How to Use the School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool

Land acknowledgement

We acknowledge with respect the territories of the First Peoples of what is now known as British Columbia. We honour the many First Nations people who have lived on and cared for these lands for thousands of years and continue to do so today. We recognize the importance of their cultural heritage, laws, and relationships with the land that continue to shape, sustain, and enrich the province of British Columbia. We are committed to learning, understanding and respecting these connections, as well as to fostering meaningful relationships based on mutual respect and reconciliation.

Creating this resource

The British Columbia Council of Administrators of Inclusive Support in Education (BC CAISE), in partnership with Untapped Accessibility, Disability Alliance BC (DABC), and the Province of BC, have created this resource to support British Columbia school districts as they continue increasing the accessibility of all of their school sites.

BC CAISE would like to thank DABC and the Province of BC for supporting this project's funding. Thanks also to Untapped Accessibility for their support in its development, and the many educators, students, and families who contributed to and inspired the creation of this resource.

Legal disclaimer

This guide provides general information only as a reference to support school districts in meeting the requirements of Accessible BC Act. Each organization is responsible for understanding and complying with its legal obligations.

Accessibility statement

This guide is accessible to PDF/UA standards.
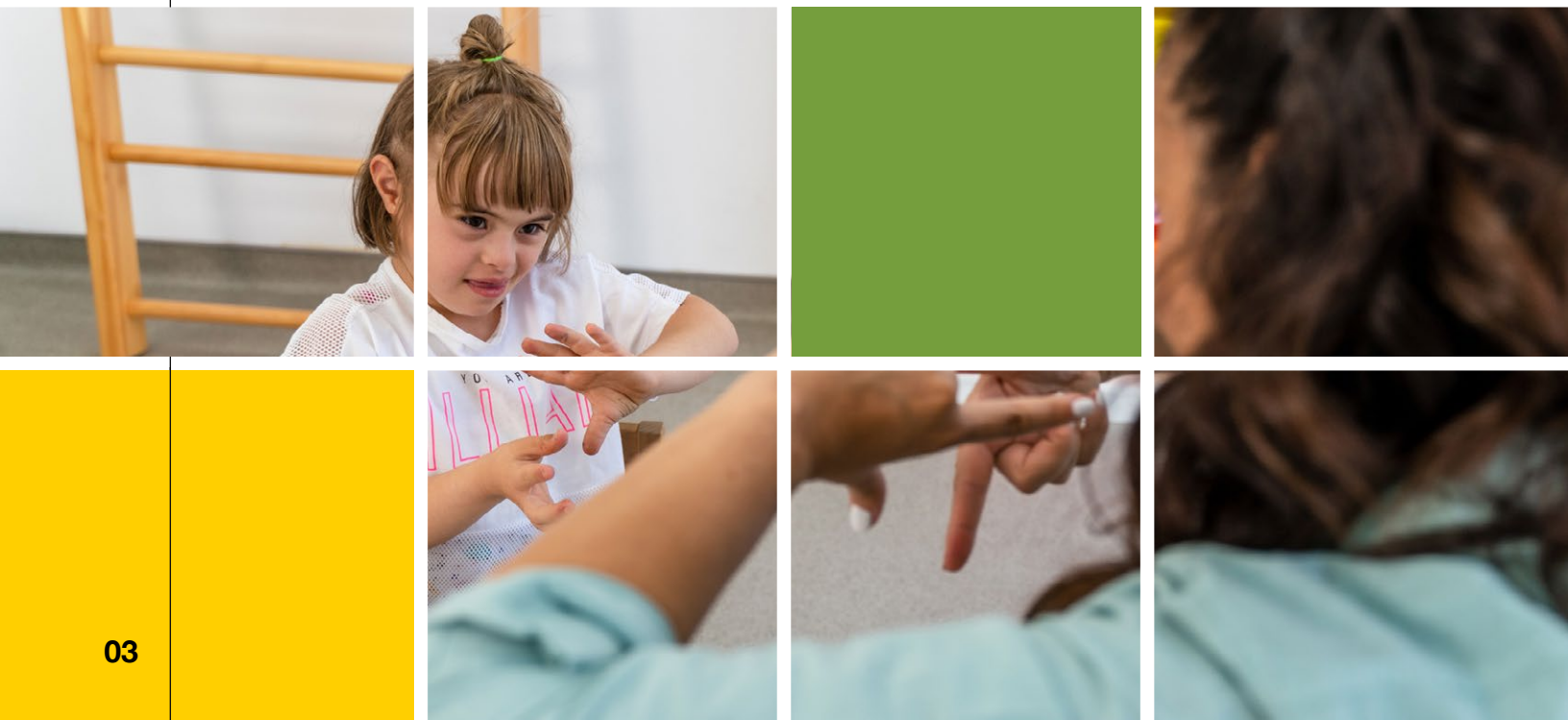
Foreword

Committed to the principle "Nothing About Us Without Us", BC CAISE and Untapped Accessibility worked to ensure people with disabilities were highly involved in the work which led to the creation of this resource. This commitment resulted in a resource development team where at least 80% of the members were professionals with lived experience with a broad range of disabilities.

We believe the School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool will benefit all school districts in British Columbia as we work to make our schools and district facilities as accessible as possible for students, staff, families, and members of the community.

We are proud to share this guide and the accompanying Assessment Tool with educational leaders across B.C., and we are hopeful that their use will lead to more accessible schools across the province.
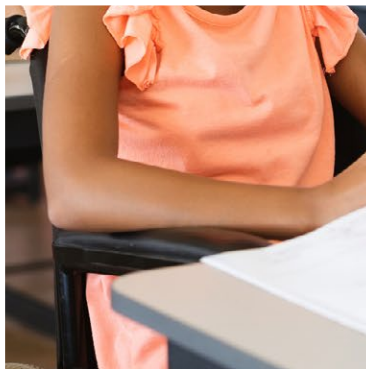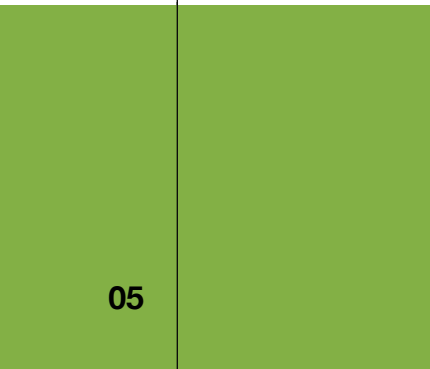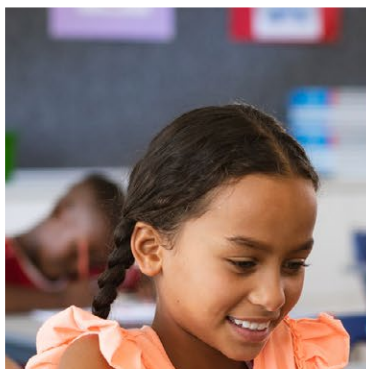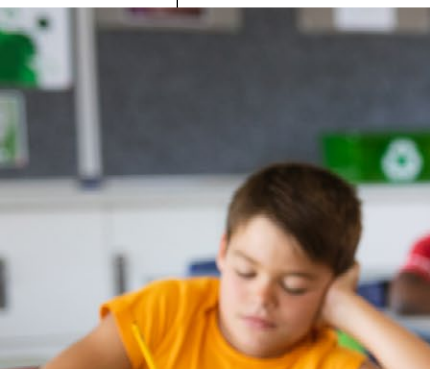
Colin Reid, adult with ADHD
President, BC CAISE

Table of contents

Guide overview

Inclusive school environments are critical to an accessible future in B.C.. When students, staff, families, and community members experience and see meaningful inclusion at their school, they value and expect inclusion in the greater community. We developed this guide and the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* to help you assess the accessibility of your school site as you work towards full inclusivity.

The *How to Use the School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* will help you use the actual assessment resource. Please review this guide prior to planning your school's accessibility assessment. This guide, and the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool*, should be used in accordance with direction provided by your school district.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for school and district teams in British Columbia's K-12 education system who conduct school site accessibility assessments. This process is often coordinated or led by a school administrator or other educational leader. However, the information contained in this guide is relevant for all educators, students, and community members who are interested in making any educational setting more accessible.

Organizations outside of education or outside of B.C. are welcome to use this guide and may find it beneficial, however it is important to familiarize yourself with any local accessibility requirements, codes or legislation.

What is the School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool?

The *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* is a practical instrument for measuring and addressing accessibility in schools so all students, teachers, family members, and caregivers can fully engage with the space. It supports school leaders to identify, assess, and record accessibility barriers so they can be addressed.
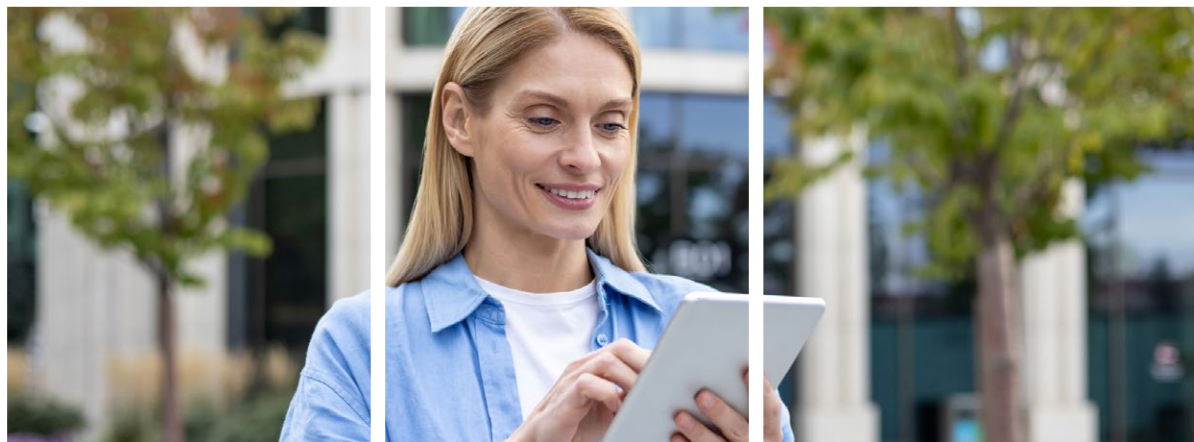
On the individual school level, the tool provides space to catalogue all types of barriers so accessibility action plans can be developed. The assessment process is also meant to ignite individual learning and conversation around physical, sensory, and social-emotional barriers and how to address them. At the district level, the tool can create an inventory of accessibility barriers that are present across schools. This can help districts prioritize decisions, funding, and actions on how to promote accessibility from a higher level.

How does the tool work?

The *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* guides users to consider school site accessibility in three areas: physical, sensory, and social-emotional.

Physical accessibility considerations

Physical accessibility considerations include anything related to the built environment that introduces physical barriers. For example, stairs without ramps, narrow doorways, inaccessible restrooms, and poor signage.

Sensory accessibility considerations

Sensory accessibility considerations include any barriers related to the sensory experience. For example, harsh lighting, strong scents, and loud noises can cause people to be over stimulated.

Social-emotional accessibility considerations

Social-emotional accessibility considerations include anything related to one's sense of belonging and being represented in a space. For example, posters, books, and other learnings materials that have no disability representation create learning and social inclusion barriers for students with disabilities.

Definitions and language considerations

The terms used in the *How to use the School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* and the *School Site Accessibility Tool* are reflective of those used in the Accessible BC Act, the Accessible Canada Act, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and other provincial and federal legislation related to accessibility and disability rights. For example, we use "students with disabilities", "people with disabilities", and "staff members with disabilities" throughout this document. For more information and guidance on accessible and inclusive language, please see the *BC CAISE Guide for Developing Accessibility-Focused School District Policies and Reviewing Existing Policies Through an Accessibility Lens.*

Conducting your assessment

Understand the context

Understanding societal context is a helpful first step in conducting your school site accessibility assessment. Whether you are assessing a school that is brand new or very old, you are likely to find many accessibility barriers. Over generations, our beliefs, and attitudes towards people with disabilities have resulted in exclusionary building codes, policies, and laws. Given that it took generations to create these exclusionary environments, it will take time to create inclusive ones. It's helpful to keep this in mind as you work through the assessment process.

This guide and the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* will support you to begin assessing your school site towards full inclusion. It may feel overwhelming to uncover all the barriers that are present, so please remember the context in which you are working. Using these tools and going through the assessment process is an incredibly valuable first step to creating positive and lasting change to the accessibility of your school site.

Consider your audience

Schools are used by a diverse range of people. Often, when considering the accessibility of schools, we only think of students. While students are a critical part of our school systems, school sites must also be accessible to the staff, parents and caregivers, and community members who use the space.

Creating accessible environments for everyone is important from an access and equity perspective, but it's also crucial for creating a strong social-emotional learning environment. Students with disabilities deserve to see themselves represented in the staff, in the school and in the neighbourhood which together makes up their larger educational community. This level of representation only occurs when the environment is inclusive and accessible to all.

Consider your assessment team

The *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* considers the experience of using each space in a school environment. To conduct an honest and authentic evaluation of your school, you'll need individuals who navigate and interact with each space differently. This ensures various user-perspectives are represented.

> **While each school site varies in size, an ideal assessment team would consist of 4-8 individuals who bring diverse perspectives and include lived experience with the following:**
>
> ➲ Physical and cognitive function,
> ➲ Sensory sensitivity, and
> ➲ Emotional regulation.

It's also important to ensure diverse age, race, and cultural representation. When possible, try to include a mix of students, caregivers, community members, and school personnel. Having someone who uses a support person and/or service animal can also be beneficial, especially when assessing space requirements.

The assessment team should have a leader who can look after the coordination and scheduling of the assessment process. They will be responsible for calling the introductory meeting and finding times for the assessment to occur. They may also manage the collection of all assessment forms, as well as the collation and sharing of findings.

Planning your introductory meeting

When you have assembled your assessment team and appointed a leader, you will need to schedule an introductory group meeting to review the assessment process and introduce the tool. The leader can coordinate scheduling and lead the in-person or virtual meeting.

We recommend that assessment team members review the tool and this guide in advance of the introductory meeting. This gives them an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the tools and process, and craft questions to bring to the meeting for discussion.

Example agenda for introductory meeting:

- Land acknowledgment
- Assessment team introductions
  - Name
  - Pronouns
  - Role at the school (student, teacher, administrator, parent etc.)
  - Discussion around why accessibility is meaningful to you
- Review of timeline, time commitment, and the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool*
- Time for questions or discussion related to the assessment tool and next steps

Scheduling your assessment sessions

Next, your group leader will create a schedule of assessment sessions. For smaller school sites, the full assessment may be completed on the same day as the introductory meeting. But for larger school sites, the process will likely require several sessions. Moving through the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* can be cognitively, physically, and emotionally demanding for team members, so multiple shorter sessions are recommended.

Here are some examples of how you could break up the assessment sessions:

1. The assessment team can focus on one floor of the school per session, moving through the full *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* for each floor.

2. The assessment team can focus on one or two sections of the tool per session, focusing on the entire school for each section.

Conducting your assessments

While each assessment team will have their own unique approach to each session, the following sequence of events is suggested:

1 Gather as a group and **clarify the spaces you will be looking at that day.**

2 **Split your assessment team into two groups.** Ensure each group has at least one person who can provide access to all needed spaces in the school (for example, they have keys to open classrooms and other spaces). Provide each group with a copy of the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool*. It may be helpful for each member of the team to have their own copy or a way to take individual notes.

3 Each group will move through each space and **ideally, the two groups will not assess the same space at the same time.** This will help each team complete their assessments independently, without the influence of the other group's decision making. It will also help to reduce distractions in the environment.

4 Each small group will **designate one group member as their group leader.** This person is responsible for moving the group through all items in each section.

5 **Each item is accompanied by a check box.** All group members will conduct their own assessment of each item. If all group members agree that the item meets their needs, that item can be checked. If there is disagreement, the group will discuss and then decide if the item can be checked. If the group cannot come to agreement, they will highlight the point, make a note in the "Notes" column, and bring it to the larger assessment team discussion, which takes place at the end of the session. The group leader will ensure the group highlights the item if consensus is not reached within a reasonable timeline so the group can move on to a new item.

6 When the assessment for the session is complete, **each group will add together the number of items that were checked off and record that number in the checks section of the assessment tool.**

7 When both groups have completed assessing all items in the assigned sections, **the whole assessment team will come back together to discuss findings.**

8 Each group will share their scores for each item section. When group scores are the same for item sections, the checked boxes and scores from that section are **transferred to a new copy of the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool*. This copy will be the school's final completed version of the tool.**

9 Where scores differ, each team will discuss their reasoning for their assessment of each item. If the assessment team can reach consensus on a score, that score will be recoded on the final copy of the *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool*. **If there's no consensus, the lower score will be recorded.**

10 Assessment team leader will collect the final *School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool* and collate the findings. See next section.

Sharing your findings

The results of this assessment are meant to inform internal accessibility planning for individual schools and larger-scale planning for whole school districts. Please refer to the direction from your District as to how and when the results of the assessment are shared or used for planning.

While the results of the assessment many identify areas where accessibility can be improved, it will also likely identify areas where accessibility is great. Communicating what accessibility features are currently available can be an impactful, shorter-term next step for your school community. Ensuring people know what accessibility features are available is just as important as having them in place. Consider if there are any areas where you could proactively communicate the accessibility features of your school to students, staff, parents and caregivers, and community members. Sharing information about your school's accessibility features through your school website can be a great way to communicate this information to your school community.

Engaging students in the assessment process

You may wish to involve the students more in the assessment and communication process (beyond having student representatives on your assessment team). For example, classrooms could do lessons around conducting their own assessment using a "student-friendly" tool. Schools could also help students create their own accessibility maps to complement the larger school site assessment data. For example, students would draw their routes into and through the school and identify any accessibility issues they face. Having students share their results with the school community could be part of how you communicate your findings.

Good luck on your accessibility journey!

BC CAISE