The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 provides the same civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities that apply as a result of race, gender, national origin, and religion (Button & Wobschall, 1994). Title III of the ADA directs that public facilities make reasonable modifications to control discrimination and support accessibility in policies, practices, and procedures (Council for Exceptional Children, 1994). As a result of this landmark legislation, accessibility alterations such as providing ramps to elevated areas and providing accessible signage through height adjustments and raised lettering have become commonplace across the United States.

The Perkins Vocational Act of 1984 called attention to America’s need to support individuals who were less fortunate by birth or economic circumstances. The Act underscored the need for improving vocational programs and serving special populations of students. The Act created an awareness of the population of people that had gone unnoticed with little or no training.

The World Wide Web (WWW) has become an invaluable resource for many people with disabilities. Accessibility across platforms and geographic distance makes the WWW an ideal universal tool for gathering and disseminating information (Heflich & Edyburn, 1998). Many school districts use the Internet to disseminate a wide variety of information to students and parents. Wong (1997) discussed using the Internet for increased self-advocacy by individuals with physical impairments. It is ironic, however, that while technological developments have enhanced and provided new exciting opportunities for the WWW, they have, at the same time, complicated and limited the accessibility of the content and resources for individuals with disabilities.

Physical barriers are obvious accessibility concerns. Web page developers need to be just as aware that on-line barriers can create significant problems for some users. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that all organizations make reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities. Even though there has not been a judicial ruling on WWW accommodations for individuals with disabilities, home page developers should work towards designing and building Web sites that are accessible to all individuals. It is important that Web page developers use and follow standards that allow accessibility to all WWW users.

To examine the accessibility of school districts’ home pages a descriptive study was conducted. The population Web sites for this study were school districts located in the United States and Canada. A list of 567 School District Web sites was randomly selected from an online school web directory. Each home page was analyzed using the software package Bobby 3.2 (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2000), which allows researchers and other professionals to evaluate Web pages in accordance with the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative's guidelines.

Approximately three-fourths (74.3%) of the home pages were not approved by Bobby 3.2. This indicates that at least one Priority 1 error (seriously affects accessibility) was detected on these pages. There was an average of .91 Priority 1 accessibility errors on the School District home pages. In addition, the average number of Priority Two and Priority Three errors was 2.33 and 1.64 respectively.

Web developers at school districts need to examine their Web sites for accessibility problems. It is strongly recommended that validation methods be used in the early stages of Web development, which will help make problems easier to correct and assist developers in avoiding many accessibility problems. In addition to evaluation tools such as Bobby 3.2 expert and novice users with disabilities should be invited to view home pages and provide feedback about accessibility or usability problems and their severity.

References