

Accessible Events Playbook:

Practical Strategies for
Disability-Inclusive Events



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Contents

Set the Tone and Create a Culture of Access

Plan and Prepare for the Event

Plan for Hybrid Programming (If Appropriate)

- Camera Use

- Chat

- American Sign Language Video Remote/Video Interpreters

- Captioning

- Additional Considerations

Create Accessible Presentations

- Image and Media Accessibility

- Additional Technical Considerations

Host the Event

- Kicking Off the Event

- Throughout the Event

- Following the Event

Accessible Events: Prep Checklist

At the National Education Association (NEA), we are committed to equity and inclusion that extends beyond classrooms and contracts. It lives in every space where we gather, learn, and organize together. We recognize that creating accessible environments is essential to fulfilling our mission: To advocate for education professionals and unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education for every student.

This Accessible Events Playbook, produced in partnership with Detroit Disability Power, is designed to help our leaders, members, and partners plan and host events, both virtually and in person, that reflect our shared values of equal opportunity, justice, democracy, professionalism, partnership, and collective action. While not exhaustive, this resource outlines practical strategies and best practices to ensure that every participant, especially those with disabilities, can engage fully and equitably.

By employing these practices, we take collective action to disrupt inaccessibility and move closer to our vision of a great public school for every student—no matter who they are, where they live, or how they learn.

An Important Note Regarding Language Use

It is crucial to recognize that the usage of person-first versus identity-first language is a complex and individualized matter. The selection of language can be influenced by factors such as age, personal experience, and cultural context. The debate surrounding language use is particularly nuanced within the realm of special education, where labels have historically been associated with deficit-based meanings. This complexity emphasizes the importance of respecting individual preferences and engaging in open dialogue about language use. For more information on language use and etiquette, visit www.nea.org/disabilities.

Set the Tone and Create a Culture of Access

✓ **Create baseline access standards.** Commit to a set of standards and practices you will ALWAYS follow, regardless of audience, that works best for you. Habituate these practices so that when someone submits a new access request before or during a session, you can easily pivot and add new practices into your facilitation.

Here is a sample set of practices:



Budget a minimum of \$500 for accessibility accommodations for every event regardless of audience, size, and scale.



Provide an agenda that embeds 15-minute breaks every 60–90 minutes for long meetings or events.



Hire a CART captioner or post the transcript following a public-facing event.



Only work with unionized hotels and venues.



Reserve space for registrants to make accessibility requests on every event registration and RSVP form and provide guidance on how to follow up on requests, when appropriate.



TIP: Always include a budget line item during event planning that is dedicated to accessibility to ensure that baseline standards and any additional needs of staff and participants can be met.

Plan and Prepare for the Event

- ✓ **Communicate access offerings and access requests.** Have an access statement outlining what access features, such as ASL and captioning, will be present in the space and what barriers might exist. Keep it simple and specific. Provide guidance on how someone can request additional access needs and include a designated contact with information on how to reach them.

Here is a sample access statement:

Our staff is working to make sure our event is as accessible as possible. If you would like more information or need to make a request for your needs to be met, please contact us at [Email].



Transportation. The venue is accessible using the metro and bus. For the metro, take the red line to [Metro Station]. For the bus, take Route 44 to [Bus Stop/Station]. We have a limited number of transportation stipends; please contact us at [Email] for this information.



Entrances/Exits. All entrances of the building are step-free. Please use the main entrance on [Street Name], and signs will direct you to the elevators. Take the elevator to the third floor.



Event Setup. All our programming will take place on the third floor. The room will have low-pile carpeting, backlit screens, and natural overhead lighting that we can dim or adjust, as needed. Lunch, including vegan and vegetarian options, will be served buffet style, where staff can assist, as needed. The room will have round tables that seat up to six people; we are expecting about 36 participants in total. Please let us know at any time if you need help finding the best seat for you. Single-stall accessible restrooms are available on the third floor and the ground floor. A parent's room and a quiet room are also available on the third floor. Please ask our staff if you need help finding these rooms; no key or permission is required for use.



Communication Access. At this time, we have automated captioning and captions included in all media. We will offer large-print copies of materials, including agendas and handouts; you will receive these materials via email two days before the event. We request that all participants use microphones that are provided throughout each room.

Additional Considerations. Please refrain from wearing scented items, such as perfumes and lotions, during our event. This can trigger asthma and migraines for folks who are sensitive.

- ✓ **Address accessibility in all registration forms and RSVPs.** Ensure there is space on all registration forms and RSVPs to make access requests. Provide a deadline (generally, one or two weeks before the event) guaranteeing requests will be met and note that you will do your best to support requests made after this deadline. This is an important note because planning for good accessibility can take time; access accommodation and supports are often difficult to secure without advanced notice. If you incorporate new access needs, make sure to update your access statement to include this new information.

Common access needs for in-person events include:

- Dietary restrictions;
- Scent-free spaces;
- Customizable lighting;
- Seating assignments;
- Reserved space for wheelchair parking;
- Accessible routes and restrooms;
- Interpreters and translated documents;
- Large-print materials;
- Microphone usage; and
- Reserved space for those who need to bring someone.



For virtual events, assign access point people who will join sessions and assist with technology, monitor the chat, and perform any additional access tasks.



TIP: Avoid last-minute changes in time, location, and/or other logistics. People move at different paces. We must recognize that people may require help from others to complete daily tasks or rely on paratransit, which is notoriously inflexible.

- ✓ **Share presentations/materials ahead of time.** This is especially important for blind people who use screen readers and D/deaf participants who might want to go through the content ahead of time.



TIP: Make sure to save clear image descriptions into the back end of your materials. Prepare an agenda, including designated breaks, for each session with relevant information, and share in advance of and at the outset of the meeting.

- ✓ **Recognize that being put on the spot can be difficult for people.** Distribute information, such as agendas or event materials, prior to the event to provide answers to frequently asked questions. For hybrid and virtual events, allow people to participate in the ice-breaker using the chat.

✓ **Budget for interpretation fees in your event or yearly budget.** Generally, fees are \$60–\$150 per hour per interpreter.

Tips for securing interpretation services:

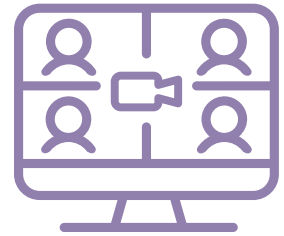
- Interpretation for more than one hour requires two interpreters to team up and switch on/off. This is consistent with oral/spoken language interpretation. If your event is four hours or more, interpretation may require a team of three interpreters.
- Interpreters often book at least two or three weeks in advance.
- When possible, request to work with interpreters who share identities and cultures with the audience and/or are knowledgeable about the topics being discussed.

Plan for Hybrid Programming (If Appropriate)

- ✓ **Properly staff sessions for hybrid events.** Work toward providing participants an equal experience, no matter how they join the session. This can be difficult to achieve without additional planning, staff attention, and resources.

Common issues include:

- Online participant engagement not being acknowledged or shared in the in-person space;
- Facilitator and in-person participants moving through the content too quickly; and
- Multiple in-person participants speaking at the same time, hindering online participants from keeping up and engaging fully.



- ✓ **Request all presenters and participants state their name before they speak.** It is important to emphasize this practice, which is vital for hybrid participation, in advance of the event.

Camera Use

Camera use is a prime example of when **access needs can conflict**. Disability is a diverse and inter-sectional experience, meaning that people's access needs are vast and vary. "Camera use as access" will depend on the context of the event, who is expected to engage and how, and the kind of access participants will need.

- ✓ **Have empathy and allow people to show up how they need to.** This could mean having cameras on, having cameras off, appearing in comfortable clothing, etc.; allow participants to present themselves and their environment however they need to join that day.
- ✓ **Negotiate cameras ON/OFF.** Create a culture where people can share what they need. This transparency will help navigate competing access needs, including camera use. Each person knows what is best for themselves and their participation.
- ✓ **Allow people to make their own decision about camera on vs. camera off.**

Instances supporting "cameras OFF" as an access need:

- Many people care for others as well as care for themselves in their home.
- Everyone has a right to privacy in their lives and in their homes.
- Some people need to travel to or join the event from communal spaces for adequate internet access and may need cameras off for bandwidth or to avoid sharing a busy or distracting background.



- For individuals with disabilities, being able to “show up and participate” might require them to conserve energy by dressing comfortably without extensive time grooming before the event.
- Many people need breaks from back-to-back meetings with cameras on to avoid eye strain, headaches, stiffness, etc.
- Many people who spend long days on back-to-back video calls can be mentally, physically, and emotionally challenged for many reasons.
- Zoom fatigue is real! It requires participants to piece together missing bits of information—such as tech glitches or nonverbal communication, like body language or tone and pitch of voice, which can disrupt or be difficult to interpret during video calls.
- Many people with disabilities or chronic illness and pain struggle to sit and/or be “camera ready” for hours at a time.
- Many people who are Autistic or neurodivergent may experience sensory overload or struggle to maintain eye contact.

Instances supporting “cameras ON” as an access need:

- Both ASL interpreters and people using interpreters will need to keep their cameras on to communicate.
- People who lip read and use interpreters benefit from people being on screen and sitting close to the camera in a well-lit room.
- Having cameras on can help build intimacy among participants.
- Having cameras on can provide context—for example, through body language—and help people accurately interpret the information shared in the meeting.

Chat

Chat use is another prime example of when access needs can conflict. For instance, some people with anxiety might feel more comfortable using chat to communicate, whereas people with ADHD or Autism may feel that too much chat use disrupts their ability to stay present and comprehend communication happening outside of the chat.



TIP: If there are people who share that having cameras on is an access need, let the group know about this access-related request so that they can factor that into their own access planning. You can ask speakers to turn cameras on before they speak. If someone is presenting and others are not speaking, you can suggest cameras off to give people a break and help the group focus on the presentation.

- ✓ **Assign chat moderators.** This person can monitor and read the chat aloud as well as help keep any “chat chaos” under control.
- ✓ **Plan pauses for chat.** You can pause regularly to prompt participants to engage in the chat and/or acknowledge and respond to chat contributions.

When chat use benefits access:

- The chat allows people to engage without interrupting the main content and presenter, especially when time is limited.
- Using the chat feature can be especially helpful for those in the D/deaf and hard of hearing community or people who process information better in writing.
- Chat use supports multitasking, resource-sharing, and note-taking.

When chat use hinders access:

- Participants must manage audio content, visual content, and a fast-moving chat stream. For those who are neurodivergent, the chat can cause cognitive overload.
- Some screen readers have issues navigating the difference between the chat and the main content, particularly when the chat is read aloud on top of or in place of main audio and presentation content.
- Some tech platforms don’t fully integrate keyboard navigation or screen reader usage or allow transcripts to be downloaded, all of which are essential for participants with disabilities.



American Sign Language Video Remote/Video Interpreters

- ✓ **Spotlight interpreters so that they are always in view for participants.**

Make interpreters co-hosts so that they can spotlight themselves when they need to switch.

- ✓ **Check if your platform offers a dedicated interpreter view or channel,** which can give participants more control than spotlighting alone.



Captioning

Captioning can be provided by humans aided by technology or through automated systems, which are continually improving and often already built into videoconferencing platforms.

- ✓ **Set up captioning preferences.**

Automated captioning is an emerging technology that uses AI/automatic speech recognition and speech-to-text to generate captions. There are many automated captioning tools, with varying levels of accuracy and quality depending on the software or program being used, internet connection, microphone quality, speakers’ accent, and/or background noise.

Additional Considerations

- ✓ **Plan ahead if you require breakout rooms (using Zoom).** Due to limitations in existing/popular technology, some accessibility features, such as automated captioning and ASL interpretation **do not work** in breakout rooms. Devise a plan on how you will best facilitate having access in more than one room.
- ✓ **For larger groups, provide an option for people to access a “quiet room.”** This provides a safe space where participants aren’t required or expected to engage with others. Some people may feel anxious or overloaded or need an additional break to recenter before returning to the event. This is especially important for individuals with disabilities and their families.

Create Accessible Presentations

Image and Media Accessibility

✓ **Include verbal and written image descriptions in presentations.** Briefly describe what is happening in the image for people who identify as Blind/low vision or are calling in or using their phones, where images may be small.

Written descriptions provide more detail where the length and style will depend on the context and use of the image. Learn more about [how to write an image description](#).

Verbal descriptions should be used during presentations to describe the most important details.

Here are some examples of verbal descriptions:

- If you are sharing a data chart or a table, you can say, “On the screen is a chart that maps student reading scores by U.S. state counties demonstrating...”
- If you are sharing an image of people in your organization at a staff or membership retreat, you can say, “On the screen is an image of 10 people at a park gathered around a picnic table. They are diverse in age, skin color, and gender, and they are holding signs that say, ‘Education Justice Now.’”

✓ **Include alt text and image descriptions on the back end.** In most programs (including Google Slides and Microsoft programs), you can right-click on an image and select alternative text/advanced settings to add alt text and image descriptions.

Alt text is a short description, generally one or two sentences, that identifies the most important parts of the image.

Additional Technical Considerations

✓ **Caption all audio and media where audio is used.** This includes all YouTube videos and videos created for the event. At a minimum, have automated captioning throughout the duration of the program.

✓ **Use high-contrast colors between text and background.** Limit use to two or three colors and be aware of [color combinations that make content inaccessible to colorblind people](#).

✓ **Use descriptive hyperlinks to indicate the purpose or destination of the link.** Learn more about [descriptive links from Section508.gov](#).



TIP: Check contrast using an eye-dropper web extension, and check the background and foreground with a [contrast checker](#).

- Small text (smaller than 16 pt.) contrast ratio should be a minimum of 4.5:1.
- Large text (16 pt. and greater) contrast ratio should be 3:1.

Host the Event

Kicking Off the Event

- ✓ **Test access features**, like CART, captioning, and ASL/interpretation. Make sure each feature is working properly **before** you begin the meeting and monitor live transcription for errors.
- ✓ **Use quality microphones and/or headsets!** It makes a big difference, especially if you are using captioning programs and ASL/additional language interpreters. If an environment is particularly noisy or if the captions are struggling to pick up a particular voice, suggest participants with access to headphones with microphones (many iPhone headphones have this) use them.
- ✓ **Start the meeting with an “access check”** to make sure everyone’s needs are met. Share guidance on how someone can request additional access needs and include a designated contact with information on how to reach them.
- ✓ **Ask each participant to state their name** before speaking throughout the meeting. This helps captions pick up a change in speaker and helps ASL/interpreters, people calling in, and individuals with low vision who cannot read the small names on the screen.
- ✓ **Invite participants to show up and engage how and when they need to.** This may mean changing locations, stretching, moving, stimming, or using assistive devices to communicate. (Also, see Camera Use under Plan for Hybrid Programming.)
- ✓ **During introductions, invite participants and facilitators to share** their pronouns and describe themselves and their setting visually if they’d like. This helps equalize access to information for those who are Blind/low vision.



Throughout the Event

- ✓ **Check access regularly.** Begin each session and resume from each break with an “access check,” asking, both verbally and in the chat for online sessions, if everyone has what they need to fully participate before continuing.

If access stops for some reason online or in person:

- Stop the session until access is created/resumed for all;
- Explain that you are waiting because access is critical for equitable engagement; and
- Communicate how and to whom someone can address access concerns.



In person, this typically looks like a technical glitch in projecting captions, microphone access, or internet issues. Resist the urge to continue for the sake of time.

- ✓ **Ensure all speakers and presenters describe and explain all visuals.** Do not rely on color alone to differentiate between sections and in data charts.
- ✓ **Give participants time and space.** Recognize that some people, particularly neurodivergent people, have trouble answering questions on the spot and need time to process before they respond. If it feels like people aren't sharing in a large group, utilize smaller breakouts or pair-sharing. You can also provide the option to go to a "quiet room" instead of participating in the breakout.
- ✓ **For virtual and hybrid events, set up a way for people to share and comment,** such as through the chat function or a shared document to take notes.
- ✓ **Monitor captioning and transcripts.** Correct them accordingly.

Following the Event

- ✓ **Gather feedback.** Ensure there is a way for everyone, including participants and staff, to reflect and provide feedback to be considered and/or incorporated into future efforts.
- ✓ **Ask specific questions about accessibility in evaluation forms** to capture ways to improve and grow. If possible, follow up with individuals who provide important reflections, even if it's just to thank them and assure them their thoughts have been received and are valued!
- ✓ **Update future practices based on feedback.**



Accessible Events: Prep Checklist

Set the Tone and Create a Culture of Access

	Create a dedicated budget line for accessibility and budget a minimum of \$500 for access accommodations.
	Hire a CART captioner or provide transcript (following public-facing event).
	Include space to make accessibility requests on registration and RSVP forms.
	Provide agenda that builds in 15-minute breaks every 60-90 minutes of planned event.
	Book unionized hotels/venues only.

Plan and Prepare for the Event

	Draft and share an access statement, including features, barriers, point of contact, logistical access details, and event setup.
	Set clear deadline for access requests (at least one or two weeks before the event) and identify point of contact.
	Share presentations/materials, with alt text and image descriptions, in advance. This should include an agenda, with breaks embedded throughout the schedule.
	Avoid last-minute changes to time, location, or other event logistics.
	Budget for interpretation services in event or annual budget.
	If necessary, book interpreters in advance (at least two weeks prior to the event). Note, additional interpreters are required for events that are longer than one hour.

Plan for Hybrid Programming (If Appropriate)

	Staff properly for hybrid facilitation to ensure an equal experience for all participants in-person and online. Assign access support roles, including tech monitoring and chat moderation.
	Request all presenters and participants make it a practice to state their name before they speak.
	Negotiate camera use, allowing flexibility for on/off use depending on individual needs, and invite participants to make their own decision.
	Create a plan for balanced chat access, including moderation, pauses, and screen reader compatibility.
	Spotlight interpreters so that interpreters are always in view for participants, and make interpreters cohosts so that they have spotlight control.
	Check if platform offers a dedicated interpreter view and, if so, spotlight interpreters at the beginning of the event.
	Set up captioning preferences.
	Plan ahead for breakouts and a “quiet room” option.

Create Accessible Presentations

	Include verbal and written image descriptions.
	Include alt text and image descriptions on the back end.
	Caption all audio and media where audio is used.
	Use high-contrast colors between text and background (check ratios) and limit to two or three colors.
	Use descriptive hyperlinks to identify purpose or destination of link.

Kick Off the Event

	Test access features, including captioning, ASL/interpretation, and tech access, before you begin the event.
	Use quality microphones and/or headsets.
	Begin with an access check (ask if everyone has what they need) and identify the access support person.
	Ask all participants to state their name before speaking.
	Invite participants to engage in ways that support their needs (stretch, stim, move).
	Invite participants to share verbal description of themselves and their setting during introductions.

Throughout the Event

	Check access regularly.
	Pause the event if access fails (captions, mic, tech issues) and do not continue until resolved.
	Ask all speakers and presenters to describe and explain all visuals.
	Provide participants with time and space to process and respond, utilizing smaller groups, pair-sharing, and the option to go to a “quiet room.”
	Set up a way for virtual participants to share and comment (for virtual and hybrid events). Pause regularly to acknowledge chat input.
	Monitor and correct captioning and transcripts for accuracy.

Following the Event

	Ask for feedback, with specific accessibility prompts included.
	Follow-up on access-related reflections, including thanking participants and documenting learnings.
	Update future access practices based on feedback.

This information was compiled by Detroit Disability Power for an initiative supported by the National Education Association.