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Don't Leave Blind Students Out

At Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, we have an ongoing commitment to preparing our clients, especially young people, to function fully, productively and, yes, competitively in today's workplace. New technologies have leveled the playing field, and we can do everything at work that our sighted co-workers can do: We just need to do it in different ways.

As a busy, blind executive, I know the time-wasting traps laid by websites that cannot be read by my screen-reading software, even though the technology exists to make them accessible. Complex web-based, online, e-learning systems that schools and colleges are implementing can be challenging for sighted people to use, and are frequently not usable by blind and visually impaired users who otherwise have no trouble using the Internet with screen-reading software.

The thrust of new legislation called the Digital Learning Now Act is the establishment of virtual charter schools and includes requiring Florida high school students to participate in online courses. For example, those students who are entering ninth grade this fall will have to complete at least one course online by the end of the school year. The legislation also requires that, beginning in 2014, all statewide end-of-course assessments will be administered online.

Unfortunately, there is no provision built into the Digital Learning Now Act for the blind or visually impaired students who need the e-learning software to be accessible by screen readers. Thus, blind and visually impaired students are at high risk of being left behind as a result of this legislation.

Unfortunately, too many schools rely on commercial browser-based software for virtual learning that is not accessible to blind and visually impaired students, which is in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If the state of Florida intends to legislate online learning for all high school students, then it needs to also legislate compliance with existing standards for accessibility, so that everyone will benefit. Blind and visually impaired students at universities already are speaking out when distance learning blocks accessibility, including students at Florida State who have a lawsuit pending. Will blind and visually impaired Florida high school students be next?

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