



May 14, 2020

An Open Letter to all State Departments of Education

Dear State Departments of Education:

As you are well aware, The COVID-19 outbreak has prompted many educational institutions to implement protocols for remote learning as a viable alternative to closing their doors altogether. Since the declaration of COVID-19 as a global health pandemic, distance-learning methods and opportunities have dramatically evolved. Despite the legal requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and other federal laws, the universal design and nonvisual accessibility of such tools has unfortunately continued to be viewed as an afterthought in most cases. As President of the largest organization of blind people in the United States, I urge you to include the learning needs of blind students into your Rethink K-12 School Models Grant proposals and innovation strategies. This is the perfect opportunity to develop distance-learning tools with accessibility as an integral component of the design and development phases.

The COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly transformed the 21st-century classroom more than anything that has come before, and interactive online distance-learning activities are becoming the norm for K-12 students. The National Federation of the Blind has stepped up to provide educational opportunities for blind students and their families during the COVID-19 emergency. Our Distance Education Resources provide interactive online lessons, how-to videos, and written lesson ideas to meet the educational needs of blind students. School districts receiving the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant should do more to level the playing field between disabled and nondisabled students. For instance, a state receiving microgrant funding can ensure their blind students have access technology readily available in their homes, such as an embosser capable of producing diagrams for science and mathematics courses.

Providing equal access to students with disabilities is not optional for educational entities administering virtual learning opportunities to students without disabilities. This means that schools that shift to online instruction must do so in a manner that is equally accessible for blind students. Creative and innovative distance learning strategies should not establish more barriers for blind students and other students with disabilities. With additional financial resources, grantees can focus on meeting their legal obligations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1401 et seq.) the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 701 et seq.) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (42 U.S.C. 12101 [12131 et seq.]) to blind students and other students with disabilities by implementing and enhancing distance-learning systems to deliver the equitable and high quality educational opportunities that are afforded to nondisabled students.

Blind students must not be robbed of distance-learning services offered to their nondisabled peers. Our nation benefits when nonvisual accessibility and universal design are implemented in online learning environments from the outset, and when students with disabilities receive the educational opportunities they need to be ready for post-secondary education, post-secondary employment, and living independently.

As a father of two blind K-12 students, I urge you to take the needs of blind students into account as you propose creative and innovative approaches for the Rethink K-12 School Models Grant application. I also encourage you to reach out to, and learn best practices from, local education agencies and organizations like the National Federation of the Blind.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark A. Riccobono". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Mark A. Riccobono, President  
National Federation of the Blind