



Services for Students with Visual Impairments

This brochure is designed to give district staff basic information about Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) services for students who are visually impaired and the resources that are available to help these students succeed. Please feel free to contact our department directly for more in-depth information.

Our job is to assist you as you work with your visually impaired students so that they can reach their highest potential. We look forward to partnering with you.



Special Education Department, VI Services
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“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

—Helen Keller

About Us

The Special Education Department at SCOE provides services and learning resources for students who meet the eligibility criteria for Visual Impairment (VI).

VI support may range from daily intervention for students with intense needs (Braille users or very low vision students, for example) to monthly consultation for students who require less assistance.

A wide variety of adaptive equipment and support is available for visually impaired students. This equipment can range from high-tech devices such as computers that produce Braille to low-tech solutions like a classroom white board to provide appropriate contrast. The VI staff will work with your district team to recommend and obtain adaptive equipment—and to teach students and staff how to use it.



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True story: A fourth-grader, who is blind, and a friend were eating lunch in the cafeteria at Spring Creek School. The sighted student watched the blind student eating and asked, "Wow, how do you ever even find your mouth to eat?" The blind student replied, "I just talk and follow the sound."

SCOE also provides Braille, large-print materials, and tape recordings for VI students when requested in advance by district staff. These resources are generally supplemented by materials produced by the classroom teacher or assistant.

The Sonoma County Office of Education's VI team is available to support not only visually impaired students, but also district instructional staff. We understand and appreciate how hard classroom teachers work and how much you want each of your students to succeed. We also understand that working with a blind or visually impaired student is a completely new experience for most people. Please don't hesitate to call our department and ask for help.

► Eligibility Criteria

Visual impairment including blindness means an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.

—*California Administrative Code, Title 5, Section 3030 (d)*

The Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) guidelines further define "partially sighted" as visual acuity ranging from 20/70 to 20/200 or less in the better eye after best correction.

"Legally blind" is defined as central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye after best correction ... or visual acuity better than 20/200 if there is a field defect in which the widest diameter of the visual field is no greater than 20 degrees.

For more details about eligibility and identifying student needs, see the document *Sonoma County SELPA Eligibility and Dismissal Criteria* or go to www.scoe.org and search for "eligibility criteria."

Braille, Large-Print, and Taped Materials

The VI staff includes a full-time Braillist who produces Braille, large-print, and recorded instructional materials for students. Due to the large volume of materials needed countywide, it is crucial that districts provide adequate lead time to obtain these materials for their students.

Please identify the instructional materials you need as early as possible, so that we can get them to your visually impaired student in a timely manner. When requesting lengthy texts, work with the VI teacher to calendar the dates you will need each chapter.

It is our goal to prepare all materials needed for the start of the new school year during the summer. We ask that, to whatever extent possible, schools identify texts and other required materials for VI students by the end of the preceding school year. We understand this isn't always possible and will do our best to expedite the production of materials whenever we get your request.

Many students, especially in the lower grades, have worksheets or written materials that are assigned "in the moment" or with very little lead time. In these cases, our staff will probably not be able to produce the materials. Assume it will take *at least* one week for the VI teacher to get materials to the Braillist, the Braillist



to produce the material, and the VI teacher to pick up and return materials to your classroom. Brainstorm with the VI teacher about ways to get these last-minute assignments or spontaneous lessons prepared for your student.

“ [Braille] is real cool. I like knowing Braille because, that way, on spelling tests no one can peek at my papers. I like using my Brailler instead of a pencil because pencils take longer. With pencils you have to use all those loops and lines; with a Brailler, you just press one key. **”**

—Eli S., guitar player, swimmer, and third-grade student at El Verano School

Role of the VI Teacher

Teachers of the Visually Impaired are itinerant staff that will visit your classroom to help visually impaired students access the curriculum. Their responsibilities may include:

- ▶ Assessing the student's functional vision.
- ▶ Attending IEPs and providing present-level information about the student's functional vision, suggesting appropriate goals, recommending modifications or accommodations for state-mandated assessments, and making recommendations about the scope and extent of VI service required.
- ▶ Assisting with and advising district staff about modifications to curriculum and assessment materials.
- ▶ Providing students with direct instruction about Braille, the use of specialized equipment and adaptations, and activities of daily living.
- ▶ Helping with the training of assistants assigned to VI students.
- ▶ Providing Braille, large-print, or recorded materials.
- ▶ "Interlining" student's work produced in Braille so that the classroom teacher can read it (that is, printing out what the student has written in Braille).

VI teachers provide instruction that is directly related to the student's vision loss. Although

they may help modify curriculum materials, they do not generally provide direct instruction in core curriculum areas.

For instance, if a low-vision student is having trouble learning math concepts, the VI teacher might help with suggestions for presenting materials, provide enlarged textbooks, or teach the student how to use a talking calculator. The VI teacher might work with the student on classroom curriculum as a way of teaching the student how to use adaptive equipment, organize workspace, etc. However, the VI teacher is not primarily responsible for teaching math content.



One major exception to this is for the young VI student learning to read using Braille. In this instance, the VI teacher is the primary instructor for the core curriculum area of reading. For this reason, VI teachers are all highly-qualified reading and language arts instructors.

“ VI teachers are always on the lookout for an idea or physical object that can explain something more clearly to their students. I've had very skilled VI teachers use everyday objects—soap boxes, measuring spoons, and food containers—to explain and clarify concepts in science and math. **”**

Role of the Orientation and Mobility Teacher

Orientation and Mobility (O&M) teachers are itinerant staff who help visually impaired students successfully navigate their environment. Their responsibilities may include:

- ▶ Assessing the student's mobility and travel skills.
- ▶ Attending IEPs and providing present-level information about the student's mobility skills, suggesting appropriate goals, and making recommendations about O&M services.
- ▶ Providing direct instruction to students regarding travel skills and use of public transportation, cane use, orienting their bodies in space, and having a mental map of the classroom, school, and neighborhood.
- ▶ Providing direct instruction to visually impaired students, their teachers, and peers in the use of "sighted guide" techniques.
- ▶ Providing consultation to district staff about any of these areas so that they understand what blind or low-vision students can be expected to do safely and independently, know when to help, and know how much help to give.



“What I've always tried to do on mountains is be a real team member, not some token blind guy. I carry as much weight as everyone else and set up tents and build snow walls and cook meals. I'm not some helpless person that's getting dragged up there. I'm a real part of the team. **”**

—Erik Weihenmayer, fifth-grade teacher, world famous mountain climber, and the only blind person (so far) to summit Everest

“I like to walk home with my cane because then I can go as slow or as fast as I want. Sometimes I find stuff for projects when I'm using my cane. **”**

—Eli S., El Verano School third-grader and a young man who enjoys his independence. Look out, Erik Weihenmayer!

Role of the Classroom Teacher and Aide

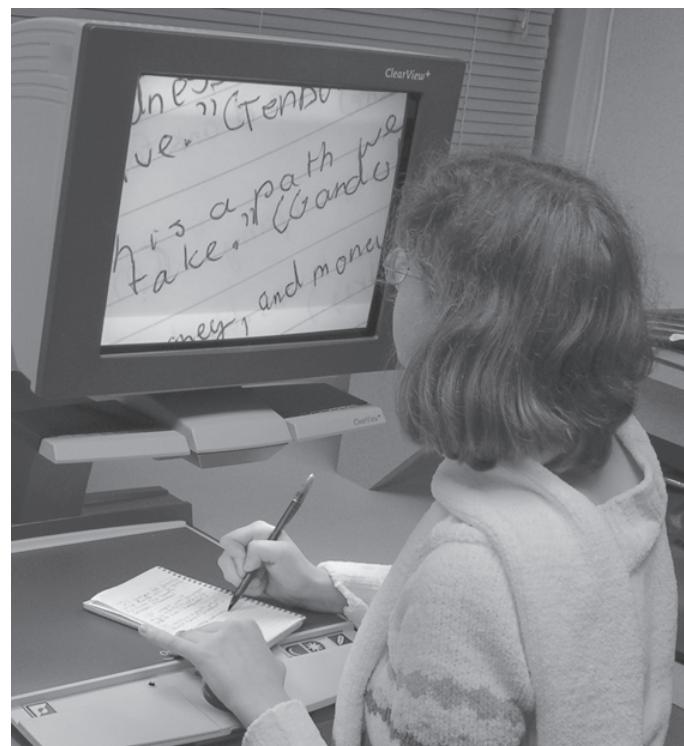
Sometimes an aide will be assigned to assist a blind or severely visually impaired student. The aide works under the combined direction of the classroom and VI teacher to facilitate the student's learning and integration in the general education setting.

The younger the blind student is, the more hands-on help he or she will need. It is important for the aide to help the student become as independent as possible and to move from being a hands-on assistant to a "shadow" aide as the student's independence increases.

The VI aide typically learns how to produce some Braille and will take responsibility for day-to-day assignments that VI staff can't accommodate. The VI teacher will work with the aide to provide training in this area.

Teachers who adopt a goal of self-sufficiency for their visually impaired students will expect these students to participate fully and independently in the class. Here are some suggestions to help achieve this goal:

- ▶ Keep expectations high.
- ▶ Provide the same or equivalent information, experience, and education for the blind child as for the sighted children in the class.



- ▶ Speak directly to the child at all times, grade the child's papers, know the child's work, interact with the child daily, discipline the child, and so forth.
- ▶ Assume the same responsibility for the education of the blind child as is assumed for the education of the sighted children in the classroom.

It is important that the classroom teacher, aide, and VI teacher work together as a team and communicate with each other frequently.

“I walk from class to class with my BrailleNote slung over my shoulder. It only weighs two pounds. I use it like other students use pencil and paper. I think I'm even faster than they are when we take notes. Using the email function, I can send my assignments directly to my teachers. I can also write letters to people who never would be able to read Braille. For instance, using email, I can write and receive letters from my grandmother in Mexico. In the future, I can use it with a GPS and travel all over the world by myself. **”**

—Hoby W., blind college student, recent docent at Petaluma High School Wildlife Museum, world traveler, and big fan of technology

District Responsibilities

District staff often ask what their responsibilities are for their VI students. Major responsibilities include:

- ▶ Providing some enlarging and Braille translations of day-to-day materials.
- ▶ Providing consistent space for the VI teacher to work with your students.
- ▶ Assuring a safe storage place for any equipment assigned to your students.
- ▶ Obtaining Braille or large print copies of state testing materials when needed.
- ▶ Purchasing minor adaptations to accommodate a particular student's needs, such as a classroom white board for good contrast.
- ▶ Attending IEP meetings. The district principal or designee usually chairs the meeting and the student's regular education teachers should attend and participate.
- ▶ Providing an aide for the student when required by the IEP.

Visually impaired students are sometimes eligible for RSP help. District staff are responsible for referring and assessing students. The VI teacher can consult with staff about assessment materials.

“ *I would like to be an architect because I like to build things and I would like to help people. I can build apartments for people to live in.* **”**

—Alex H., seventh-grader at Roseland Accelerated Middle School,
humanitarian, and visually impaired student with real vision

► Where does the equipment come from?

VI staff work with SELPA's Adaptive Technology Center and Low Incidence Equipment Committee to meet your student's equipment needs. Our staff will make recommendations for specific pieces of equipment and train your staff to use them.

Most equipment requiring an expenditure over \$200 is obtained with SELPA's Low Incidence Funds and does not have to be purchased by the district. In support of VI students, SCOE's Special Education department purchases other types of equipment, such as monoculars and canes.



Resource List

- ▶ SCOE's Special Education department has a **Disability Awareness Training Kit** and can provide presentations to staff and students at your school. For information, call 524-2868.
- ▶ The **Earle Baum Center**, www.earlebaum.org, is a great local resource serving the blind and visually impaired throughout Northern California. They are located at 4539 Occidental Road in Santa Rosa and can be reached by calling 523-3222.
- ▶ **American Federation for the Blind** (AFB), www.afb.org, has an informative website.
- ▶ **National Federation of the Blind** (NFB), www.nfb.org, has a helpful website with a good section called "Questions from Kids about Blindness."
- ▶ **San Francisco Lighthouse for the Blind**, (415) 431-1481 or www.lighthouse-sf.org.
- ▶ **Hadley School for the Blind** offers tuition-free home study courses. Find out more at www.hadley-school.org or by calling (800) 323-4238.
- ▶ **Braille certification courses** are available through the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/nls/bds/courses.
- ▶ The SCOE Library has a **collection of Braille books, large-print books, and books on tape**. Some of these materials can be checked out by eligible VI students. Talk with your student's VI teacher about this service.

- ▶ **California School for the Blind** (CSB), www.csb-cde.ca.gov, is a residential K-12 state school located in Fremont. It provides comprehensive VI educational assessments, as well as in-depth low-vision evaluations for students. Talk to your student's VI teacher for more information or call CSB's director of pupil personnel services, (510) 794-3800.
- ▶ **Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic**, www.rfbd.org or (800) 221-4792.
- ▶ **American Printing House for the Blind**, www.aph.org or (800) 223-1839.
- ▶ **Enchanted Hills Summer Camp** for VI students, offered by San Francisco Lighthouse for the Blind, call (415) 431-1481.



- ▶ **SRJC Disability Resources Department**, www.santarosa.edu/disability_resources, provides help for visually impaired junior college students. Contact the department at the Santa Rosa campus, 527-4278, or Petaluma campus, 778-2430.