

Braille and Visually Impaired Students

What Does the Law Require?

Passing a law is one thing. Getting it enforced and, more to the point, *accepted*, is quite another. Laws tend to be a reflection of public opinion, not a creator of it. They give a final nudge to new reality. With respect to Braille, there can be no doubt that the climate of public opinion has changed dramatically during the past decade. Once again, Braille is becoming the centerpiece in the education of blind people, just as print is for sighted people.

--Kenneth Jernigan,
Braille into the Next Millennium

Questions and Answers

Q: You mean that there is a specific provision in the law about Braille instruction for visually impaired students?

A: Yes, that's right. The "Braille provision" as it is sometimes called, was added when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 1997 and was continued in the 2004 reauthorization.

Q: What does it say?

A: Here is the pertinent section from the IDEA reauthorization of 2004:

Section 614 (d)(3)(B)(iii)

(B) Consideration of Special Factors.--The Individual Education Program (IEP) Team shall—

(iii) in the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP Team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the child's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child;

Q: Is it significant that this provision uses the word "provide" rather than "consider the need for" Braille instruction?

A: Good observation. Yes, it is significant. It means that the IEP team is obligated to assume--even before an evaluation is conducted--that Braille instruction will be a necessary service for the blind or visually impaired child. This is an important shift from past educational practices when it was routinely assumed that children with some usable vision would read print and only be provided with Braille instruction as the last resort.

Q: Does this provision apply to every blind or visually impaired child with an IEP?

A: Yes.

Q: Does this mean that visually impaired children who might have sufficient vision to read enlarged print or regular print with magnification shall also be provided with Braille instruction and the opportunity to use Braille?

A: That's right. Unless, of course (as the provision states), an evaluation that takes into consideration the child's future need for Braille literacy demonstrates that Braille is not appropriate.

Q: So, this evaluation must be pretty important. What is it called?

A: It is extremely important. Many people in the blindness profession have come to refer to it as a learning media assessment. In all instances where Braille instruction is not provided for children covered under this provision, documentation of a learning media assessment (the evaluation) is required. Furthermore, it is critical that a qualified person conduct the assessment. The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, including those with Multiple Disabilities, recommends that "All assessments and evaluations of students will be conducted by and/or in partnership with personnel having expertise in the education of students with visual impairments and their parents." (*Huebner, Merk-Adam, Stryker, and Wolffe, 2004*).

Q: What must the evaluation include?

A: There are many elements in a learning media assessment. The Braille provision specifically requires that the following be addressed: skills in reading and writing, reading and writing needs, and future need for Braille or Braille instruction. The assessment of future needs is important because a number of congenital eye diseases or disorders are degenerative. As we know, the educational system is charged with the responsibility of preparing students for a lifetime of literacy. This provision protects the right of children with visual impairments to be provided with skills in a literacy mode that will also last a lifetime, whatever the prognosis might be for their vision.

Q: Are there any learning media assessment tools that an LEA can purchase and use for this evaluation?

A: Yes. The Texas School for the Blind, the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), and others have developed learning media assessment tools. Some state departments of education, such as Maryland, have also developed specific guidelines that may be used by IEP teams. Information about resources is included at the end of this brochure.

Q: Some children with blindness or visual impairment also have additional disabilities--such as autism, learning disabilities, developmental delays, cerebral palsy, and so forth. Do learning media assessments need to be conducted for these children? Might these children require Braille instruction?

A: Yes, and yes--to both questions. Literacy is the pathway to maximum independence and life satisfaction for every child that has the capacity to learn, including those at the functional reading level. It may take such children longer to learn to read, and/or require additional supports or individualized strategies, but this only highlights the importance of good assessments.

Q: Once the IEP team has conducted a learning media assessment and made a determination about the appropriateness of print and Braille instruction, does the team need to review or reconsider that decision during the annual IEP review?

A: That depends. If the child is receiving regular and adequate Braille instruction, probably not. However, if the child is not receiving Braille instruction, then it would be appropriate and in keeping with the intent of the Braille provision for the IEP team to discuss and/or reassess the decision annually.

Q: This sounds like a sensible and educationally sound process. Now what about those resources?

RESOURCES

The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities - www.tsbvi.edu/agenda/

Learning Media Assessments - www.lighthouse.org (search term: assessment compendium)

Braille Instructional Materials

American Printing House for the Blind (APH) - www.aph.org/products

American Foundation for the Blind - www.afb.org/store

Braille Too (Grant Wood AEA, Iowa) - www.aea10.k12.ia.us/divlearn/brailletoo.html

Exceptional Teaching Aids, Inc. (Mangold Exclusives) - www.store.exceptionalteaching.net/maex.html

Texas School for the Blind Publications - www.tsbvi.edu (go to Curriculum Publications)

Informational Materials about Braille

The World Under My Fingers: Personal Reflections on Braille, Second Edition
National Federation of the Blind - www.nfb.org

The Bridge to Braille: Reading and School Success for the Young Blind Child
National Organization of Parents of Blind Children - www.nfb.org/nopbc.htm

Braille Into the Next Millennium ISBN 0-8444-021-7
National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped - www.loc.gov/nls

This document was developed and published by

The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments,
Including Those with Multiple Disabilities
www.tsbvi.edu/agenda/

in partnership with

The National Organization of Parents of Blind Children (NOPBC),
a division of the National Federation of the Blind
www.nfb.org/nopbc.htm