

January 20, 2017

Dr. John Ramos, Sr.
Superintendent of Schools
School District of South Orange and Maplewood
525 Academy Street
Maplewood, New Jersey 07040

Re: Case No. 02-16-1479
School District of South Orange and Maplewood

Dear Superintendent Ramos:

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 School District of South Orange and Maplewood (the District). The complainant alleged that the District discriminated based on disability because certain pages of the District's website were not accessible to individuals with disabilities including, but not limited to, those with visual and hearing impairments.

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 financial assistance from the Department, and is a public elementary and secondary education system. Therefore, OCR has jurisdictional authority to address this complaint under Section 504 and the ADA.

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

Regulatory Authority

The regulation implementing Section 504, at 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(a), provides that no qualified person with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in, be

denied the benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance. The regulation implementing the ADA, at 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(a), extends this prohibition to public entities.

The regulations implementing Section 504 and the ADA, at 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b) and 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b), respectively, further prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in the provision of any aid, benefit, or service, directly or through contractual, licensing, or other arrangements. Covered entities may not deny a qualified person with a disability the opportunity to participate in or benefit from the aid, benefit, or service; afford a qualified person with a disability an opportunity to participate in or benefit from the aid, benefit, or service that is not equal to that afforded others; provide a qualified person with a disability with an aid, benefit, or service that is not as effective as that provided to others; or otherwise limit a qualified person with a disability in the enjoyment of any right, privilege, advantage, or opportunity enjoyed by others receiving an aid, benefit, or service.

Additionally, the regulation implementing the ADA has specific requirements for communication, which, in pertinent part, require that public entities take appropriate steps to ensure that communications with applicants, participants, members of the public, and companions with disabilities are as effective as communications with others. 28 C.F.R. § 35.160(a)(1).

Investigation and Findings

During the course of the investigation, OCR examined a number of pages on the District's website to determine whether these were accessible to persons with disabilities. These web pages included, but were not limited to:

- Homepage (<http://www.somds.k12.nj.us>);
- Special Education (<http://www.somds.k12.nj.us/Domain/32>);
- Facts at a Glance (<http://www.somds.k12.nj.us/domain/43>);
- SOMA TV (<http://www.somatv.org/modern-canadacana/>);
- The Parenting Center (<http://www.somds.k12.nj.us//site/Default.aspx?PageID=403>);
- Columbia High School Library (<http://www.somds.k12.nj.us/Domain/85>); and
- Online Public Access Catalog (<http://www.somds.k12.nj.us/Page/506>).

OCR evaluated the above-listed pages and determined that the website lacked a way for users of special software to skip to the main content of the pages, thereby impeding their ability to efficiently navigate past long headers appearing before the main content; form controls were missing, which identify the purpose and function of the otherwise unlabeled search bar/form field for users of special software; keyboard controls did not access all content and functions, including videos, or were not visually apparent, which makes it difficult for keyboard users to navigate the pages; links contained no text, which makes it difficult for users with disabilities to understand the purpose or context for a link; videos lacked meaningful captions; and web pages had insufficient contrast, which affected all viewers, including those with visual disabilities and those with certain cognitive/neurological disabilities. OCR determined that the deficiencies identified constitute barriers that deny persons with disabilities access to programs, services, and

activities offered on the website and may impede the District's communications with persons with disabilities.

Based on the foregoing, OCR determined that the District violated the regulation implementing Section 504, at 34 C.F.R. § 104.4, and the regulation implementing the ADA, at 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.130 and 35.160(a)(1), by maintaining a website that excludes qualified persons with disabilities from its online programs, activities, aids, benefits and services. Specifically, the District does not afford individuals with disabilities the same ease of use, completeness of information, or functionality through its website as is provided to individuals without disabilities.

Resolution Agreement

The District submitted a signed Resolution Agreement to OCR on January 5, 2017. In accordance with the Resolution Agreement, the District agreed to take actions such as:

- selecting an auditor who has the requisite knowledge and experience to identify barriers to access on the District'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;
- 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.

This letter 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. OCR will monitor the District's implementation of the Resolution Agreement. When OCR concludes the District has fully implemented the terms of the Resolution 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 Resolution Agreement, OCR may seek compliance with the federal civil rights laws through any means authorized by law, including enforcing the specific terms of the Resolution Agreement.

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 happens, the individual may file another complaint alleging such treatment.

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 about OCR's determination, please contact Amy Randhawa, Compliance Team Attorney, at (646) 428-3781 or sandeep.randhawa@ed.gov; Aditi Shah, Compliance Team Attorney, at (646) 428-3897 or aditi.shah@ed.gov; or Félice Bowen, Compliance Team Leader, at (646) 428-3806 or felice.bowen@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/

Timothy C. J. Blanchard

Encl.

cc: XXXXX XXXXXXXX, Esq.