with visual, hearing, physical, and cognitive impairments. While you may not have a learner currently in need of assistive technology resources, one may join the school at any time. You and other educators and administrators should develop a plan to acquire the necessary resources when such a student does walk through your doors. This ensures immediate learning engagement for these students, with no downtime waiting for resources. Accessible and assistive technologies create equity for all learners.

Collection development is the core of every school library, and successful school librarians know how to serve every learner. However, school libraries are not constructed in a silo.

Successful libraries are steeped in collaboration. The school librarian should work with a team (other educators, reading specialists, special education teachers, school diagnosticians, etc.) to ensure a learner's specific needs are fulfilled to support academic learning and reading for enjoyment.

Resources to Support Students with Disabilities

When considering learners with visual impairments, determine whether your print collection contains large-print resources. Most book jobbers offer large-print resources. If you do not see them listed, advocate for your learners and use jobbers that can support this area of the collection. Do you know how to obtain Braille resources? The National Center on Accessible Education Materials (NCAEM) is a great resource to locate state contact information for accessible education materials (AEMs) and accessible instructional materials (AIMs). (The terms "AEM" and "AIM" are often used interchangeably; these resources are meant specifically for use by K–12 learners.)

AIM should be available for students with disabilities as well as those who have been identified as needing extra help. According to NCAEM:

> For students who do not receive special education services under IDEA, the disability civil rights laws—Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act—may require the provision of AEM to ensure an equal educational opportunity. So, a student does not necessarily have to have an IEP to receive AEM and other accommodations. (n.d.)

It is important to identify the appropriate state authority to work with to determine how to best support all learners with the appropriate materials. Your state authority may offer in-person visits and webinars to offer support for your school's team.

Bookshare.org is a resource that supports learners with dyslexia, visual impairments, cerebral palsy, and other reading barriers through audio, highlighted text, Braille, and large-font materials. Bookshare is free for "qualified U.S. students of any age and schools through an award from OSEP (Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education). People with qualifying conditions who are not U.S. students, and organizations serving them, pay a low membership fee" (n.d.). Schools can register to support students needing these resources. A primary contact person is needed to manage the school account. The responsible person must agree to the Bookshare terms, download the form, complete it, scan the form, and e-mail it to get started.

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) is a resource through the Library of Congress that supports learners needing Braille, audiobooks, and magazines. Through a national network of cooperating libraries NLS circulates resources at no cost via postage-free mail or instant downloads. Any resident of the United States or American citizen living abroad who is blind or has a visual or physical disability that prevents them from reading or handling print materials may apply for this service (n.d.). Institutions may also apply for this service. Eligibility information can be found at <www.loc.gov/nls/about/eligibility-for-nls-services>.

Another resource is Learning Ally, an organization that serves to transform the lives of struggling learners by offering human-read popular fiction audiobooks and textbooks in English, science, social

science, history and art (n.d.). In several states the organization's services are offered in partnership with a grant at little to no cost to institutions. However, school memberships are available nationwide for a sliding scale fee based on enrollment for a school and/or the division. A primary contact person is needed to manage the school account. An IEP or 504 is not required for students identified as having a reading deficit for schools that possess a school-based license. Students with dyslexia are eligible for the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution (n.d.). Individuals can obtain an annual membership for $135 per year. In some instances, discounts or fee waivers are available. Family users of this service must

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ADA History

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law on July 26, 1990, by President George H.W. Bush. The ADA is a wide-ranging civil rights law that prohibits, under certain circumstances, discrimination based on disability. It affords similar protections against discrimination to Americans with disabilities as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination based on race, religion, sex, national origin, and other characteristics illegal.

Rulemaking for the ADA dates back to 1991, and the latest update became effective in January 2017. The latest rule "further clarified a public accommodation's obligation to provide appropriate auxiliary aids and services for people with disabilities." These enhancements to the ADA are meant to ensure equal access and equal opportunity to support accessibility for all learners.

Equipped with this knowledge, as a collaborative member of the school leadership team, you can ensure all learners have resources and access to meet them where they are in the learning process.

Other Terms and Definitions

- **Accessible educational materials (AEMs):** print- and technology-based educational materials designed to be usable across the widest range of individual variability.

- **Accessible instructional materials (AIMs):** print-based educational materials converted into specialized formats required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (e.g., Braille, large print, audio, and digital text).

- **Individualized education program (IEP):** a written plan that is individually developed for students identified as having a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The plan is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with IDEA regulations by a duly constituted IEP team of educators, parents, and student (when appropriate). An IEP is based on achievement, assessment, and evaluation data and contains the goals that will guide the delivery of special education and related services.

- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):** a federal law governing the rights of children with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in what is termed a least restrictive environment (LRE).

have documentation of a learning disability, visual impairment, or physical disability preventing usage of traditional print material.

A competent authority is required to certify eligibility for these services. Examples of competent authorities that can certify eligibility in the Commonwealth of Virginia may include, but not limited, to:

Low Vision/Blindness

- Family doctor

- Ophthalmologist

- Optometrist

- Special education teacher

- National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, or similar government body outside of the United States

Physical Disabilities

- Physical/Occupational therapist

- Family doctor or other medical professional

- Special education teacher

Other Disabilities

- Clinical psychologist

- Family doctor

- Special education teacher

- Psychiatrist

- Neurologist (AIM VA n.d.)

Often in the K–12 setting, the special education team coordinates with medical practitioners to confirm eligibility.

Resources to Manage Accessibility

School library websites contain a plethora of information and resources, and these websites must be curated for all learners. Have you considered if your school library website complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (see sidebar)? The interface of the web content and information must be presented in a format that all learners can access. Check the following key components to ensure your website meets the needs of all learners:

- Use headers on the webpage but keep them simple and professional.

- Tables should be used only for data, not layout design.

- All documents for webpages should first be processed through an accessibility checker in the computer management system.

The accessibility checker is critical to ensure documents are fully accessible online. This feature allows the creator to check the online content accessibility and resolve accessibility issues before the content reaches the learner. Computer management systems such as Apple and Microsoft have accessibility functions you can employ to make your learners' experience enjoyable for teaching and learning.

To run the accessibility checker in Microsoft Office, click the "File" tab on the main menu toolbar at the top; click "Check for Issues;" and then click "Check Accessibility." For those using the Office 365 version of Word, you can access the accessibility checker from the "Review" tab on the main menu at the top. To enable the accessibility checker on a Mac, in the Apple menu, select "System Preferences," then select "Accessibility." Next, select and turn on the features you want to use.

This feature will show errors and warnings and how to fix errors in the accessibility checker panel. Common errors found in the accessibility checker include alternative text needed for images and alternative text or header rows for tables.

All images should have an informative description to support visual impairments. Color should not be used as the only means to communicate information because some learners may be color blind. WAVE Browser Evaluation and the Siteimprove Accessibility Checker provide web content evaluation directly within Chrome. These tools allow the content creator to check color contrast for learners that may experience light sensitivity.

Use linking text for websites instead of listing the URL. A screen reader will spell a URL instead of reading it, which can be annoying and distracting for learners. When creating lists, use the built-in function of the computer management system. These functions provide the template to properly place and support labeling of content, thus avoiding errors in the accessibility checker.

School librarians will want to collaborate with the leadership team to determine if a free accessibility checker option is appropriate, or a commercial resource would best suit their school needs.

Other Assistive Resources

Can learners access a screen reader on the devices used in the school library? Screen reader software allows text to be transmitted audibly. Any earphones compatible with your computers should support learners using these devices. Learners with cognitive impairments can be supported with e-readers and digital books.

In Microsoft, learners can use the "Dictate" function to capture information in a document. Microsoft offers many features to support learners with vision, hearing, and physical impairments. These features can be found by clicking "Start," then "Settings," then "Ease of Access."

Some of the features you can turn on include:

- The magnifier functionality, which supports learners with vision impairments

- Color filters, which support learners with vision impairments

- The narrator functionality, which supports learners with vision and/or physical impairments

- Closed captions, which support learners with hearing impairments

- Keyboard shortcuts, which support learners with physical impairments.

Conclusion

Successful school libraries strive to provide accessible resources for learners with visual, hearing, physical, and cognitive impairments to fit their learning needs. Successful school libraries strive to provide resources to manage accessibility and assistive technology to support the needs of learners.

Equal access + equal opportunity = Success for all learners.

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National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. n.d. <https://www.loc.gov/nls/> (accessed July 28, 2019).

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Apple. n.d. "Accessibility." <www.apple.com/accessibility>.

"How to Meet WCAG (Quick Reference)." n.d. <https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref/?versions=2.0>.

Microsoft. n.d. "Microsoft Accessibility." <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/accessibility/>.

Siteimprove Browser Extension. n.d. "Siteimprove Browser Extensions – Optimize in Chrome & Firefox." <https://siteimprove.com/en-us/core-platform/integrations/browser-extensions/>.

U.S. Department of Education. n.d. "About IDEA." <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>.

WAVE Web Accessibility Tool. n.d. <https://wave.webaim.org>.