# PERKINS SCHOOL EXPANDS ITS WEB SITE FOR BLIND

*Christina Pazzanese, Globe Correspondent*



Using advanced design technology, the Watertown-based Perkins School for the Blind launched a new Web site last week that allows blind, deaf-blind, and sighted users the same online experience and access to information.

"We realized that there was a lot of information that no one had access to," said Kimberly Emrick-Kittredge, Web master of the Perkins site. The site was developed with input from a committee of sighted and blind people, professional tech ies and average users, students and teachers. It was created by members of Nesnadny + Schwartz, a Cleveland-based Web design team, whose mission was to create "one site for everyone."

The site's improved navigation and expanded content has already drawn kudos from users.

"It's so much easier to use," said Sharon Strzalkowski, a vocational rehabilitation counselor for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, who is blind. "There's much quicker and efficient access. And any time there's an image, it's described and it's easy to move around."

The extra description helps the many blind people who use voice synthesizers to "read" aloud text on the screen, she said. Strzalkowski also likes the new online access to the Howe Press catalog, which sells hard-to-find student supplies like Braille paper and writing slates.

Before the new site was set up, users were not able to directly e-mail Perkins teachers and administrators or access the school's famous Braille & Talking Book Library catalog. Now, they can not only peruse 700,000 Library of Congress volumes and Perkins's own 16,000 Braille titles, but they can also borrow and ship books to themselves online.

"The biggest decision was to avoid the `fork in the road' syndrome," said Emrick-Kittredge, referring to the stripped-down, "text only" option that visually impaired users typically must use to access most Web sites. "We realized that was sending a certain message" that Perkins did not want to send.

Using Cascading Style Sheets technology, the site offers a custom ization feature that allows users to select a variety of settings to enhance their viewing experience by enlarging photos and fonts or changing background colors. CSS creates a database of the user's preferences and is easily updated. When a user leaves the site, the preferences are held in place.

Kim Charlson, director of the Perkins Braille & Talking Book Library, noted that the growing importance of the Internet, particularly in business, makes full access for the blind and visually impaired critical, given the "tremendous unemployment rates of blind" people.

She cited a "70 percent unemployment rate in the US and 80 to 85 percent outside the US" according to the American Foundation for the Blind, a nonprofit advocacy group.

As the nation's oldest school for the blind with programs in 50 countries, Perkins made a concerted effort to reach users that may not have the latest technology.

"What we've done is make it compatible with older browsers," said Charlson. "A lot of international people are coming to the site, using older technology and all different degrees of ability and skill."

Early next year, Emrick-Kittredge said, the school will begin a second development phase that will offer general information and links to resources of particular interest to the visually impaired, such as downloadable full-text documents and other publications. There will also be an online forum for students and teachers to share writing and artwork.

"One of the things I like about the site is it's not just for people who are visually impaired," said Charlson, who noted that schoolchildren can now reach the site's Helen Keller section to learn more about the inspirational Perkins graduate.

"The general public can learn more about blindness and the experience of the blind," she said.

The school's Web site is at www.perkins.org