Overcoming Barriers to Equal Education

By law, all U.S. public buildings, including schools, must be accessible to people with physical disabilities. Typical accommodations include reserved parking spots close to an entrance, ramps or street-level entrances and curb cuts. *Ktr101*

Access to education is a fundamental human right. Education provides the foundation for an individual's professional, economic, social and personal development. Education enables individuals to hone their skills and realize their full potential.

Unfortunately, many barriers to education persist, preventing individuals from realizing their full potential and contributing meaningfully to society. These barriers may be physical, mental, social or financial. The barriers this pamphlet addresses affect predominantly those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments. Yet the solutions it suggests may be helpful in enhancing access to education for all students.

Social Attitudes

Social perceptions toward those with impairments are major determinants of whether the disabled are provided equal access to education. When parents, school administrators and community members believe that impairments make a child less worthy of being educated, or less able to benefit from education, it is unlikely that children with disabilities will be given equal access to education.

Barriers erected by social attitudes toward the disabled can be addressed and overcome by community outreach programs that raise awareness and dispel myths about disabilities. Many disabled people's organizations (DPOs) work

Head Start students work on a project in a Texas classroom. A federal government program in the United States, Head Start provides young children from low-income families access to education until they reach the age of 5. *AP Images*

at the local level and employ people with disabilities who have graduated from secondary school or university. By engaging with the community, these employees provide a powerful example of the potential of students with disabilities and offer irrefutable evidence of the individual and societal benefits of providing equal access to education.

Physical Access

Many schools are inaccessible to students, particularly those with physical disabilities. Some school buildings have multiple floors but no elevators, others have bathroom stalls too narrow for wheelchairs and some have doors too heavy to open.

The perceived difficulty of updating these schools hinders many administrators from taking action. But there are practical accommodations many schools can make. Schools without elevators, for example, can relocate classes with disabled students to the ground floor, avoiding the need for elevators. Municipalities constructing or updating school buildings can design one school to be accessible to disabled students and arrange transportation for all students who need to attend that school.

Sometimes, schools are so remote that students with or without disabilities cannot access them. In these cases, offering transportation to and from the location is another way to ensure equal access to education.
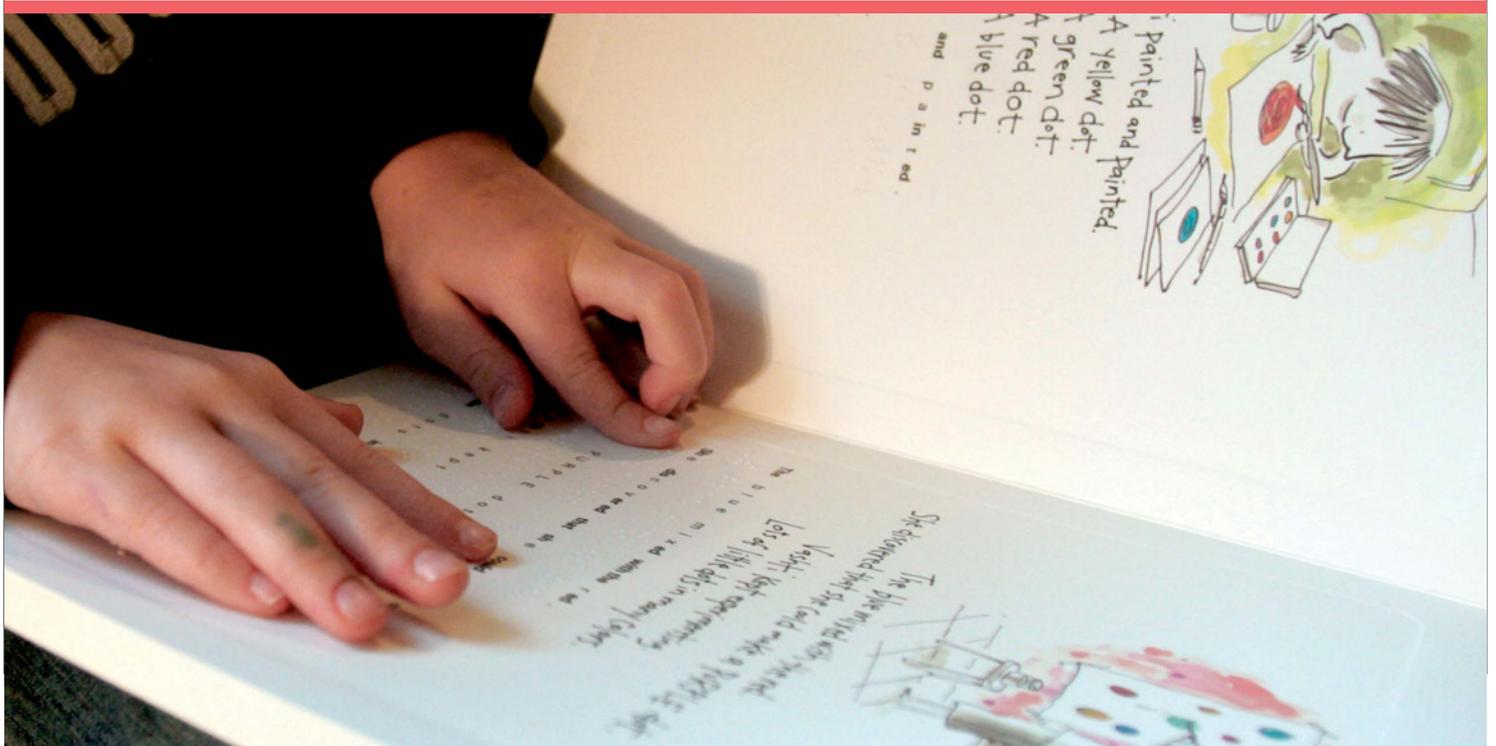
Educational Environment

A classroom stocked with inadequate materials and untrained teachers presents another barrier. While teachers do not need an advanced degree in special education, they should be trained in how to interact with children who have visual impairments, hearing impairments and other special needs.

In areas where formal training is not possible, model schools offer a viable alternative. Model schools are accessible schools with trained teachers and alternative-format materials such as Braille books. With one model centrally located within each region, these schools can serve as a resource for teachers learning how to meet the needs of disabled students attending other schools.

Sign-language interpreters along with materials in Braille and special building modifications are necessary for any system seeking to educate all students. School administrators can help create this optimal

A child reads a book designed for both sighted and blind students to enjoy. Having materials in alternative formats such as Braille is crucial to creating an inclusive educational environment. *AP Images*

A classroom aide uses sign language to explain a lesson to two elementary school students in Pennsylvania. U.S. school districts provide sign-language interpretation, books in audio or Braille and other resources for students who need them. *AP Images*

learning environment by including disability adjustments in their annual budgets. Not only will this help schools better accommodate students with disabilities, but also send a message to the community that all students deserve such an education. Administrators should also encourage their teachers to develop curriculums early on so that children with special needs may arrange for alternative formats before the school term starts.

Communities can also take advantage of the resources already available to them. In many areas, for example, there are citizens who already know sign language and are willing to volunteer or provide their services for a nominal fee.

Individualized Learning

Another barrier to providing equal access to education is the misconception that all children learn the same way and at the same pace. Every student is unique. All students have strengths and weaknesses, and most students need support to reach their full potential. To help students reach this potential, teachers need to individualize the learning process as much as possible.

Individual education plans, or IEPs, are flexible documents a teacher prepares with a student that outline the educational expectations for that student, the services to be provided to the student such as a personal aide, alternative-format materials or extended test times, and the methods by which the student's progress will be evaluated. While IEPs are typically used for disabled students, all parents and students should discuss their individual learning needs with their teachers.

A secondary school freshman takes a course through a publicly funded, online-only school. Online educational resources make it possible for students to access education regardless of physical or financial restraints. *AP images*

Support Systems

Parents and educators who feel overwhelmed and do not know where to go for help can create barriers through inaction. For parents, administrators and governments, there are many resources available on how to better provide for disabled students.

Parents can find emotional support and practical help through other parents of disabled children. Parents can seek and create opportunities for their disabled children by sharing information and resources. Many societies now have advisory groups, which typically include disabled individuals, to help school administrators and governments make smarter policy decisions by informing them of the unique needs of disabled students.

In many places, local DPOs offer training and support to parents, conduct disability awareness training in schools and educate communities about more inclusive education. International organizations and foreign donors also provide financial assistance to countries seeking to develop more inclusive education systems.

Online Options for Students

For students whose schedule or budget prohibit them from attending school, online opportunities offer another entry into education. Websites dedicated to online schools provide tools and resources that help both students and parents navigate the world of online learning. Whether enrolling for kindergarten classes or graduate degrees, prospective students can use these websites to make informed decisions about their academic careers.

One online option growing in popularity is the MOOC, or massive open online course. A MOOC delivers educational content through the Internet to anyone interested in learning, regardless of educational background, and usually at no cost. Students watch lectures, read assigned material, participate in online discussions and complete tests to earn credit.

Whether pursuing professional development or formal degree credit, students can select from a variety of subjects from some of the world's most prestigious academic institutions. And because these courses have no geographic restrictions, they give every student access to education.