

February 10, 2017

Michael J. Pfister
Superintendent of Schools
South River Public Schools
15 Montgomery Street
South River, New Jersey 08882

Re: Case No. 02-16-1409
South River Public Schools

Dear Superintendent Pfister:

This letter is to notify you of the determination made by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), regarding the above-referenced complaint filed against the South River Public Schools District (the District). The complainant alleged that the District is discriminating, on the basis of disability, because its website is not accessible to individuals with disabilities.

OCR is responsible for enforcing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 794, and its implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. Part 104, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in programs or activities receiving financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education (the Department). OCR also is responsible for enforcing Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (the ADA), 42 U.S.C. § 12131 et seq., and its implementing regulation at 28 C.F.R. Part 35. Under the ADA, OCR has jurisdiction over complaints alleging discrimination on the basis of disability that are filed against certain public entities. The District is a recipient of federal financial assistance from the Department and is a public elementary and secondary education system. Therefore, OCR has jurisdictional authority to investigate this complaint under both Section 504 and the ADA.

This letter summarizes the applicable legal standards, the information gathered during the investigation, and how the investigation was resolved.

Legal Authority:

Section 504 and the ADA prohibit people, on the basis of disability, from being excluded from participation in, being denied the benefits of, or otherwise being subjected to discrimination by recipients of federal financial assistance or by public entities, respectively. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4

and 28 C.F.R. § 35.130. People with disabilities must have equal access to recipients' programs, services, or activities unless doing so would fundamentally alter the nature of the programs, services, or activities, or would impose an undue burden. 28 C.F.R. § 35.164. Both Section 504 and the ADA prohibit affording individuals with disabilities an opportunity to participate in or benefit from aids, benefits, and services that is unequal to the opportunity afforded others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(1)(ii); 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(1)(ii). Similarly, individuals with disabilities must be provided with aids, benefits, or services that provide an equal opportunity to achieve the same result or the same level of achievement as others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(2); 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(1)(iii). An individual with a disability, or a class of individuals with disabilities, may be provided with a different or separate aid, benefit, or service only if doing so is necessary to ensure that the aid, benefit, or service is as effective as that provided to others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(1)(iv); 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(1)(iv). The ADA also requires public entities to take steps to ensure that communications with people with disabilities are as effective as communications with others, subject to the fundamental alteration and undue burden defenses. 28 C.F.R. § 35.160(a)(1). In sum, programs, services, and activities—whether in a “brick and mortar,” on-line, or other “virtual” context—must be operated in ways that comply with Section 504 and the ADA.

Investigation:

OCR examined the pages on the recipient's website identified by the complainant to determine whether these are accessible to persons with disabilities. These web pages included:

- a) Homepage (<http://www.srivernj.org/>);
- b) Special Education Services Page (<http://www.srivernj.org/domain/53>);
- c) Student Services page (<http://www.srivernj.org/domain/54>);
- d) Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying page (<http://www.srivernj.org/Page/3011>);
- e) Food Services page (<http://www.srivernj.org/domain/57>); and
- f) Online Lunch Application page (<http://www.srivernj.org/Page/3002>).

OCR evaluated the above-listed pages and determined that parts of the website used color combinations that made text difficult or impossible for people with low vision to see. These barriers deny persons with disabilities access to programs, services, and activities offered on the website and impede the recipient's communications with persons with disabilities; therefore, these barriers violate Section 504 and the ADA. In addition, OCR determined that the website lacked a way for users of special software and those with disabilities affecting fine motor control to skip to the main content of the pages, thereby impeding their ability to efficiently navigate past long headers appearing before the main content. Additionally, the titles of web pages did not change when tabbing through the content, thus failing to make the title of the content accessible to those who are blind, many who have low vision, and those with disabilities affecting fine motor control.

Before OCR conducted additional investigation of the District's website, the District expressed an interest in voluntarily resolving this case. In light of the District's willingness to address its website comprehensively without further investigation, OCR determined entering into a voluntary resolution agreement was appropriate.

Resolution Agreement:

The District submitted signed a resolution agreement (Agreement) on December 20, 2016. When fully implemented, the Agreement will address the findings of noncompliance noted above as well as resolve issues of accessibility pertaining to the rest of the District's website. The District committed to take actions including:

- selecting an auditor who has the requisite knowledge and experience to identify barriers to access on the recipient's website and conducting a thorough audit of existing online content and functionality;
- making all new website content and functionality accessible to people with disabilities;
- developing a corrective action plan to prioritize the removal of online barriers over an 18-month period;
- posting a notice to persons with disabilities about how to request access to online information or functionality that is currently inaccessible; and
- providing website accessibility training to all appropriate personnel.

OCR will monitor the recipient's implementation of the Agreement. When OCR concludes that the District has fully and effectively implemented the terms and obligations of the Agreement and is in compliance with the statutes and regulations at issue in the case, OCR will terminate its monitoring and close the case. If the District fails to implement the Agreement, OCR may initiate administrative or judicial proceedings to enforce specific terms and obligations of the Agreement. Before initiating administrative (34 CFR §§ 100.9, 100.10) or judicial proceedings to enforce the Agreement, OCR will give the District written notice of the alleged breach and sixty (60) calendar days to cure the breach.

These findings should not be interpreted to address the District's compliance with any other regulatory provision or to address any issues other than those addressed in this letter. This letter sets forth OCR's determination in an individual OCR case. This letter is not a formal statement of OCR policy and should not be relied upon, cited, or construed as such. OCR's formal policy statements are approved by a duly authorized OCR official and made available to the public. The complainant may have the right to file a private suit in federal court whether or not OCR finds a violation.

Please be advised that the District may not harass, coerce, intimidate, or discriminate against any individual because he or she has filed a complaint or participated in the complaint resolution process. If this should occur, the individual may file a separate complaint alleging such harassment or intimidation.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, it may be necessary to release this document and related correspondence and records upon request. In the event that OCR receives such a request, OCR will seek to protect, to the extent provided by law, personally identifiable information that, if released, could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

If you have any questions, please contact Coleen Chin, Senior Attorney, at (646) 428-3809 or coleen.chin@ed.gov; or Ernest King, Compliance Team Attorney, at (646) 428-3777 or ernest.king@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/

Timothy C.J. Blanchard

Encl.

cc: XXXXXXXXXXXX, Esq.