

# Blindness



Students with little or no functional vision for learning are considered educationally blind and primarily use Braille, tactile (e.g., raised maps) and audio resources to access instructional materials. Many of these students may have some residual vision, which can provide cues to enhance tactile learning or access to information. This can be an advantage in such tasks as learning to travel independently around the school. Students who have residual vision should receive specific instruction and practice in the effective use of this vision to help them develop an optimal level of visual efficiency.

Visual acuity is measured by comparing one's ability to identify symbols of various sizes viewed at a given distance (6 metres/20 feet). A normal visual acuity is 6/6 or 20/20. Near vision is measured in a similar manner using a test distance of 16 inches or 40 centimetres. Visual field is measured in degrees. The term legally blind is sometimes used to identify people with a severe vision loss. An individual is considered legally blind if central visual acuity is 6/60 (20/200) or less in the better eye, even with corrective lenses or if the visual field is restricted to a diameter of 20 degrees or less. Only 1 in 10 people, who are legally blind, see nothing at all.

## Implications for Planning and Awareness

- Meet with the student, parents and the student's previous classroom teachers to discuss necessary supports for the student. This could include information about:
  - the student's learning strengths and routine required accommodations
  - how to access textbooks and instructional materials in alternate formats (e.g., Braille)
  - the technology and special equipment used by the student
  - instructional strategies that enhance access to information
  - the procedure to make peers aware of vision loss and its implications.
- Learn as much as you can about how vision loss may affect learning and social and emotional well-being. Reading, asking questions and talking to qualified professionals, such as a teacher of the visually impaired and/or an orientation and mobility instructor.
- Arrange (prior to the first day of school) for a teacher of the visually impaired or an orientation and mobility instructor to orient the student to the classroom, to any areas of the school that will be used by the student, and to locations for catching buses.
- Learn the correct way to act as a sighted guide for the student and teach this method to peers.
- Review previous functional vision assessments and eye care specialist reports to find out specific information about the student's vision. Speak to the student and/or teachers of the visually impaired about accommodations that enhance the use of residual vision, thereby improving access to instruction.

Your awareness needs to begin with conversations with the student's parents.



- Review recent assessments to identify current instructional levels and any areas requiring individualized instruction.
- Collaborate with school staff, the school jurisdictional team and community partners to identify and coordinate supports and services required to address the nine areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum for students with visual impairment, including:
  - compensatory and functional academic skills (e.g., Braille reading, keyboarding, tactile discrimination skills)
  - orientation and mobility
  - social interaction skills
  - independent living and management skills
  - recreation and leisure skills
  - career and life management skills
  - assistive technology
  - visual efficiency skills
  - self-determination.
- Develop a system for sharing information with relevant staff members about the student's vision loss, abilities, instructional needs and successful strategies.

### Implications for Instruction

- Organize instruction to include the use of concrete teaching methods, stressing the relationship among things in the environment.
- Review basic concepts prior to the presentation of a lesson. Incidental learning is significantly limited for a student who is blind. Even if the student is familiar with a concept, pose questions to ensure accuracy and completeness of understanding.
- Use real models, tactile representations and objects for manipulation to support verbal explanations of new concepts.
- Use cooperative education strategies to actively involve the student in group work.
- Discuss access to learning aids and equipment designed specifically for students who are blind with a teacher of the visually impaired.
- Consult with an orientation and mobility specialist or teacher of the visually impaired to arrange the classroom to ensure the student can move about safely and independently.
- Create an efficient system that will include desk space and a storage area for technology, special equipment, materials and volumes of Braille textbooks.
- Implement strategies to ensure the student has access to visual materials presented in various formats (e.g., bulletin boards, videos, software programs).
- Implement strategies for getting notes presented during a lesson (e.g., electronic copy of notes, sharing notes recorded by a peer).
- Plan in advance the materials and resources that you will be using in daily lessons. Ensure that they are available in the students' appropriate alternate format at the same time as their sighted peers.
- Establish procedures to ensure the student has access to textbooks, supplementary and teacher-made materials in Braille at the same time as peers receive a print copy.



- Use descriptive words such as left and right, and avoid the use of vague terms, such as “over here” or “this,” when giving the student directions.
- Verbalize what is being written on the board, demonstrated to the class, or happening in the class when nonverbal information is being provided (e.g., a visitor enters the classroom, changes are made to the arrangement of the classroom).
- Provide additional time to complete assignments, if necessary.

### Implications for Social and Emotional Well-being

- In collaboration with school team members, including the parents, implement strategies to ensure the meaningful social inclusion of the student.
- Teach the student’s classmates strategies to interact effectively with a peer who is blind. Ensure they understand the implications of blindness on verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Provide both classroom and extracurricular opportunities for the student to interact with peers and to develop friendships.
- Identify peers by name when responding to raised hands or when calling on specific students to respond to questions. This allows the student who is blind to learn to identify classmates by their voices.
- Based on observation and assessment of the student during social interactions, provide instruction to address identified social skill needs and mastery of age-appropriate social skills and behaviours. Some skills can be taught in a group setting while others may require one-on-one instruction.
- Monitor the student’s understanding of his or her strengths, areas of need and ability to understand and respond to the perceptions of others.
- Teach self-advocacy skills and a “can do” attitude.
- Ensure the student has access to information and the supports needed to achieve success in an activity.
- Investigate opportunities for the student to meet and interact with peers and adult role models who are blind.
- Encourage independence by expecting the student to take the same level of responsibility (that classmates have) for his or her learning.
- Respond to the student in a manner appropriate to the relevant age level and performance expectations for the given age group. Communicating high expectations to the student demonstrates your belief in and commitment to his or her success.
- Provide opportunities for the student to complete classroom jobs and to help peers. It is critical for the student to believe he or she can help, as well as be helped.
- Ensure there are both classroom and extracurricular activities where the student who is blind can perform competently and meaningfully.

Parents know their children well and can offer insights on how to support their social and emotional well-being. There is strength in collaborating on strategies that could be used at home, at school and in the community.



**As you consider the implications for this disability, think about the following questions:**

1. Do I need further conversations with the parents to better understand this student's strengths and needs?  Yes  No
2. Do I need targeted professional learning?  Yes  No  
If yes, what specific topics and strategies would I explore?
3. Is consultation with jurisdictional staff required?  Yes  No  
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?
4. Is consultation with external service providers required (e.g., Regional Educational Consulting Services, Student Health Partnership, Alberta Children's Hospital, Glenrose Hospital)?  Yes  No  
If yes, what issues and questions would we explore?
5. Are further assessments required to assist with planning for this student?  Yes  No  
If yes, what questions do I need answered?
6. Is service to the student from an external provider required?  Yes  No  
If yes, what outcomes would be anticipated?

**Links for further information:**

Alberta Education. *Essential Components of Educational Programming for Students Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired*. <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/special/programming/components.aspx>

Vision Education Alberta. <http://www.vision.alberta.ca/>

"The Expanded Core Curriculum for Students with Visual Impairments." <http://vision.alberta.ca/resources/curriculum.aspx>

"Supporting General Education Classroom Teachers of Braille-Reading Students." <http://setbc.org/teachingbraillestudents/default.html>

Saskatchewan Education. *Teaching Students with Visual Impairments*. <http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/StudentSupportServicesPublications>

Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. <http://www.tsbvi.edu/>

**Please note:**

These websites are for information only and the user is responsible for evaluating the content and appropriate uses of the information.

