$7.2M National Digital Accessibility Project to Impact Students With Disabilities

NCADEMI aims to improve accessibility of digital learning experiences for children and youth with disabilities.

A four-year, $7.2M National Center on Accessible Digital Education Materials & Instruction (NCADEMI, pronounced n-CAD-emy) officially launched at Utah State University in October 2024. The national center is part of the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice (IDRPP) at USU and is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) within the US Department of Education. Its mission is to ensure that students with disabilities nationwide can access and engage with technology at the same time, and with the same ease and independence, as students without disabilities.

On October 23, members of NCADEMI's team met in Washington DC with OSEP leadership and staff to formalize the project's launch. Now, team members will collect information from stakeholders to determine the most urgent accessibility needs. Its goal is to improve the accessibility of digital learning experiences for children and youth with disabilities, from early learning through high school graduation.

"While significant gains have been made, learners with disabilities remain at a disadvantage, both in education and finding jobs, due to the lack of accessibility of materials and technologies commonly provided in schools," said NCADEMI director Cynthia Curry.

NCADEMI's training and resources will enable students with disabilities to learn alongside their peers using

materials that work for them, without waiting for them to be converted into a format they can use.

The center will draw on the expertise of two IDRPP programs, Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE) and WebAIM, that deliver technical assistance nationwide. NCADEMI will support educational leaders, teachers, parents, policymakers, and others.

IDRPP's NCADEMI team members Christopher Phillips, Cynthia Curry, Jonathan Whiting, and Brenda Smith at the kick-off event in Washington, DC.

"TAESE and WebAIM have each carved out impressive national reputations over the past 20 to 30 years," said IDRPP Executive Director Matthew Wappett. "And NCADEMI provides an opportunity to leverage their respective areas of expertise and networks. We are excited for the opportunity this provides the IDRPP to work more directly with OSEP to improve the accessibility of education from pre-K through post-high school settings."

"The center does not produce or provide educational materials for student use," Curry said. "We offer training, coaching, and resources to improve the practices and decision making of those who do provide them." As such, NCADEMI will support state and local education agencies, Part C early intervention agencies, OSEP-funded parent information centers, OSEP-funded technical assistance and dissemination centers, and teacher and administrator training programs.

Digital inaccessibility isn't just a huge stumbling-block to student learning; it is also against the intent of U.S. law, which requires a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities. Although laws have typically lagged behind the changes in technology, a new Justice Department rule states that state and local governments—and the agencies that operate under them—must ensure that their websites and mobile apps meet accessibility standards by 2026 or 2027, depending on the entity's size. NCADEMI will help schools and related agencies comply with this and other regulations requiring accessibility of educational materials.

A roadmap to help state and local educational agencies comply with the Justice Department's new rule is currently available free of charge on the center's website. It is among the first of many resources the project will share.

In coming months, watch for listening sessions, webinars, guides, tools, and learning modules. NCADEMI staff will also provide in-person training at national conferences, including the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) Conference in Orlando, Florida, in January 2025. All NCADEMI resources will be open source and available to anyone who wants to procure, create, and use accessible learning materials.

"Digital accessibility and accessible materials are critical in ensuring that all infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities are included and have equitable opportunities to achieve their dreams in their homes, schools, and communities as they grow and learn," said Rebecca Sheffield, an education program specialist with OSEP. "The Office of Special Education Programs looks forward to the resources that NCADEMI will develop and share with key state and local partners and with other OSEP-funded centers, and ultimately with educators, providers, families, and children with disabilities. We appreciate the knowledge and experience the team at USU's Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice brings to this work."

Learn more on the NCADEMI website. To stay informed of NCADEMI's activities, such as upcoming webinars and listening sessions, fill out this form.