



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, REGION IV

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REGION IV
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April 5, 2017

Dr. Candice McQueen
Commissioner
Tennessee Department of Education
710 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37243

Re: OCR No. 04-16-1267
Tennessee Department of Education

Dear Dr. McQueen:

This is to advise you of the resolution of the above-referenced complaint investigation of the Tennessee Department of Education (TN DOE) by the United States Department of Education (Department), Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The complaint, which was received on February 10, 2016, alleged that TN DOE is discriminating, on the basis of disability, because its website is not accessible to persons with disabilities.

OCR is responsible for enforcing section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (Section 504), 29 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 794, *et seq.*, and its implementing regulations at 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Part 104, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities of recipients of federal financial assistance. OCR is also responsible for enforcing title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended (Title II), 42 U.S.C. § 12131, *et seq.*, and its implementing regulations at 28 C.F.R. Part 35, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in programs, services, and activities of public entities. As a recipient of federal financial assistance from the Department and as a public entity, TN DOE is subject to OCR's jurisdiction under Section 504 and Title II.

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

Legal Authority:

Section 504 and Title II prohibit individuals, 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. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4 and 28 C.F.R. § 35.130. Individuals 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

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by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*

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activities, or would impose an undue burden. 28 C.F.R. § 35.164. Both Section 504 and Title II 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). Title II also requires public entities to take steps to ensure that communications with individuals 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 Title II.

Investigation to Date:

OCR examined the pages on TN DOE’s website identified by the complainant to determine whether they are accessible to persons with disabilities. These web pages included:

- Home page: <https://www.tn.gov/education>
- Special Education page: <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/special-education>
- Migrant Students page: <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/migrant-students>
- Civil Rights and Bullying page: <https://www.tn.gov/education/article/civil-rights-bullying-compliance-report>
- English Language Learners page: <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/english-learners>
- ESSA Feedback Form page: <http://www.tn.gov/education/topic/essa-feedback-form>

OCR evaluated the above-listed pages and determined there are some technological barriers to access for people with disabilities. These barriers can impede persons with disabilities’ access to TN DOE’s online programs, services, and activities and can interfere with TN DOE’s ability to communicate effectively with persons with disabilities.

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

Resolution Agreement:

TN DOE submitted a signed resolution agreement (Agreement) to OCR on March 28, 2017. When fully implemented, the Agreement will address the barriers noted above as well as resolve issues of accessibility pertaining to the rest of TN DOE's website. TN DOE committed to take actions including:

- selecting an auditor who has the requisite knowledge and experience to identify barriers to access on TN DOE'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 TN DOE's implementation of the Agreement. When OCR concludes TN DOE 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 TN DOE 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 TN DOE written notice of the alleged breach and sixty (60) calendar days to cure the breach.

This concludes OCR's investigation of the complaint. These findings should not be interpreted to address TN DOE'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 TN DOE may not harass, coerce, intimidate, discriminate or otherwise retaliate against any individual because he or she asserted a right or privilege under a law enforced by OCR or filed a complaint, testified, or participated in the complaint resolution process. If this happens, the individual may file a retaliation complaint with OCR.

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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 could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy if released.

Thank you for the assistance TN DOE personnel extended to OCR in resolving this complaint. OCR looks forward to receiving TN DOE's first monitoring report. OCR notes that the first report is due in 30 calendar days from the date of the Agreement with regard to **Item 6 pertaining to Notice**. If you have any questions, please contact me at (404) 974-9356.

Sincerely,

/s/

Wendy Gatlin
Compliance Team Leader

Enclosure: Resolution Agreement