

July 5, 2017

Thomas J. Ficarra
Interim Superintendent of Schools
Hamilton Township School District
90 Park Avenue
Hamilton, New Jersey 08690

Re: Case No. 02-17-1124
Hamilton Township School District

Dear Mr. Ficarra:

This letter is to advise you of the resolution of the above-referenced complaint investigation of the Hamilton Township School District (the District) by U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The complainant alleged that the District is discriminating, on the basis of disability, because certain pages of its website are 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 and activities receiving financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education (the Department). OCR is also 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 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 pages on the District's website that the complainant identified to determine whether these were accessible to persons with disabilities. These web pages included:

- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/index.cfm>;
- http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/calendar_events.cfm;
- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/departments.cfm?subpage=1209958>;
- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/departments.cfm?subpage=669013>;
- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/departments.cfm?subpage=36037>;
- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/departments.cfm?subpage=1384197>;
- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/departments.cfm?subpage=36299>; and
- <http://www.hamilton.k12.nj.us/powerschool.cfm>.

OCR evaluated the above-listed pages and determined that: (i) some important content of the website could only be accessed by people who can use a computer mouse, which meant that content was not available to those who are blind, many who have low vision, and those with disabilities affecting fine motor control; (ii) some links were not labeled; (iii) important images were missing associated text descriptions, referred to as “alt tags,” that describe the images to blind and low-vision users who use special software; (iv) PDF documents were created in a way that makes them unreadable for many people who use assistive technology, including people who are blind who use screen readers; (v) search bars and/or form fields on the website were missing properly associated text labels, which identify the purpose and function of the otherwise unlabeled search bar/form field for users of special software; (vi) pages lacked a way for users of special software and those with disabilities affecting fine motor control to skip to the main content of the page, thereby impeding their ability to efficiently navigate past long headers appearing before the main content; and (vii) 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 District's communications with persons with disabilities.

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 that entering into a voluntary resolution agreement was appropriate.

Resolution Agreement

The District signed a resolution agreement (Agreement) on June 28, 2017. When fully implemented, the Agreement will address the issues 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:

- making its new website and all new website content and functionality accessible to people with disabilities;
- selecting an auditor who has the requisite knowledge and experience to identify barriers to access on the District's new website and conducting a thorough audit of new online content and functionality;
- developing a corrective action plan to prioritize the removal of any online barriers presented on the new website over a six month period;
- developing an interim corrective action plan to prioritize the removal of online barriers presented on certain pages of the District's existing website over a one 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 District'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 C.F.R. §§ 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 happens, the individual may file a complaint alleging such treatment.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, it may be necessary to release this letter and related correspondence and records upon request. In the event that OCR receives such a request, it 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 Eboné Woods, Compliance Team Attorney, at (646) 428-3898 or ebone.woods@ed.gov; or Amy Breglio, Compliance Team Attorney, at (646) 438-3942 or amy.breglio@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/

Timothy C.J. Blanchard

Encl.

cc: XXXXXXXX