

Case Study

Starkville Oktibbeha SD Breaks Barriers with Accessible Websites

Starkville Oktibbeha School District is a 10-school district operating in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi. With its district headquarters in the town of Starkville, home of Mississippi State University and the Oktibbeha County Hospital Medical Center, Starkville Oktibbeha School District is the third largest employer in the county, and a vital and very visible part of the community fabric.

In recent years, Starkville and Oktibbeha County school districts—two very distinct districts, each with established identities and cultures—were combined as part of a consolidation plan. A new superintendent, Dr. Eddie Peasant, began implementing a strategic plan designed to transform the district over the next five years, addressing the many facets that are critical to educational excellence: student achievement, school culture, community engagement, and more. And at the heart of the plan was a spirited focus on the unified district's mission and vision—one that's being driven by clear and strategic communications.

**STARKVILLE
OKTIBBEHA
SCHOOL DISTRICT**



Challenges

Navigate compliance and improve engagements



District Size

~5000 students



Products Used

SchoolStatus Sites & Apps



Challenges: Navigate Compliance and Improve Engagements

There were two major challenges confronting the school district. Early into the implementation of the district consolidation, Starkville-Oktibbeha School District officials had received a formal complaint from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights informing the district its website did not meet the federal standard for website accessibility. Schools are required to have an ADA-compliant website to serve those individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities, and Starkville was among the thousands of U.S. school districts requiring website remediation to meet federal guidelines for ADA compliance.

"[Accessibility] changes the way you approach your website. When you start thinking about formatting content to meet these guidelines, you start examining what information is best for your website," said Nicole Thomas, Public Information Officer and Communication Lead for Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District.

At the same time, the district's public information officer and communication lead Nicole Thomas had already begun an audit of the district's current website. In years prior, the district had begun a communications program with the mission of motivating students, staff and the entire Starkville school community, but the district's websites fell short of that goal.

"We weren't telling our story as well as we could have," said Thomas. "There was a lot happening, not the least of which was the consolidation of the two districts a couple years back...We also had just this exciting new partnership school with MSU (Mississippi State University), so we had a lot to communicate. There was a lot of great stuff happening, and our website wasn't reflecting that. We needed a fresh new look.

Compounding the issue, the cumbersome web content management system (CMS) tools and the lack of training resources and support for content managers resulted in stale, inaccurate or unorganized content.

Solution: New Online Communication Strategy

Motivated initially by the OCR complaint, Thomas and school administrators charted a course to learn about website accessibility. Thomas tapped information about ADA-compliant websites from the SchoolStatus Sites & Apps and put in place a plan to build a new website that not only satisfied accessibility laws, but one that looked professional and was easy for Starkville's entire school community to use.

The wake-up call from the OCR also signaled for Thomas a broader perspective on how a school website should work. "It [accessibility] changes the way you approach your website," said Thomas. "When you start thinking about formatting content to meet these guidelines, you start examining what information is best for your website."

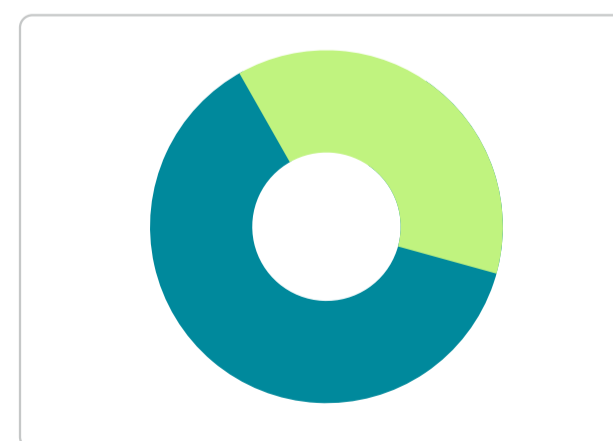
In addition to helping the Starkville Oktibbeha School District create ADA-compliant websites, SchoolStatus also helped to keep them accessible. Both through ongoing training and support on how to create accessible content, the district turned to SchoolStatus Sites & Apps for ongoing monitoring, remediation, and training to keep websites compliant. "Accessibility is an ongoing process," said Thomas, "It's not like you wake up and everything is perfect and you'll never have an issue again."



Accessibility Dashboard

WCAG2.2-AA Accessibility Report

18 Accessibility Issues Found



● Done

● To Fix

Issues Summary

23 Done
18 To Fix

Level A Compliance

SchoolStatus Sites & Apps

Thomas and her colleagues looked at how their website content was organized, and used SchoolStatus Sites & Apps' website architecture tools to lay out content hubs and optimize navigation. "A clean, nice design helps people be able to find what they're looking for, whether they have a disability or not," said Thomas. "People are coming to our site for a reason, and want to quickly and easily find the information they need."

"We wanted a great-looking district site, but we also wanted to carry the branding through to all our schools," said Thomas, who selected from one of the many themes in the SchoolStatus theme library. The themes, while maintaining the basic color, logos and other branding mandates established, allow website administrators and authorized publishers to adjust layouts, design widgets, and content on a school-by-school basis.

In addition, Thomas finds the News feature on the district main page especially helpful, for it allows web publishers to share news and event content from the district site to targeted schools or every school. "From one dashboard, we can push information out precisely to the schools where it applies," said Thomas. Parents get just the content that pertains to their school.



Outcome: An Accessible Website Launches A Unified District Brand

The new website has been a boon for the district's community relations and enrollment recruiting. "For a lot of people, their first stop is the school website," said Thomas. "It's been met with rave reviews from parents, teachers, community, and now state level. In addition to being appealing graphically and easy to manage, it's accessible for those with disabilities," said Thomas.

The SchoolStatus website solution for Starkville Oktibbeha School District not only solved web accessibility issues, but put in place a communications foundation to help a school district going through tremendous change. The new website and unified brand will be an incredible asset for the district into the future.

Book a demo to learn how SchoolStatus can help build accessible websites for your district.

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