



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

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November 23, 2016

Via U.S. Mail and Facsimile (670) 664-3762

Mr. Glenn Muna
Acting Commissioner of Education
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System
P.O. Box 501370
Saipan, MP 96950

Re: Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System
OCR Reference No. 10161260

Dear Commissioner Muna:

This is to advise you of the resolution of the above-referenced complaint investigation of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System ("CNMI PSS") by the United States Department of Education (Department), Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The complaint, which OCR received on July 1, 2016, alleged that CNMI PSS is discriminating, on the basis of disability, because certain pages on its website are not accessible to persons with disabilities.

OCR is responsible for enforcing section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), as amended, 29 U.S.C. §794, *et seq.*, and its implementing regulations at 34 C.F.R. Part 104, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities of recipients of federal financial assistance. OCR also is responsible for enforcing title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II), as amended, 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 this Department and as a public entity, CNMI PSS 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 recipients of federal financial assistance and public entities from, on the basis of disability, denying qualified disabled persons an equal opportunity to participate in or benefit from aids, benefits, or services that are delivered either directly or through contractual, licensing, or other arrangements. 34 C.F.R. §104.4 and 28 C.F.R. §35.130. People with disabilities must have equal access to the 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. 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 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 Title II.

Investigation to Date

During the course of the investigation, OCR examined a number of pages and documents on CNMI PSS’s website to determine whether they are accessible to persons with disabilities. These web pages and documents included the:

- Homepage at www.cnmipss.org;
- On-line Courses web page at www.cnmipss.org/online-courses;
- Parent Resources web page at www.cnmipss.org/parents-community/parents/parent-resources;
- 2016-17 Calendar web page at www.cnmipss.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Signed-Kindergarten-through-Grade-12-Calendar-for-School-Year-2016-2017.pdf?855b46;
- Delivery of Special Education Programs web page at www.cnmipss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Special-Education-Policy-and-Procedure3.10.12-1.pdf?855b46;
- Procedural Safeguard Notice web page at www.cnmipss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Part-B-Parent-Rights-Updated-12.3.10.pdf?855b46;
- State Performance Improvement Plan web page at www.cnmipss.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/mp-ssip-2015B.3.30.15.pdf?855b46;
- Food and Nutrition web page at www.cnmipss.org/fns;
- Special Education web page at www.cnmipss.org/special-education; and
- Calendar web page at www.cnmipss.org/calendar.

OCR evaluated the above-listed web pages and documents and determined that 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; parts of the website used color combinations that made text difficult or impossible for people with low-vision to see; and a video was not captioned, so it was inaccessible to people who are deaf. These barriers deny persons with disabilities access to programs, services, and activities offered on the website and may impede CNMI PSS’s communications with persons with disabilities.

Prior to the conclusion of OCR’s investigation, CNMI PSS expressed an interest in voluntarily resolving this case. In order to conclude OCR’s investigation of this complaint, OCR would have had to conduct interviews, review documents, and examine a broader range of pages on CNMI PSS’s website; OCR would have sought to learn, for example, whether CNMI PSS had received previous complaints of

inaccessible website content or functionality, and how those complaints were resolved; and whether its information technology staff members and people responsible for uploading content or maintaining web pages had received training in website accessibility. In light of CNMI PSS's willingness to address its website comprehensively without further investigation, OCR determined entering into a voluntary resolution agreement would be appropriate.

Resolution Agreement

CNMI PSS submitted a signed Resolution Agreement (agreement) to OCR on November 21, 2016. CNMI PSS committed to take actions such as:

- making 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 CNMI PSS's website and conducting a thorough audit of existing on-line content and functionality;
- developing a corrective action plan to prioritize the removal of on-line barriers over a 18-month period;
- posting a notice to persons with disabilities about how to request access to on-line information or functionality that is currently inaccessible; and
- providing website accessibility training to all appropriate personnel.

This concludes OCR's investigation of the complaint. These findings should not be interpreted to address CNMI PSS's compliance with any other regulatory provision or to address any issues other than those addressed in this letter. OCR will monitor CNMI PSS's implementation of the agreement. When OCR concludes CNMI PSS has fully implemented the terms 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 CNMI PSS fails to implement the agreement, OCR may seek compliance with the federal civil rights laws through any means authorized by law, including enforcing the specific terms of the 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 CNMI PSS 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 complainant may file a retaliation complaint with OCR.

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.

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Thank you for the assistance CNMI PSS and its counsel extended to OCR in resolving this complaint. We look forward to receiving CNMI PSS's first report about its implementation of the agreement by December 21, 2016. If you have any questions, please contact Noel Nightingale, Lead Attorney, by telephone at (206) 607-1632, or by e-mail at noel.nightingale@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

Paul Goodwin
Team Leader

Enclosure: Resolution Agreement

cc: Legal Counsel
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Public School System