

US DOJ: Kindle in classroom hurts blind students

The agency's settlement prohibits three schools from promoting the use of the Kindle in classrooms

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Three U.S. universities will stop promoting the use of Amazon.com's Kindle DX e-book reader in classrooms after complaints that the device doesn't give blind students equal access to information.

Settlements with Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Pace University in New York City and Reed College in Portland, Oregon, were announced Wednesday by the U.S. Department of Justice. The National Federation of the Blind and the American Council of the Blind had complained that use of the Kindle devices discriminates against students with vision problems.

The complaints about the Kindle were based on the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability.

The three universities were among six schools participating in an Amazon.com pilot program testing the use of the Kindle DX in classrooms. On Monday, a fourth participating school, Arizona State University, also reached a settlement with the DOJ and the two organizations representing the blind.

Three other schools announced in late 2009 they will not deploy Kindle in classrooms.

The Kindle DX has the capability to convert text to synthesized speech, but the device does not include text-to-speech functionality for its menu and navigational controls, the DOJ said in a press release. Some reviewers and users of the device's text-to-speech software have also said the speech is difficult to listen to and the conversion can be inaccurate.

The agreements are a "step forward" for blind students, said Chris Danielsen, director of public relations at the National Federation of the Blind. The group is encouraged that Amazon has announced improvements for the Kindle, he added.

"With regard to the Kindle DX, it can read books aloud, but a blind person cannot independently select a book, start the read-aloud function, or navigate within the book, among other things," he added. "In other words, a blind student could only really use the device with the assistance of a sighted person."

Amazon.com is making changes to the Kindle to make it more accessible to blind people, a spokesman there said. The Kindle team is working on an audio-based menu system, and the devices will have a super-size font added, Amazon said in [a press release](#). **Those new features are due out by mid-2010, the company said.**

"Kindle is for anyone who loves to read -- in fact, we've heard from thousands of vision-impaired customers and customers with learning disabilities over the past two years who have been helped tremendously by Kindle," Ian Freed, vice president for Amazon Kindle, said in a statement. "With some key modifications, we believe Kindle can be a breakthrough device for the blind, and the team is excited about making these enhancements."

Under the agreements reached Wednesday, the universities generally will not purchase, recommend or promote use of the Kindle DX, or any other dedicated electronic book reader, unless the devices are fully accessible to students who are blind or have low vision.

The universities agreed that if they use dedicated electronic book readers, they will ensure that students with vision disabilities are able to access and acquire the same materials and information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as sighted students with substantially equivalent ease of use.

The DOJ's agreement with each university becomes effective at the end of the Kindle pilot projects.

"Advancing technology is systematically changing the way universities approach education, but we must be sure that emerging technologies offer individuals with disabilities the same opportunities as other students," Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez said in a statement. "These agreements underscore the importance of full and equal educational opportunities for everyone."