

Disclaimer

This document does not reflect policy or procedures from the Utah State Board of Education. The information is intended to be guidance for school staff members as they address the unique challenges of working with students with visual impairments. The section of the guidelines that contain federal or State legal citations are requirements.

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Purpose/Introduction

The Utah State Office of Education recognizes the unique needs of students with visual impairments. The challenge to succeed and progress educationally is difficult, but for students with a vision loss or blindness, the need for accommodations and supplemental services is critical. Early identification and interventions are important for preventing academic delays and improving results for students with visual impairments.

This manual will focus on the unique educational needs of students with visual impairments: first, to help educators and administrators improve their effectiveness in understanding and meeting the needs of students with visual impairments; second, to serve as a tool for improving the effectiveness of programs in meeting the needs of students and in making maximum use of available resources; and finally, to provide references to assist educators and administrators in improving both individual growth and program effectiveness.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that school districts evaluate and, when appropriate, provide special education services to students whose educational performance is adversely affected by their disability. IDEA includes visual impairments as a disability category if a school team determines the child's disability adversely affects educational performance and requires special education and related services. If the student has difficulties that do not "adversely impact the student's educational performance," the student is not eligible for services under IDEA.

IDEA places major emphasis on the participation of all students with disabilities in the general education curriculum, including participation of all students in mandated statewide and district-wide assessments.

There are numerous definitions of "visual impairment" and "blindness" including those in vocational rehabilitation and Utah State Law. For the purposes of this manual, the definition in IDEA 2004 will be used. This manual addresses students with visual impairments that are eligible for special education services.

Specific accommodations have been developed, as research-based information becomes available, to address the needs of students with visual impairments. Significant progress has been made in including students with visual impairments in statewide assessments. Although there continue to be barriers and issues regarding statewide assessment that have not yet been resolved for students with visual impairments, the inclusion of all students in statewide assessments is required. It will continue to be an evolving process with a focus on the equitable and fair assessment of all students.

Related services are critical in assisting the student to benefit from his/her special education program. An example would be orientation and mobility services; this will be discussed in detail later.

Legal Authority

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq., reauthorized in 2004, is considered an education law, protecting the educational rights of children with disabilities. The IDEA contains many broad, overarching mandates for State and public agencies to further protect children with disabilities. Once identified as a student with a disability pursuant to IDEA, the student is entitled to a free appropriate public education designed to meet the student's unique learning needs.

In furtherance of these broad protections, the IDEA requires that an Individualized Education Program (IEP) be developed by the school district to address the child's unique needs. Typically, the IDEA is silent with regard to a particular method or type of instruction to be used when designing the specialized instruction for a student with a disability. However, when developing the IEP for a student who is blind or visually impaired, the IDEA contains specific mandates to be followed by the school district. Pursuant to §1414(d)(3)(B), the IEP team shall provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP team determines, after evaluation, that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child, and further, whether the child needs assistive technology devices and services. Defined specifically in the definition section of IDEA, assistive technology can generally be described as various types of devices and services designed to help students with disabilities function within their environments.

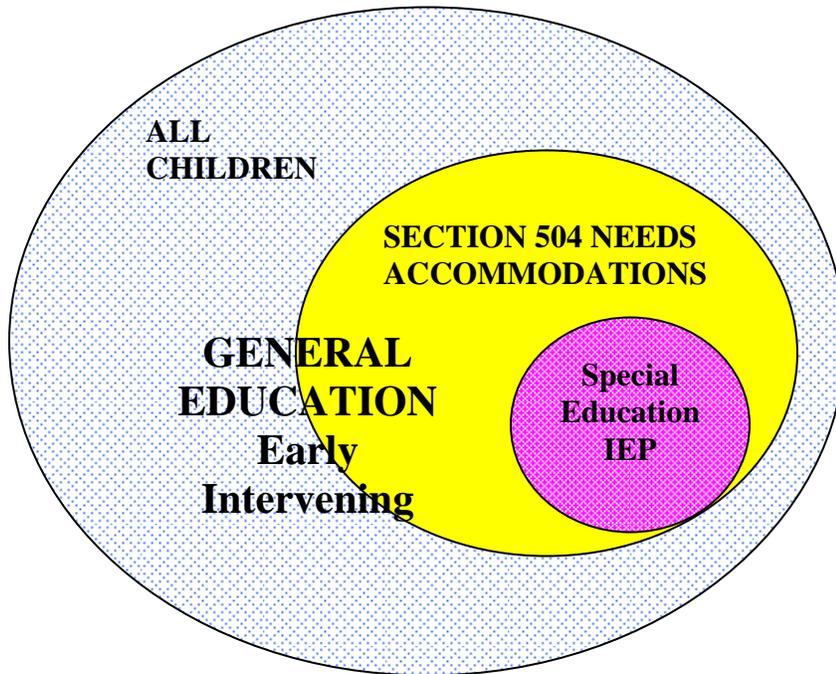
The IEP must also include a statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child, (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)). Related services can include transportation, developmental, corrective, and other supportive services to enable a child with a disability to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), (20 U.S.C. §1402(26)).

In addition to the IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights act that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Section 504 ensures that a child with a disability has equal access to an education in a public school setting. Unlike the IDEA, Section 504 does not contain the substantive requirements for educational planning. It is possible that a child with a disability may not need specialized instruction but needs accommodations or modifications in order to permit access to an education. Section 504 mandates that public schools provide reasonable accommodations or modifications to permit access to an education for a child with a disability.

In order for a student to be eligible for Section 504, *he/she must have a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits a major life activity*. The impairment must affect the student's education. One of the major life activities is "seeing." If the condition cannot be corrected by glasses or other assistive technology, and the impairment affects the student's education, a Section 504 accommodation plan might be necessary. If a student with a visual

impairment is determined to be eligible under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the teacher of the visually impaired student may be involved as a consultant in the development of the 504 plan. The teacher of the visually impaired student can provide valuable information to assist in the success of the student in the general education classroom.

The distinction between an IDEA disability and a Section 504 disability can be confusing. The following visual depiction represents the universe of all children, including those children entitled to accommodations through Section 504 and those entitled to special education under the IDEA:



Relevant to this discussion regarding students with visual impairments, some students need individual accommodations to access an educational program, but do not need specialized instruction. For example, if a student needs large-print texts in order to access the curriculum, but is able to make adequate progress without specialized instruction, then the student would be entitled to the protections of Section 504 but would not require an IEP or be identified as a special education student pursuant to the IDEA.

There exists no bright-line test to determine whether a particular kind of assessment, service, or assistive device is the responsibility of the school district. Such determinations are made on a case-by-case basis by the IEP team, which should include the student's parent and individuals with expertise in vision impairment. By law, these decisions are driven by the student's IEP team in fulfillment of its duty to provide the student with FAPE. State educational agencies, the courts, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) resolve disputes arising under IDEA and Section 504. Through the resolution of disputes comes interpretive guidance helpful to

educational agencies providing services to children and helpful to students and parents as they attempt to navigate the requirements of IDEA and Section 504.

In an effort to summarize decades of guidance, general principles that have withstood the test of time are highlighted here:

- If a school district determines a child with a disability requires a particular assistive device in order to receive FAPE, the school district must provide it at no expense to the parents. *Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garrett F.*, 106 F. 3d 822 (8th Cir. 1997), *Letter to Bachus*, 22 IDELR 629 (1995).
- Although vision therapy may be useful or beneficial, unless necessary to ensure FAPE, or unless necessary to ensure that the student benefits from his/her IEP, it is not the responsibility of the school district. *Eugene School District 4J*, 35 IDELR 52 (OR SEA 2001), *Board of Education of the Springville-Griffith Institute Central School District*, 37 IDELR 175 (NY SEA 2002).
- When assistive technology devices or services are determined to be necessary to provide FAPE, but the school district fails to provide the services, parents may be entitled to reimbursement for services unilaterally obtained, and the student may be entitled to compensatory education from the school district. *Dekalb County School District v. M.T.V.*, 45 IDELR 30 (11th Cir. 2006), *Board of Education of the Starpoint Central School District*, 37 IDELR 120 (NY SEA 2002), *Upper Darby School District*, 26 IDELR 1183 (PA SEA 1997).
- The school district is responsible for conducting evaluations in all suspected areas of disability, and in the case of a child with a visual impairment, the IEP team is responsible for evaluating the child's reading and writing skills, appropriate media, and need for Braille. The evaluative reports of outside experts are to be considered but do not supplant the IEP team's responsibility. *In re: Student with a Disability*, 103 LRP 57778 (NM SEA 2003).
- Reasonable accommodations must be provided under Section 504. Accommodations may be considered reasonable if they facilitate access to education. *New York City Department of Education*, 39 IDELR 129 (OCR, Eastern Division 2003), *Cabrini College*, 30 IDELR 26 (OCR, Eastern Division 2004).

Eligibility and Service Options

Early identification and intervention are important because of the critical learning that takes place between birth and four years of age. Vision loss can lead to delays in cognitive development, motor skill acquisition, social and emotional problems, and functional academic skills. Many school districts have early intervening and Responsiveness to Intervention (RtI) processes. This is everything that occurs in general education, including screening, observation, and interventions, prior to a referral to special education for a comprehensive evaluation.

This section provides an overview of the process generally used for identification, through the least restrictive environment, in the context of working with students with visual impairments.

Step One: Evaluation

Many infants and toddlers with visual and/or hearing impairments receive early intervention services through the Parent Infant Program (PIP) at the Utah Schools for the Deaf and Blind. PIP incorporates family-centered practices into services for families and children from birth to age three. The school district should check to see whether the child received services through PIP.

Identification/Screening

A student must be examined by an optometrist or ophthalmologist as soon as a vision loss is suspected. Some possible indicators for vision loss could include the following:

- Eyes crossed or turning in or out
- Eyes moving independently of each other
- Reddened, watering eye, encrusted eyelids, frequent sties
- Eyes shake or wander randomly.
- Eyes are not able to follow parent's face.
- Pupils of the eyes are excessively large or small.
- Pupils of the eyes are not black; they appear to have a cloudy film on them.
- Headaches, nausea, and dizziness
- Burning or itchy eyes
- Blurring of vision at any time
- Double vision
- Rubbing eyes frequently
- Does not appear to focus with central vision.
- Turns or tilts head when looking at detail.
- Covers or closes an eye when looking at detail.

- Avoids close work or becomes tired after close work.
- Can see better during the day than at night.
- Complains of tired eyes.
- Squints eyes.
- Sits very close to the television.
- Has difficulty walking and running; appears clumsy.

The school does routine screening for all children, and it is not considered an evaluation that needs parental consent (CFR 300.302). An example would be vision screening. Parents are notified of screenings through student and parent handbooks.

Every effort should be made to locate and identify students with visual impairments. This is part of the school district Child Find requirement.

Child Find (a) General requirement. (1) The school district must have in effect policies and procedures to ensure that—(i) All children with disabilities residing in the State, including children with disabilities attending private schools, regardless of the severity of their disability, and who are in need of special education and related services, are identified, located, and evaluated; and (ii) A practical method is developed and implemented to determine which children are currently receiving needed special education and related services. CFR 300.111(a)

Examination

A student must be examined by a specialist if there is a concern regarding a student’s vision. An *optometrist* is a doctor of optometry (O.D.) who specializes in the examination and treatment of conditions or impairments of the visual system. *Optometrists* prescribe glasses and are trained to detect problems with vision, eye diseases, and other abnormalities. An *ophthalmologist* is a doctor of medicine (M.D.) who specialized in diagnosis and treatment of defects and diseases of the eye, performing surgery when necessary or prescribing other types of treatment including glasses or other optical devices.

Visual Acuity

Visual acuity is an important aspect of a complete eye exam. Visual acuity refers to the clarity or clearness of one’s vision, a measure of how well a person sees. The numerator indicates the distance (in feet) from the chart that the subject can read. The denominator indicates the distance at which a normal eye can read. Some examples are given below:

- A person with a distance visual acuity of 20/20 is said to have **“normal” vision**. If a person with a distance visual acuity of 20/20 stands 20 feet from an object, he/she sees the object as well as others with “normal” vision standing 20 feet from the same object.

- A person with **low vision**, with a distance visual acuity of 20/100, would need to stand four feet from an object to see it as well as a person with “normal” vision standing 20 feet from the same object (4/20=20/100).
- A person who is **legally blind**, with a distance visual acuity of 20/200, would need to stand two feet from an object to see it as well as a person with “normal” vision standing 20 feet from the same object (2/20=20/200).

Vision Loss/Blindness

IDEA and Utah rules state that *visual impairment, including blindness, means impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes both partial sight (low vision) and blindness (CFR 300.306(b)(1)(13)).* There is a range of vision loss for students who are low vision and for students who are blind.

Low vision is defined as a mild to moderate visual impairment with visual acuity measured between 20/70 and 20/200. A student with low vision is one whose vision can be used as a primary channel for learning, but the low vision affects daily activities. Individuals with severe low vision may be classified as partially sighted and/or legally blind.

The term *legally blind* is used when the best corrected visual acuity is 20/200 or less, or the person’s visual field is 20 degrees or less. *Legally blind* is generally used to enable a person to access services funded by the government. *Legal blindness* can range from the student having unreliable vision and relying to some extent on other senses, to being totally without sight and relying exclusively on other senses. Students who are blind learn via Braille or other non-visual media. Note: The acuity measurement of 20/200 is for distance vision. Many with 20/200 vision for distances must see much better up close, and may use vision for reading and schoolwork.

A *cortical visual impairment* is not caused by any abnormality of the eyes. It is a temporary or permanent visual impairment resulting from neurological damage within the brain, often within the visual cortex of the brain. The degree of vision impairment can range from severe visual impairment to total blindness. The damage prevents the individual from adequately receiving and interpreting what the eyes see.

Functional Visual Assessment

Visual acuity is an important component of a clinical evaluation, but it conveys limited information. For instance, we may know that a student has 20/100 distance acuity, but the preferred or optimal print size for reading may not be apparent to the parents or teacher. The vision assessment provides a description of the student’s typical use of vision during everyday tasks in multiple settings and activities. The information provided through the functional vision assessment will define the current effects of the student’s visual impairment and potential use of vision by the student in certain conditions.

It is important to note that a functional vision assessment should be conducted prior to other assessments so that other team members are able to consider visual factors unique to each student before conducting their assessment.

Learning Media Assessment

The learning media assessment is “an objective process of systematically selecting *learning* and *literacy* media” (Koenig and Holbrook). This includes the total range of instructional media needed to facilitate learning and is, understandably, different for each student. It consists of *general learning media* (instructional materials and methods) and *literacy media* (the tools for reading and writing). Instructional materials can include a range of options, such as pictures, real objects, tactile symbols, videos, worksheets, tapes and augmentave communication devices. Methods can involve modeling, demonstrating, prompting, questioning, pointing, and lecturing. The wide range of possible materials and methods provides for students at all ability levels.

The learning media assessment gathers three types of information on each student:

- The efficiency with which the student gathers information from various channels: visual, tactual and auditory
- The types of general learning media the student uses, or will use, to accomplish learning tasks
- The literacy media the student will use for reading and writing

Impact on Education

Visual impairment can result in delayed educational development that, without effective intervention, may have a severe impact on the student’s social, emotional, functional, academic, and vocational development.

Students with visual impairment are typically limited in acquiring information through incidental learning, since they are often unaware of subtle activities in their environments. They may require individualized instruction relating to specialized skills, as well as specialized books, materials, and equipment for learning through alternate modes.

Educational goals for students with visual impairments are essentially the same as those for all students. In order to accomplish these goals, however, students with visual impairments require specific interventions and accommodations of their educational programs.

Early Intervening

Some students with vision loss can be accommodated by general education through early intervening services or a Section 504 accommodation plan. Students with moderate or severe vision loss might need an evaluation for special education services.

Evaluation Issues

Unique Factors to Be Considered by the Evaluation Team of a Student With a Visual Impairment

The following is a list of unique factors that should be considered when conducting an evaluation or developing an IEP for a student who has a visual impairment:

- Cause and age of onset of visual impairment
- Degree of visual impairment
- Other disabilities and medical conditions
- Family and cultural characteristics
- Physical and psychological maturity of the student
- Environmental characteristics
- Sensory development (visual, auditory, tactual, kinesthetic)
- Social development
- Concept development and reasoning
- Listening skills and study skills
- Leisure and recreation
- Orientation and mobility
- Use of media for literacy in reading and writing
- Career education
- Motor development
- Independent living skills
- Assistive technology devices and services
- Communication modes
- Academics
- Low vision aids
- Expanded Core Curriculum

Listed below are some of the specific aspects of a functional vision assessment:

- Appearance of the eyes
- Pupillary reflexes
- Eye preference
- Acuity
- Field of vision
- Color vision
- Scanning
- Tracking
- Possible use of optical aids
- Optimal print size
- Reading distance

Psychoeducational Assessment

When children with visual impairments are referred for psychoeducational evaluation, it is usually because of concerns expressed by classroom teachers, the teacher of the visually impaired (TVI), or parents about one or more aspects of their development and learning. Because of the low incidence of visual impairments relative to other disabilities among school-age children, school psychologists and other assessment personnel working in general education schools have considerably less experience with this population. It is the consensus of major authors on assessment with this population that the TVI must be involved in consultation with the other team members who will be involved.

Prior to initiating testing, all relevant vision impairment-specific assessments should be completed and reports made available to the psychoeducational team. These include the Functional Vision Evaluation, the Learning Media Assessment, Orientation and Mobility Evaluation, and the most current report of the ophthalmologist or optometrist who

provides care to the student. The TVI should review the eye report and the results of these assessments with the team and participate in planning the assessment.

School psychologists are responsible for the cognitive (and sometimes the academic) portions of psychoeducational assessments. The following recommendations apply to other team members as well, particularly if they will use assessment instruments containing visual stimuli.

- School psychologists should familiarize themselves with the medical and developmental history of the child and with the results of the functional vision assessment and learning media assessment provided by the TVI. Knowing the medical history, particularly whether the origin of the visual impairment is in the eye or in the central nervous system, will aid teams in forming hypotheses about the likelihood of additional disabilities.
- TVIs and school psychologists should clarify the referral questions.
- School psychologists should observe the student in a variety of settings.
- School psychologists should interview the classroom teacher(s), the TVI, and the parents.
- Screening instruments of social and emotional functioning should be used to identify problem areas that may require intervention.
- Because a visual impairment may affect the ability of individuals to function independently, adaptive measures should be considered.
- School psychologists and TVIs should examine test stimuli to determine whether adaptations are needed. Adaptations should conform to the intent of the items and neither increase nor decrease the cognitive demands.
- TVIs and school psychologists should consult together about any adjustments to the testing environment that are needed (e.g., lighting, furniture arrangement relative to light sources).
- Following testing, school psychologists and TVIs should discuss the student's performance in terms of effects of the vision loss on the student's functioning.
- Scores on verbal subtests should be interpreted with caution, because many of the items sample concepts that are learned incidentally through sight.
- Performance on visual-spatial subtests should be administered to students who use their vision for most or all of their learning, but the results should be interpreted qualitatively for information on the effects of vision loss on the student's ability to function with visual material and not for computation of Full Scale, Composite, or other Total scores.

- The services of an ancillary examiner should be used when tests with Braille stimuli or requiring interpretation of Brailled responses are administered.
- Teams should make a good-faith effort to reach consensus on the presence or absence of additional exceptionalities and on recommendations for programming to enhance the child's progress in all areas of both the general and expanded core curricula.

Eligibility

While the student's vision history from a qualified eye care professional must be on record, a team of qualified professionals and the student's parents determine eligibility.

- The visual impairment must adversely affect the student's educational performance.
- The student with a visual impairment must required special education and related services.
- The team must determine that the visual impairment is the student's primary disability.
- The requirements of Rule II.G must be met, as prescribed in IDEA 2004.
- When classifying a student as visually impaired, the IEP team must consider whether other impairments interfere with the comprehension of visual and/or auditory stimuli.

Step Two: The IEP

The IEP Team

The team should include at least one person with knowledge in the area(s) of suspected disability; in this case, a *vision specialist*. The person with this training has knowledge and experience in conducting and interpreting assessments for students who are visually impaired. This is also true for children who may have other disabilities in addition to vision loss. Students with additional disabilities should be carefully assessed from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

The teacher of the visually impaired brings a variety of skills to the school:

- Consultation to other team members about eye conditions; educational implications; and the appropriateness, modifications, and interpretation of assessments for students who are visually impaired
- Knowledge of the expanded core curriculum that could include skill development relating to alternative communication modes (e.g., Braille, large print), social

