

SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKFORCE *watch*

INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

A Dwindling Supply of Qualified Personnel of Students with Visual Impairments and Blindness

What States Should Know

IN THIS WATCH

Nationwide shortages of qualified personnel of students with visual impairments and blindness exist—What should states know in order to meet the challenge?

There is a persistent, nationwide shortage of *qualified* personnel of students who are visually impaired, blind, or deaf-blind. Although rural areas traditionally have been hit hardest by shortages, even many large city programs and special schools have critical shortages of certified personnel—defined here as teachers of students with visual impairments or blindness, teachers of students who are deaf-blind, and orientation and mobility specialists. In fact, it is estimated that as many as 35 percent of those individuals who receive new certifications in the area are employed to work with students with visual impairments or blindness *prior* to beginning their coursework.

The result: Too many students receive either no service or limited service from an individual who is properly prepared to address their unique learning needs. Many students rarely see a specialist who can teach braille or other disability-specific skills.

As states look to support districts in filling vacant positions for personnel to work with students with visual impairments or blindness, the emphasis will be on find-

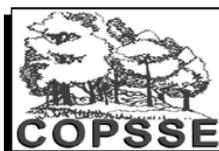
ing qualified candidates. What should you know about current trends in personnel preparation and what do experts recommend you do about them? Read on to find insights from the research.

Did You Know That Our Capacity To Prepare Personnel To Work with Students with Visual Impairments Is Limited?

Personnel preparation programs are producing insufficient numbers of graduates to fill the nationwide shortages. Part of the problem lies with the fact that few preparation programs are in operation. Preparation programs for personnel of students with visual impairments and blindness are found only in approximately one-half of the states. Rarely do states offer more than one program.

During the last two decades, some preparation programs have been closed. The number of programs dropped from 42 in the late 1980s to 36 by the end of the 1990s. Since 1999, five programs have stopped accepting new students and one has been closed. [**Note:** Two programs were initiated during this same time.]

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Further compounding the problem is the reduction in the number of teacher education faculty members. Some programs do not have a single full-time faculty member with expertise in visual impairments and blindness.

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Parents and students report that large numbers of students with visual impairments have been placed in residential programs as a result of certified personnel shortages.

In some cases, teachers with master's degrees develop content and provide coursework on a part-time basis. Currently, 31.8 full-time faculty members are providing activities that normally would require 57 full-time faculty members.

The relative lack of available preparation programs hampers recruitment efforts and, ultimately, contributes to the shortage of qualified personnel of students with visual impairments and blindness. Potential candidates may not be willing or may be financially unable to attend preparation programs that are located great distances from their homes, even when a portion of the training is delivered online or off campus. Moreover, due to the small number of students pursuing certification in visual impairment and blindness, some universities may cancel program offerings in a given year, resulting in additional hardships. In addition, the expenses that many individuals incur in pursuing training typically are not offset by their salaries once they are employed.

Did You Know That States Are Providing Personnel Preparation Support?

Quality personnel preparation programs in the field of visual impairments and blindness can be costly. Some states have provided support for personnel preparation programs. Examples include:

- **State funding for preparation programs.** For example, Texas and North Carolina provide line item budget appropriations.
- **State funding for tuition assistance.** For example, Arizona and Alabama contribute funds to candidates.

Do You Know About National Efforts To Increase the Number of Available Personnel?

These national activities may have a positive effect:

- **National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youth with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities.** The agenda includes 10 general goals, one of which speaks directly to preparation. National organizations, state coordinators, and state/local committees are working to achieve the goals.
- **Blind and Visually Impaired Students: Educational Service Guidelines.** The National Association of State Directors of Special Education worked with 12 national organizations to develop this document, which identifies promising practices. Ten states have par-

ticipated in workshops based on the document.

- **National Plan for Training Personnel To Serve Children with Blindness and Low Vision.** The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, supported a collaborative planning process with national stakeholders.

For More Information

Information reported in this brief was based on the COP SSE issue brief, *Free and Appropriate Public Education and the Personnel Crisis for Students with Visual Impairments and Blindness*, by Anne L. Corn and Susan J. Spungin. This document can be found on the COP SSE web site at www.copsse.org.



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About COPSSE
The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs of the U.S. Department of Education [cooperative agreement #H325Q000002]. COPSSE research is designed to inform scholars and policymakers about beginning teacher quality, effective initial preparation, and the effects of preparation alternatives. The Center is directed by Drs. Paul Sindelar and Mary Brownell. The policy briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy & Associates.

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