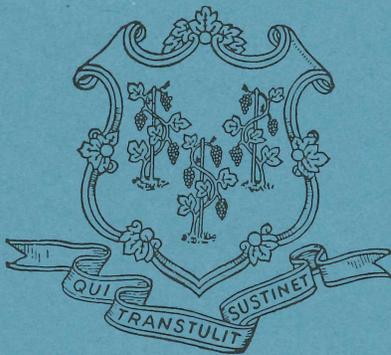


**EDUCATIONAL SERVICES  
FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE  
BLIND OR VISUALLY  
IMPAIRED**

Connecticut

General Assembly



LEGISLATIVE  
PROGRAM REVIEW  
AND  
INVESTIGATIONS  
COMMITTEE

**December 2000**

**CONNECTICUT GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM REVIEW AND INVESTIGATIONS COMMITTEE**

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee is a joint, bipartisan, statutory committee of the Connecticut General Assembly. It was established in 1972 to evaluate the efficiency, effectiveness, and statutory compliance of selected state agencies and programs, recommending remedies where needed. In 1975, the General Assembly expanded the committee's function to include investigations, and during the 1977 session added responsibility for "sunset" (automatic program termination) performance reviews. The committee was given authority to raise and report bills in 1985.

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# Key Points

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## EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

- Children who are blind or visually impaired, like others with disabilities, are entitled to special education and early intervention services from birth through age 21.
  - Local school districts have primary responsibility for carrying out federal and state special education mandates for all students with disabilities; the state education department distributes funding and monitors local district compliance.
  - The Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB), the state lead agency for persons with vision-related disabilities, provides technical and financial assistance to local districts for special education for students who are blind or visually impaired.
  - By law, BESB is authorized to reimburse districts for special education costs related to students who are blind or visually impaired up to \$6,400 per child per year and up to \$11,000 for children who have vision-related and other disabilities; no other disability category receives similar state assistance for special education expenses.
  - Blindness and visual impairment is a low incidence disability; about 1,200 children in Connecticut receive vision-related special education services and many (55 percent) have multiple handicaps.
  - Educational needs of students with vision-related disabilities are diverse; instructional services and materials are highly specialized and can be expensive.
  - Braille instruction is a controversial issue; the literacy of children with visual impairments is the focus of a recently established statutory advisory council.
  - In Connecticut and nationwide, there is a shortage of qualified teachers of the visually impaired.
  - It is generally agreed the elements critical to quality vision education services include:
    - a supportive administration structure;
    - a comprehensive array of services;
    - an adequate supply of specialized teachers; and
    - ready access to services, materials, equipment, and technology.
  - Each of these elements within Connecticut's system for providing educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired needs improvement.
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LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM REVIEW  
& INVESTIGATIONS COMMITTEE

**Educational Services for Children  
Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired**

DECEMBER 2000

# Digest

## Educational Services for Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

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### STRENGTHEN LEADERSHIP

#### *FINDINGS*

*Leadership for vision education is lacking and roles are confused.*

*Few steps have been taken to address serious gaps in the array of services for children with vision-related disabilities.*

*No state document outlines goals, objectives, or strategies for vision education; best practice guidelines have not been issued to local districts.*

*State support offered to districts is limited in scope and quantity.*

*Quality services require a centralized state resource for technical advice, assistance, and leadership.*

*BESB has the potential to be the lead advocate and central resource for vision education.*

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Amend the statutes to articulate BESB's education services mission as follows: the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in collaboration with the state department of education, shall support local school districts in meeting the educational needs of children with vision-related disabilities by providing, within available appropriations, advice, assistance, and resources, including the specialized educational services and materials children require because of their blindness or visual impairment.**

**Rename the Board of Education and Services for the Blind the Connecticut Services for the Blind. The agency's current seven-member advisory board should also be renamed the Connecticut Services for the Blind Advisory Board.**

**Add a representative from the special education staff of the state department of education, designated by the commissioner of education as an ex officio member to the BESB advisory board.**

**Require the Board of Education and Services for the Blind and State Department of Education to work together to develop and issue to local districts policy and best practices guidelines related to education services for children with vision-related disabilities. Amend the Braille Literacy Advisory Council's responsibilities to include evaluating and reporting on: the array of education services available to children with vision-related**

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**disabilities; access to services, materials, equipment and technology; and outcomes of the services provided.**

**Change the name of the council to the Advisory Council on Vision Education Services and increase its membership to include a parent of a child who is blind or visually impaired and has additional disabilities and a teacher who specializes in providing vision-related education services to multiply disabled students.**

## **IMPROVE ACCESS TO SERVICES AND MATERIALS**

### ***FINDINGS***

*The current distribution of teachers of the visually impaired throughout the state is inefficient and unfair.*

*Teacher services are unavailable during summer months.*

*BESB has few resources and little funding flexibility to support its statewide technical assistance, training, and advocacy functions.*

*The agency's materials resource center is understaffed and unable to meet demand for transcription and other services.*

*Technical assistance and support for computers and other technology is minimal.*

*The BESB Birth-to-Three program has been cited for administrative deficiencies.*

*More state efforts are needed to secure an adequate supply of qualified teachers.*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Require BESB to provide its teachers to districts on a fee-for-service basis starting in the 2002-03 school year to make access to agency teaching staff equitable.**

**Require BESB to pursue contract revisions to ensure the availability of teacher of the visually impaired services all 12 months of the year during its next collective bargaining negotiations. Require the agency to make teacher services available year-round for its Birth-to-Three program, through collective bargaining negotiations or other arrangements, before June 30, 2001.**

**Revise the statutes to authorize the agency to provide teacher of the visually impaired services on a fee-for-service basis to any school district in state. Enact legislation to establish a self-sustaining account to receive fees from districts and pay costs related to supplying teacher services.**

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Use the state funds formerly allocated for BESB teacher costs to augment the agency's centralized resources and support services.

Require SDE to officially include BESB education staff in planning, evaluating and monitoring the activities undertaken through its federal teacher training grant project.

Require the state education department, in consultation with BESB, to determine the number of teachers and other personnel, such as orientation and mobility specialists, that are required to meet the education needs of children with vision-related disabilities in Connecticut at present and over the next ten years and report its results to the advisory council by July 1, 2001.

## **REDIRECT FUNDING TO SUPPORT EDUCATION GOALS**

### ***FINDINGS***

*About \$7.5 million per year is provided to towns through BESB to offset special education costs for children who are blind or visually impaired.*

*The present funding mechanism is cumbersome and ineffective in supporting the specialized services and materials needed by students with vision-related disabilities.*

*Much of the funding – almost 80 percent during the last school year -- appears to subsidize basic special education expenses such as out-of-district tuition and salaries of special classroom teachers and aides.*

*A substantial amount of BESB funding supports special education services for students whose primary disability is not vision-related.*

*Dedicated funding can be an effective way to promote the quality and accessibility of education services for children with vision-related disabilities.*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Repeal the current statutory provisions on state payment of special education costs for blind or visually impaired children and replace them with language establishing a grant program for vision-related education services to be administered by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind.**

- a) The grant program shall be funded at an amount equal to \$6,400 times the number of blind and visually impaired children in the state as determined by BESB.**
  - b) BESB shall use the state funding to provide eligible students who are blind or visually impaired with the specialized instructional materials, including Braille and large print books, and adaptive equipment and**
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technology they require to access their education programs. The state shall also annually provide a \$2,000 entitlement to districts for the special education costs of each child who is blind or visually impaired.

- c) The remaining balance of grant funding shall be used to provide supplemental funding to reimburse local school districts on a proportional basis for the costs of consultation and instructional services provided by teachers of the visually impaired and other services related to providing expanded core curriculum for blind or visually impaired students including but not limited to orientation and mobility training and independent living skills. Only districts that have expended an amount greater than the total amount of entitlement funding received on educational services required for vision-related disabilities shall be eligible to apply for supplemental funding.
- d) The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in consultation with the State Department of Education, shall develop a proposed statutory funding formula for the grant program and a description of all expenses eligible for funding to present to the legislature for its consideration by January 1, 2002. The new grant program for vision education should go into effect by January 1, 2003.

## **PROMOTE ACCOUNTABILITY AND STRATEGIC PLANNING**

### ***FINDINGS***

*Defining standards, measuring success, and reporting results are important steps in the process of improving education.*

*How well the current system for serving students with vision-related disabilities achieves education goals is unknown at this time.*

*Neither BESB nor the state education department track educational outcomes for students with vision-related disabilities; no data are compiled on drop-out rates, post-graduation employment rates, or literacy rates.*

*A comprehensive blueprint for carrying out BESB's education services mission is critical to achieving desired outcomes for children who are blind or visually impaired.*

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Require the State Department of Education, in consultation with the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, to establish, monitor, and report on outcome measures for educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Monitoring results**

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should be included as part of the department's annual report on special education beginning in 2002.

Require the portion of the BESB's strategic plan concerning education services for children who are blind or visually impaired to be completed by July 1, 2001, and be updated annually. The strategic plan should incorporate and specifically address the outcome measures developed under the prior recommendation.

- a) Require BESB, with the assistance of the State Department of Education, to arrange for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) to conduct one of its training seminars on improving educational services for the sensory impaired in Connecticut.

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## Educational Services For Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired

Under state and federal law, children with disabilities including blindness and visual impairment are entitled to special education services from birth through high school graduation or up to age 21. Local school districts have primary responsibility for providing special education to children with disabilities. In Connecticut, a state agency, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB), also has a major role in identifying children who are visually impaired and providing technical assistance, consultation, financial subsidies, and, in some cases, direct instructional services for such children.

There are many challenges to providing quality educational services to children with vision-related disabilities, especially within local schools. One factor that complicates educational programming is the fact that blindness is a very low incidence disability. Districts, particularly in smaller communities, may have only one blind or visually impaired student in the whole school system. Also, blind children usually require highly specialized, often expensive, instructional services, materials and equipment. At the present time, certified teachers of the visually impaired are in short supply and there can be long delays in getting textbooks and other instructional materials adapted for children who are blind or visually impaired (e.g., produced in Braille or large print).

How to meet needs of children with vision-related disabilities efficiently and effectively is an issue in many states and the subject of a number of national studies. In Connecticut, because local districts and BESB have roles in providing educational services to children who are visually impaired, there are also questions about equity and accountability in the state's current system.

**Study scope.** At the request of four legislative members of a recent task force that examined Braille literacy issues, the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee authorized a study of the state's system for providing educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired in April 2000. The study focused on issues related to resources, coordination, access, equity, and outcomes. One goal of the committee's review was to determine whether the quality and efficiency of educational services for children with vision-related disabilities would be improved by consolidation under the Board of Education and Services for the Blind or through other means.

**Methods.** Information for the committee study was gathered through a variety of methods. Relevant state and federal laws, regulations, and policy documents were reviewed and committee staff traced the legislative history of educational services for children with vision-related and other sensory disabilities. A review of the professional literature concerning a wide range of

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vision education issues was also conducted. Agency budget documents, audit reports, and other financial materials including BESB expenditure databases were examined to determine trends in state funding for vision-related special education services.

Committee staff interviewed BESB and education department personnel with vision education responsibilities, members of the agency advisory board, and representatives of a number of interest and advocacy groups representing blind persons and their families. Teachers of the visually impaired were surveyed and interviewed regarding their qualifications and caseloads. Focus groups of teachers of the visually impaired, parents of students with vision-related disabilities, and local special education directors were also used to gather information and opinions about educational services for child who are blind or visually impaired.

All local district special education directors were additionally sent a written questionnaire developed by committee staff to solicit their opinions on the current system and how to improve it. (The survey instrument and a summary of results are contained in Appendix D.) The program review committee received further input about educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired from parents, teachers, students, school administrators, and state agency personnel during a public hearing held on October 4, 2000.

In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with agencies responsible for vision-education in selected states to develop comparative information on services and administrative structures. Program review staff accompanied several BESB teachers during their work days to observe how services are currently provided to children with vision-related disabilities and reviewed a sample of client education program files maintained by the agency. Committee staff also observed a classroom operated by the Connecticut Institute for the Blind/Oak Hill School, participated in a BESB professional development workshop on vision education issues for local school personnel, and visited a regional education service center program for deaf and hearing impaired children.

**Report organization.** The first three chapters of this report provide background information on the system for providing educational services to children with vision-related disabilities in Connecticut. Chapter I outlines the various roles and responsibilities for providing educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Chapter II contains an overview of the current client population and the services provided while Chapter III describes BESB's organization and operations related to educational services for children with vision-related disabilities. The fourth and final chapter of the report presents the program review committee's legislative and administrative recommendations intended to: 1) address identified inequities and inefficiencies in the present system; and 2) improve educational service quality and outcomes for children who are blind or visually impaired.

**Agency response.** It is the policy of the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee to provide agencies included in the scope of a review with the opportunity to comment on committee findings and recommendations before the a final report is published. Written responses to this report were solicited from the Board of Education and Services for the Blind and the State Department of Education. Both agencies returned responses, which are presented in Appendix A.

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## Roles and Responsibilities

Like public education in general, providing education services to children who are blind or visually impaired involves federal, state, and local levels of government. Ensuring children receive appropriate educational services is a state government responsibility, although states must comply with a variety of federal education mandates. In all states, local education agencies (LEAs) actually carry out education programs for all children including those with disabilities.

Connecticut was one of the first states to mandate special education for children with disabilities with passage of Public Act 627 in 1967. Federal legislation enacted in 1975 required all states to provide children with disabilities a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive setting possible. Both the state and federal laws require a comprehensive continuum of special education and related services be available to meet the needs of children with disabilities from preschool through high school graduation or age 21. Comprehensive early intervention services for infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities were mandated under federal legislation enacted in 1986.

Many agencies -- federal, state, and local, and public and private -- are part of Connecticut's system for providing this continuum of educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Their roles and responsibilities are outlined below. An overview of some of the interest and advisory groups concerned with educational services for visually impaired children in Connecticut is also included in this chapter. The chapter additionally contains information on how services are structured in other states and descriptions of several national initiatives on educational services for students who are blind or visually impaired.

### **Federal Special Education Role**

In all states including Connecticut, the main policies governing special education, including educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired, are contained in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and its accompanying regulations. The U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE) oversees state implementation of IDEA requirements, distributes federal funding for special education programming as well as grants for research and special projects, and provides policy guidance and technical assistance to state and local education agencies. In general, U.S. DOE relies on the state education department to monitor and report on local district compliance with federal special education provisions.

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**IDEA provisions.** The main provisions of IDEA require state and local education agencies to create a system that:

- identifies all students with disabilities who may qualify for special education services;
- evaluates each child to determine the effect of his or her disability on educational performance;
- develops and implements an Individual Education Program (IEP) for each eligible child; and
- includes procedural safeguards for the parents of children with disabilities (e.g., written notice regarding proposed actions, informed consent, the right to file a complaint and/or initiate due process).

These and other provisions of the federal act are described in more detail in Appendix B. In essence, the goal of the law is to ensure all children with disabilities receive appropriate education services based on their individual needs and not their disability, in a setting with children who are not disabled, to the maximum extent possible.

Significant amendments to IDEA were adopted by Congress in 1997 and several apply specifically to the education of children who are blind and visually impaired. One change requires teams that prepare students' Individual Education Programs to make provisions for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille for children who are visually impaired, unless they determine, based on relevant evaluations, such instruction is not appropriate. Another revision adds "orientation and mobility services" to the list of examples included in the statutory definition of special education related services.

**Early intervention services.** The special education provisions described above cover children from age three through high school graduation or age 21. Another part of the IDEA, Part H, requires states to establish a system of early intervention services, commonly known as Birth to Three, for families with children under age three who have significant developmental disabilities or delays. Blindness is one of the conditions that makes children eligible for the program and vision services are among the program's mandatory early intervention services.

The Birth to Three program is like special education in that:

- eligible children are entitled to an array of services to meet their special needs;
- a formal plan of services, the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), must be developed, and periodically reviewed, by a team of professionals and the child's parents; and
- a series of procedural safeguards (e.g., written notice and due process) for parents must be in place.

Birth to Three programs must also incorporate outreach and referral efforts and a "child find" system that includes a method for hospitals, physicians, parents, day care providers, and others to refer infants and toddlers for evaluation and assessment. Early intervention services must be

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family-centered and, whenever possible, provided in community settings where a child normally spends his or her day (e.g., at home or a child care center).

Federal law does not specify an administrative or service delivery structure but states must: 1) designate a lead agency to be responsible for comprehensive program planning and oversight; and 2) establish an Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC) composed of parents, service providers, legislators, and representatives of state agencies involved with children, to advise and assist the lead agency. In Connecticut, the Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) is the Birth to Three program lead agency. The Board of Education and Services for the Blind is one of the state agency members of the coordinating council.

As of FY 01, DMR contracted with 38 public and private agencies statewide that were part of the Birth to Three service delivery system. All referrals and requests for services are handled by INFOLINE, a nonprofit phone-based information and referral service under contract to the Department of Mental Retardation. Each provider agency serves clients from a specific set of towns and either directly provides or arranges for the early intervention services and supports called for in a child's individualized plan. Four of the Birth to Three providers specialize in serving the families of young children with sensory disorders and have statewide jurisdiction. Three provide services related to hearing impairments and one, operated by BESB, serves families whose young children have visual impairments.

**Related federal laws.** Two other federal laws have an impact on educational services for blind and visually impaired students: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II of ADA). Both are civil rights laws intended to protect persons with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of their disability and apply to more than education matters (e.g., employment, physical accessibility). The U.S. DOE Office of Civil Rights is responsible for overseeing and ensuring state and local education agencies comply with Section 504 and Title II of ADA.

Under Section 504, school districts are required to provide students who have qualifying disabilities such as blindness a comparable opportunity, as compared with students without disabilities, to participate in school activities and receive school benefits and services. Districts must develop and implement special accommodations or services to meet the educational needs of eligible students. A written educational accommodation plan describing the placement and services to be provided is also required. Students covered by Section 504 provisions may also qualify for special education services but often are served by general education programs with accommodations to meet their individual needs.

Title II of ADA also prohibits discrimination on the basis of a person's disability and its provisions applicable to schools are consistent with the requirements of Section 504. In essence, schools cannot exclude students with disabilities from district programs or activities and when necessary must make reasonable policy changes to provide them with services, facilities, or accommodations.

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## **State Education Department**

State statute requires the state board of education to provide for the development and supervision of educational programs and services for all children requiring special education, including students who are blind or visually impaired. As the board's administrative arm, the state Department of Education (SDE), carries out the following functions:

- distributes state and federal education funding to local school districts;
- develops and implements policy;
- monitors local compliance with state and federal education mandates; and
- provides technical assistance and training.

The department is additionally responsible for administering state requirements concerning licensure and certification of teachers and other education professionals. Except for the state vocational-technical school system, however, the education department does not operate educational programs or provide direct instruction services to regular or special education students.

Education consultants within the department's Bureau of Special Education and Pupil Services have primary responsibility for overseeing and assisting local school districts on special education matters. Bureau staff also respond to complaints, both informal and formal, regarding special education procedures and services. Through the Special Education Resource Center, the bureau provides training and professional development opportunities to education professionals throughout the state. Bureau staff work with other state agencies such as the Department of Mental Retardation, the Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired, and BESB, to get advice and input on education issues related to disabilities that come under their jurisdiction.

## **Local School Districts**

In Connecticut, local school districts have primary responsibility for providing a free and appropriate public education to all children including those with disabilities like blindness. In accordance with state and federal law, districts must arrange for the services of any specialized teachers and other educational professionals needed by a student who is blind or visually impaired, hire support staff such as paraprofessionals or teacher's aides, provide texts and other instructional materials or equipment, and obtain related services necessary for the child's educational program. For children who are blind, related services may include training from an orientation and mobility instructor or consultation with an adaptive technology specialist.

**Regional Education Service Centers (RESCs).** Legislation enacted in 1972 (P.A. 72-117) authorized local boards of education to establish Regional Education Service Centers "... for the purpose of cooperative action to furnish programs and services." RESCs are intended to help schools improve learning and deliver quality customized educational services with more efficiency than is possible within an individual district. Regional cooperative education programs are common in many states and are viewed as effective models for providing comprehensive special education services, particularly to low incidence disability populations.

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In Connecticut, each regional center is operated and managed by a board made up of members from each participating local board of education. The RESC boards have the authority to establish policies, determine what programs and services to provide, employ staff, and prepare and expend a budget. Financial support comes from fees paid by participating members, and state, federal, and private funding.

Currently, local and regional school districts in Connecticut are served by six RESCs – Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES), Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), Cooperative Educational Services (CES), Eastern Connecticut Regional Education Service Center (EASTCONN), Education Connection, and LEARN. The array of education and related services each provides vary, depending on the needs of the participating members, although all offer a wide range of special education programs and services. Several offer vision-related services to their members and in the eastern portion of the state, most districts obtain specialized teacher services for their students who are blind or visually impaired students from EASTCONN.

### **Board of Education and Services for the Blind**

The Board of Education and Services for the Blind was created in 1893 to assist children “... unable to obtain education in the ordinary public schools by reason of blindness or defective sight.” Initially, its main responsibility was to identify children in need of educational services and to provide state funds for the costs of board and tuition at schools for blind and partially blind children. Later, the board was also mandated to maintain a confidential registry of blind persons in Connecticut. Over the years the board grew into a comprehensive social service agency providing educational, vocational, rehabilitation, living skill and other support services to legally blind persons of all ages and to children who are visually impaired.

Most of its role in educational services for children has been superceded by the state’s special education system. However, state statutes still authorize BESB to provide state financial assistance to local districts for costs of specialized instructional services and materials for children who are blind or visually impaired. Although not called for by statute, the agency also supplies at no charge the services of its staff of certified teachers of the visually impaired to some districts. BESB additionally serves as a statewide resource center for instructional materials (e.g., Braille and large print textbooks, etc.) for children who are blind or visually impaired statewide. The board’s organization and operations related to educational services for children are described in detail in Chapter III.

**Statutory provisions.** By law, any child whose vision meets the statutory definitions of blind or visually impaired presented below is eligible to be a client of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. Under board regulations, eligibility for the agency’s educational services additionally requires the child to be a special education student with a valid individualized education program .

BESB is authorized under current state statutes to reimburse local school districts for the special education costs of students who are blind or visually impaired up to \$6,400 per student per fiscal year. Further, the board may pay up to \$11,000 per student per fiscal year for children who are blind or visually impaired and have other disabilities.

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### **Statutory Definitions**

**Blind** = central visual acuity is no greater than 20/200 in the better eye with correcting lenses OR, if greater, is accompanied by field of vision limitations such that the widest diameter subtends to an angle no greater than 20 degrees

**Visually Impaired** = central visual acuity does not exceed 20/70 in better eye with correcting lenses

### **Systems for Other Disabilities**

The state's role, through the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in providing additional financial support for special education services to children who are blind or visually impaired is unique. Local school districts are not reimbursed for special education expenses (beyond their standard state education grant funding) for students with any other type of disability. Further, BESB's teachers of the visually impaired are the only teaching personnel the state supplies to districts to work directly with students.

In many ways, BESB carries out the same special education functions – direct instruction, related services, technical assistance, early intervention, professional development, parent support -- as regional education service centers. The main differences are local school districts pay fees for the services their special education students receive from a RESC and, as members of the center's board, participate in its management and operating decisions.

The system for providing educational services to children who are deaf or hearing impaired, another low incidence population with a sensory disability, is representative of current state and local roles in special education for most students with disabilities. For students who are deaf or hearing impaired, local districts either establish their own programs and employ their own teaching staff or rely on RESCs to provide teachers and related services. Several RESCs offer direct instruction, consultation, and early intervention services for children with hearing-related disabilities. One, CREC, has established a comprehensive auditory-oral education program (Soundbridge) that includes: Birth to Three services, consulting teacher services; assessment and diagnosis services; hearing impaired day programs at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels; and a parent education and support system.

The American School for the Deaf (ASD), a nonprofit residential and day school offering a total communication education program, is another resource for hearing-related disability services for local school districts. In addition to its education programs, ASD offers parent training, professional development activities, and related services such as comprehensive student evaluations.

Local districts are responsible for buying instructional materials or equipment included in the IEP of a child who is deaf or hearing impaired as well as tuition and other costs of an out-of-

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district placement, if required.<sup>1</sup> Technical assistance and training on special education services for children with hearing-related disabilities is available through the state Department of Education. One of the education consultants in the agency's special education bureau has primary responsibility for providing expertise and guidance to parents and school districts on matters related to educational services for children who are deaf or hearing impaired.

The state Commission on the Deaf and Hearing Impaired also provides general advice and expertise on issues related to deafness and hearing impairment. (By statute, the department's consultant for the education of deaf and hearing impaired children serves as an ex officio member of the commission.) In addition to its advocacy functions, the commission provides some direct interpreting and counseling services to its clients, including children who are deaf and hearing impaired and their families. However, unlike BESB, it does not provide any direct instruction services or financial support for special education expenses.

### **Advocacy and Advisory Groups**

There are numerous public and private groups that advocate for persons with vision-related disabilities. Many provide support, advice, and assistance for various segments of the blind and visually impaired client population. Some of the major organizations in Connecticut concerned with educational services for blind and visually impaired children are the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut (NFB), the Connecticut Council for the Blind (CCB), the Connecticut Parents' Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CPABVI).

**Braille Literacy Advisory Council.** Legislation enacted in the 2000 regular session of the General Assembly (P.A. 00-127) established a nine-member advisory council responsible for making annual reports and recommendations to the legislature about Braille services and the literacy of children who are blind or visually impaired. The members, who are appointed by legislative leaders and the governor, include the education commissioner, the BESB executive director, representatives from NFB and CCB, several professional educators, a parent of a student who is visually impaired student, and a high school student who is visually impaired and a Braille reader.

The council is required to review and annually report on a number of issues related to the ability of children who are blind or visually impaired to read and write. Some of the specific areas the council must examine, in addition to assessing student literacy, are:

- availability of Braille services;
- attracting qualified teachers and expanding professional development opportunities;
- better coordination of Braille instruction and other BESB activities with local school district efforts; and

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<sup>1</sup> The state does provide an annual appropriation to the American School for the Deaf to cover the tuition costs of the regular education program for Connecticut students placed at the school. Until September 1980, the state also operated a residential school, the Mystic Oral School, for children who are deaf or hearing impaired. Further, under state education funding provisions, local districts can receive grants for certain extraordinary special education costs, such as expenses related to student placements at out-of-district facilities.

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- teacher caseloads and time spent on direct service.

The Braille Literacy Advisory Council's first report to the General Assembly was due in January 2001. However, delays in the appointment process have postponed the council's timetable. The initial organizational meeting is anticipated to occur in mid-February 2001.

### **Other States and National Initiatives**

States can provide educational services to blind children and visually impaired children through a variety of organizational models. In all cases, local education agencies have primary responsibility for special education but state agency functions differ. Program review committee staff compiled information on administrative structures for vision-related education services in other states. Based on these data, it appears there are at least three different ways states structure their systems.

In some states, responsibility for program development, technical assistance, expert advice and consultation on vision-related educational matters rests with the state education department while in others, the state agency for the blind carries out these duties. Residential schools for the blind seem to serve as a hub for educational services for visually impaired children in a number of states. In Texas, for example, the state school is responsible for statewide professional development, outreach, public information, and research related to educational services for children who are visually impaired in addition to operating direct instruction programs.

There appears to be considerable diversity in the amounts and types of financial and technical support states provide local school districts for vision-related educational services. However, most states assist districts with the costs of specialized instructional materials like Braille textbooks. Many also help fund consultative services and technical assistance to local schools, often through a regional education service structure.

**National initiatives.** On a national level, two major initiatives concerning educational services for blind and visually impaired children have been undertaken in the past five years. One is an educational reform effort called "The National Agenda." The other is a project sponsored by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) that resulted in a set of guidelines for education services for blind and visually impaired students.

The National Agenda is an action plan aimed at achieving eight goals for the education of children with visual impairments, including those with multiple disabilities. The planning process began in the early 1990s and is a collaborative effort of representatives of parent groups, schools for the blind, private agencies, universities, state education agencies and professional educators throughout the country. The national agenda goals, in brief, are:

- 1) timely referral to appropriate educational services;
- 2) full parental participation;
- 3) sufficient personnel;
- 4) caseloads based on student's needs;

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- 5) access to a full array of placement options;
  - 6) comprehensive student assessments;
  - 7) access to instructional materials; and
  - 8) disability-specific core curricula.

Implementation strategies have been developed and are being carried out by a national advisory board and eight goal leader groups, each of whom is a major organization in the field of visual disabilities. At present, state coordinators, who generally are officials from a state's lead agency for vision education, are also in place in 45 states to oversee implementation of action plan strategies under the direction of the national board. Connecticut, Hawaii, Montana, Nebraska, and Nevada do not have state coordinators.

In 1999, NASDSE, in cooperation with the Hill/Perkins Program of the Perkins School for the Blind, issued an education guidelines document for programs serving students who are blind and visually impaired. The guidelines were developed and reviewed by a number of organizations and individuals involved in vision-related education matters throughout the country. Areas covered by the guidelines include: fundamental principles; administrative roles of state and local education agencies; assessment procedures; education programming requirements and placement options; and personnel.

### Overview of Children and Services

Children who are blind or visually impaired comprise a diverse client population. In terms of degree of vision, their sight can range from total blindness to varying degrees of low vision. For some, vision difficulties are their only disability while others have multiple disabilities that affect their educational needs. In addition, the ability to adapt to vision loss is influenced by individual factors such as family support and intellectual, emotional, and physical functioning. As a result, service needs can differ greatly, even among persons with similar visual deficits, and many factors must be considered in designing appropriate educational programs. An overview of the current population of children who are blind or visually impaired in Connecticut and the existing system of education services for students with vision-related disabilities follows.

#### Client Population

It is estimated about 8 percent of the 17,140 persons identified as legally blind in Connecticut in FY 99 were children. Blindness is a low incidence disability among both adults and children. Information from the state special education report for 1999-2000, summarized in Table II-1 below, shows there were 356 students whose *primary* disability was visual impairment. They made up only 0.5 percent of all identified students with disabilities and just 0.1 percent of the total public school population.

However, there are students within other special education categories, such as multiple disability or intellectual disability, who have visual impairments. Their numbers are not tracked in Connecticut or other states at this time as federal requirements only mandate reporting according to primary disability category.

	<i>1999-2000 School Year</i>		
<i>Selected Disability Categories</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>	<i>Prevalence Rate*</i>
Total (all categories)	69,759	100.0%	12.8%
Learning Disability	32,460	46.5%	6.0%
Visual Impairment	356	0.5%	0.1%
Deafness/Blindness	65	0.1%	0.0%
Hearing Impairment	778	1.1%	0.1%
Autism	1,086	1.6%	0.2%
* Prevalence rates are calculated by the state education department as the percentage of the total Connecticut K-12 public school population (544,816 students for 1999-2000 school year)			
Source of Data: Annual Report on Special Education in Connecticut, 1999-2000			

The best estimate of the total of blind and visually impaired children requiring educational services comes from the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. According

to the board, it served about 1,200 blind and visually impaired children during FY 00. Over the past ten fiscal years, BESB had, on average, a caseload of 1,100 children and received 125 new referrals for its children’s educational services per year.

Caseload and referral data for each year during the period FY 90 through FY 99 are summarized in Table II-2. The number of child clients grew slightly up until FY 97 and then began declining although the FY 99 caseload was still 9 percent greater than in FY 90. Some of the caseload increase is likely due to the early intervention efforts of the Birth-to-Three program, which became fully operational in the state in the early 1990s.

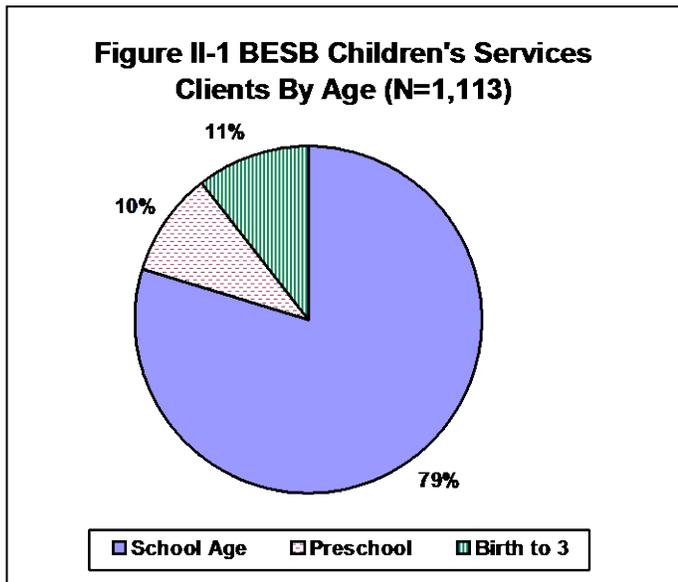
**Table II-2. New Referrals and Total Children Served by BESB: FY 90–99.**

	FY 90	FY 91	FY 92	FY 93	FY 94	FY 95	FY 96	FY 97	FY 98	FY 99
<b>No. Referred</b>	136	161	135	114	122	134	107	111	117	123
<b>Total No. Served</b>	1,020	1,066	1,086	1,110	1,130	1,152	1,160	1,212	1,142	1,113

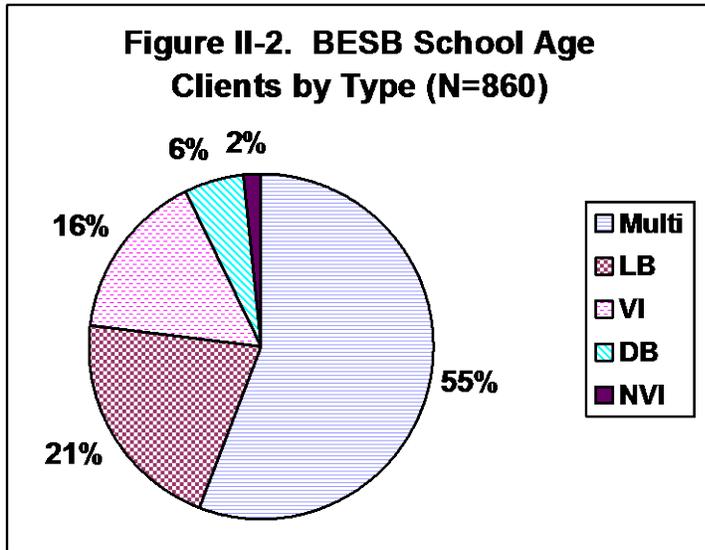
Source of Data: Board of Education and Services for the Blind

Most of the BESB children’s services clients are school-age, as Figure II-1 shows. However, the agency also serves many preschool children with vision-related disabilities as well as infants and toddlers who participate in the Birth to Three program.

As shown in Figure II-2, about 37 percent of BESB’s FY 99 school-age client population are children whose primary disability is vision-related -- legally blind (LB) or visually impaired (VI). Another 6 percent are children who are deaf-blind (DB). However, the majority of the agency’s school age clients – 55 percent -- are children with multiple handicaps including blindness or vision impairment (MH).



Over the years, a very small number of school-age children whose eyesight exceeds the limits set by statute have been provided BESB services, which is permitted under the agency’s enabling legislation. At present, about a dozen students are categorized as “not visually impaired” (NVI). They receive agency services primarily because their sight is in transition (e.g., becoming progressively worse and will result in legal blindness or is improving and will be greater than the statutory definition of visually impaired).



It is important to note the BESB educational services caseload does not include every child in the state who is blind or has a visual handicap. Parents may, and some do decline the agency's educational services for their children. Children with disabilities who are home-schooled are not part of the special education system and therefore do not have individual education programs. For that reason, a home-schooled child who is blind or visually impaired is not eligible under BESB regulations. Similarly, students with visual impairments who are served under

Section 504 but are not receiving special education services are ineligible. (Staff from BESB and the state education department have been working on revisions to the board's regulations to expand eligibility to 504 students.) How many children are in these various situations is not known but BESB and state education department staff believe the numbers are small.

### **Educational Services**

Children who are blind or visually impaired must be taught skills that sighted children learn through vision. Education programs for students who are blind or visually impaired generally incorporate specialized instruction in reading, writing, and other academic subjects. A variety of instructional methods and media may be employed including Braille, large print, regular print with low vision aids, devices that use computer-generated speech, or some combination of these methods.

Children with very little or no vision usually need orientation and mobility training to allow them move around independently as well as help with social interaction, personal management, independent living skills, and career education they will require to participate fully in their communities. With the rapid development of new computer equipment and software adapted for blind and visually impaired persons, technology skills and computer proficiency have become increasingly important for this student population. The specialized skills and knowledge children with vision-related disabilities need for full access to their educational programs are referred to by education professionals as the expanded core curriculum.

The array of options for providing special education services to children who are blind or visually impaired includes:

- residential schools designed for children who are blind children or multiply handicapped;
- special classes and day programs;
- resource rooms; and
- itinerant teaching services in regular education classrooms.

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Today, most children in Connecticut and throughout the country whose primary disability is visual impairment are taught in regular classrooms and receive the specialized instruction they need from itinerant teachers of the visually impaired<sup>1</sup>.

Before inclusion of children with disabilities (mainstreaming) became a goal during the 1970s with the passage of special education laws, most legally blind students attended residential schools for the blind. At present, Connecticut children who require the services of a residential school for blind and visually impaired students must go out of state. The Connecticut Institute for the Blind/Oak Hill, formerly a residential school for the blind, now only provides community-based services to children and adults with multiple disabilities, which may include mental retardation, blindness, visual impairments, physical disabilities, deafness, hearing impairments, and severe health impairments.

**Braille literacy.** Not every child with vision-related disabilities is taught Braille. Depending on their degree of vision loss, some students are able to read regular print with aids or large print proficiently and do not need Braille instruction. Other children have multiple handicaps (e.g., blindness and severe mental retardation or brain injury) that limit their participation in any type of academic programming. Background information on Braille is presented in Appendix C.

Braille instruction is a controversial issue within the blind community. Some advocacy groups want to enact legislation requiring Braille instruction for all legally blind students to promote literacy. They point out children who read and write proficiently have a better chance of success in their adult lives. Others believe decisions about instruction media and methods for students who are blind must be made on a case by case basis and one approach cannot meet every child's needs. Those opposed to mandatory Braille instruction note that if a child does not want to learn Braille, he or she cannot be forced to do so.

Another position related to this issue is that literacy, not necessarily Braille literacy, should be goal for children who are blind or visually impaired. Ways to promote and measure children's reading, writing, and overall communication skills need to be developed and implemented. Literacy issues are a main focus of the recently created Braille Literacy Advisory Council mentioned in the prior chapter.

## **Teachers**

Specially trained and certified teachers of the visually impaired are a key component of educational services to blind and visually impaired children. Depending on a child's needs and learning environment (e.g., residential school, regular classroom, etc.), the teacher's role can range from primary instructor for a visually impaired student to consultant to the student's team of education professionals. Whatever their role, it is generally agreed teachers of the visually impaired should carry out six main functions. These functions are:

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<sup>1</sup> Itinerant refers to the fact that the teacher travels to where the student is and is not assigned to a classroom.

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- 1) assessment and evaluation;
  - 2) learning environment;
  - 3) curriculum adaptation;
  - 4) guidance and counseling;
  - 5) administration and supervision: and
  - 6) school - community relations.

Examples of the types of activities teachers of the visually impaired may carry out in each area are summarized in Figure II-3. As the figure indicates, teachers of the visually impaired are not just Braille instructors and do not just teach children. Training a child's classroom teacher, paraprofessional, and parents so they can reinforce special vision-related educational skills and techniques is a critical role, particularly for itinerant teachers who may only work directly with a child a few hours per week.

The expertise of a qualified teacher of the visually impaired is also important during the development of a special education student's Individual Education Program. Because blindness is such a low incidence disability, most teachers and other education professionals in local school districts have had little experience planning and delivering services for visually impaired students. The IEP team relies on the teacher of the visually impaired to give advice and recommendations on learning media (e.g., Braille, large print), types and amounts of vision-related services, and specialized instructional materials and equipment that should be included in a student's education program.

**Teacher supply.** According to state education department records for the 2000-01 school year, 104 individuals were certified to teach visually impaired students in Connecticut. About half were teaching in state during the last school year; 21 were on staff at BESB and at least 28 certified teachers of the visually impaired were working for local school districts, RESCs, and private educational programs in Connecticut (e.g., Oak Hill, American School for the Deaf). The remainder could be teaching in other states or in other capacities (e.g., as regular classroom or general special education teachers states, since many educators hold more than one type of teaching certificate), or they may have left the teaching profession but maintained their certification.

In many states, local school districts are experiencing difficulties obtaining the services of qualified teachers of the visually impaired. In Connecticut, teacher caseloads are high, as the following analysis shows, and some districts have reported vacancies are becoming harder to fill. The shortage of teachers of the visually impaired is a nationally recognized problem. Recent studies predict it will become critical in the next few years, as many of the current teachers are close to retirement age and enrollment in teacher preparation programs has been declining.

Addressing the national shortage of teachers of the visually impaired and for other low incidence disability populations is a priority of the U.S. DOE. Federal funding has been made available for this purpose and the state education department received a federal grant during 2000 to develop ways of increasing the supply of teachers of the visually impaired earlier this year. Among the strategies under discussion in Connecticut and other states are alternative routes to certification and developing new higher education programs to train teachers of the visually impaired.

Figure II-3. Responsibilities of Teachers of the Visually Impaired\*

<u>MAIN FUNCTIONS</u>	<u>SPECIALIZED ACTIVITIES</u>
<i>Assessment and Evaluation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct and interpret vision assessments, communication skills assessments</li> <li>• Obtain and interpret reports from eye professionals</li> <li>• Recommend and collaborate in specialized assessments (e.g., speech and language, orientation and mobility, etc.)</li> <li>• Assist families in assessing own strengths and needs</li> <li>• Participate in teams to develop IEPs and IFSPs, assuming primary responsibility for vision-related matters</li> <li>• Recommend appropriate reading and writing media based on thorough assessment of student's specific needs</li> </ul>
<i>Learning Environment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assure student has educational materials in appropriate media and is trained in use of all devices and technological apparatus</li> <li>• Instruct student in subjects and skills requiring adaptation because of visual impairment</li> <li>• Recommend seating and other environmental modifications as needed and suggest necessary modifications in assignments or testing</li> <li>• Assure other educational professionals understand student's vision-related needs</li> <li>• Collaborate regarding methods for including students routine learning experiences</li> <li>• Help children without disabilities develop understanding of visual loss</li> </ul>
<i>Curriculum Adaptation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide direct or collaborative instruction in the following areas: Braille reading and writing; visual efficiency; print adaptations and learning devices; orientation and mobility; handwriting; typewriting; use of technology; listening skills; study skills; motor development; concept development; reasoning; tactual skills; communication development; activities of daily living; physical education; human sexuality; career education; vocational counseling; leisure and recreation; and transition</li> </ul>
<i>Guidance and Counseling</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide guidance and counseling related to visual impairment to students and their families</li> <li>• Refer to other sources of guidance and counseling services</li> </ul>
<i>Administration and Supervision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication with administrators</li> <li>• Record keeping (e.g., re student assessments, IEPs, material and equipment requests, etc.)</li> <li>• Case finding and student referral</li> <li>• In large programs, possibly supervise other teachers</li> </ul>
<i>School Community Relations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpret program for students with visual impairments to school personnel, boards of education, and groups in the community</li> <li>• Act as liaison with public and private agencies, parents and families, medical specialists and other professionals, volunteer groups, etc.</li> <li>• Develop and assist in initiating new services, coordinating existing services</li> </ul>

\* Taken from *The Role and Function of the Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments* by Susan Jay Spungin and Kay Alicyn Ferrel, a position paper of the Council for Exceptional Children-Division of Visual Impairment

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At present, there are no programs to train teachers of the visually impaired in any higher education institution in Connecticut. However, there is one teacher preparation program in the northeast region (currently at Boston College) and at three institutions in New York state (Columbia University, Hunter College, and Dominican College) have training programs for teachers of the visually impaired.

**Analysis of current teacher workforce.** As discussed earlier, local school districts are responsible for obtaining the services of qualified teachers for their students who are blind or visually impaired. In Connecticut, districts have three main ways of getting teachers for their blind and visually impaired students:

- 1) hire teachers of the visually impaired, usually on an itinerant basis;
- 2) purchase services of teachers of the visually impaired from a RESC; or
- 3) receive services (at no charge) from the educational consultants employed by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind.

During the 1999-00 school year, BESB teachers served local and regional school districts covering about 100 towns as well as five state vocational technical schools and students at approximately 20 other facilities (e.g., special education programs, parochial schools, etc.). At present, the board will provide teacher services for preschool students in any district but has insufficient resources to provide every system with teachers for older students. Further, some districts prefer to hire their own teachers of the visually impaired. As the map presented in Figure II-4 shows, BESB teachers were assigned to school-age students in 99 towns during the last school year while 70 towns the districts had made their own arrangements for teachers of the visually impaired to provide services to school-age students.

Program review committee staff gathered information on the qualifications, caseloads, and duties of the BESB education consultants and the itinerant teachers employed by school districts. Analysis of the data compiled for the 20 BESB teachers and 24 itinerant teachers indicated their backgrounds and the scope of services provided are about the same for both types of teachers. All are certified teachers of the visually impaired and the majority have many years of teaching experience.

**Duties.** In their roles as teachers of visually impaired students, both BESB education consultants and district itinerant teachers are expected to:

- provide direct and consultative instruction, technical assistance and advice to school personnel and parents;
- participate in the IEP process;
- place orders for Braille and large print books and related special education supplies and equipment with BESB; and
- assist with arranging related services (e.g., orientation and mobility training, vocational counseling, etc.) and extracurricular enrichment activities (e.g., field trips, social events, etc.).



BESB teachers have some additional duties related to statewide activities sponsored by the board, such as professional development workshops and summer programs for the children.

**Caseload.** As noted earlier, district itinerant teachers do not serve preschool children so only school-age caseload information is compared to BESB teacher data. In general, the caseload mix of older students appears similar for BESB and district itinerant teachers. The caseloads of both types of teachers include multiply handicapped children, often at least one deaf-blind child, as well as children whose only disability is blindness or visual impairment. The caseloads of each of the BESB teachers who serve school-age children includes from one to three students who are Braille readers. Committee staff was unable to compile similar information on Braille readers for all district itinerant teachers.

Analysis of teacher caseload data indicated BESB education consultants for school age children generally have higher caseloads and more locations to serve than the itinerant teachers who work for local school districts. As Table II-3 shows, caseloads for BESB teachers as of August 2000 averaged 31 school-age children while the average caseload for district itinerant teachers during the last school year was 24.

<b>Table II-3. Caseloads of Teachers of the Visually Impaired in Connecticut</b>			
	<b>No. School-Age Children Served</b>		<b>No. Locations Served</b>
	<i>Average</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Range</i>
BESB Education Consultants (August 2000)	31	23-40	3-24
District Itinerant Teachers (April 2000)	24	10-59	1-14

Source of Data: LPR&IC staff analysis of BESB teacher surveys and client database.

All BESB education consultants serve multiple school districts. Currently, the school-age children in each BESB teacher’s caseload are located in as few as three towns and as many as 24 different towns and facilities. In contrast, over half of the district itinerant teachers only work for only one or two school systems and the largest “territory” served was 14 local and regional school districts. By its nature, teaching on an itinerant basis involves travel time. When caseloads cover large geographic areas and multiple locations, travel time can be significant for both BESB and district teachers.

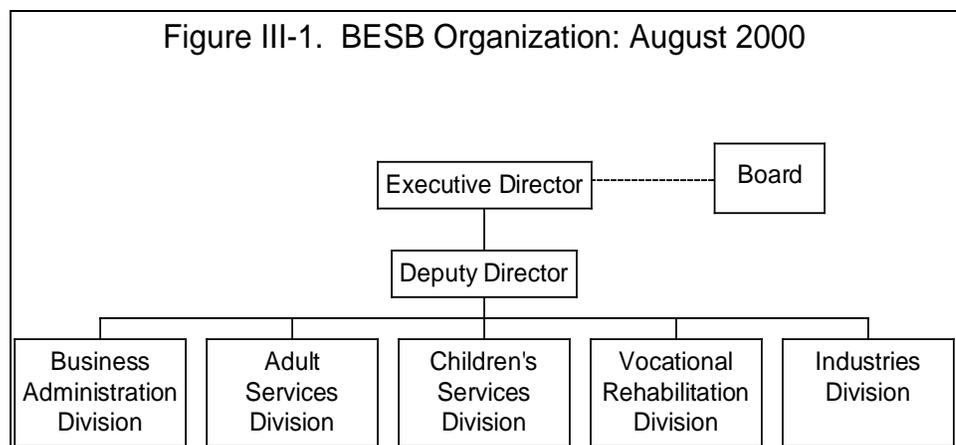
As noted above, local school districts typically do not provide vision-related services to preschool clients, relying instead on BESB and other outside providers. The caseloads of BESB education consultants who serve preschool children averaged 24 and ranged from 21 to 27 as of August 2000. For caseload purposes, preschool clients include children from birth to age 5 or 6 and the younger children are in the Birth to Three program.

## BESB Organization and Operations

The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, the state's comprehensive service agency for persons of all ages with vision-related disabilities, is located within the Department of Social Services for administrative purposes only. It is headed by an executive director who is appointed by the governor. The board itself consists of six members appointed by the governor, two of whom must be blind, and the social services commissioner as an ex officio member. Neither the director nor any board members are required to have a background or qualifications in educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired.

Over the years the board has become essentially an advisory body; its only statutory duties are to maintain a registry of blind persons and make an annual activity report to the governor. Most powers, such as the authority to determine eligibility for agency services and amount and type of services provided, approve financial assistance payments, and contract for services, have been transferred to the executive director.

As Figure III-1 shows, the agency is composed of four programmatic divisions – adult services, vocational rehabilitation, industries, and children's services – and a business administration division. The Children's Services Division has primary responsibility for providing the agency's vision-related special education services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Other divisions of the agency, however, also serve children. For example, vocation rehabilitation staff provide career counseling and help with the transition from school to work. Children also receive orientation and mobility training and independent living skills assistance from mobility and rehabilitation specialists within the Adult Services division.



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The Children's Services Division carries out the agency's four main functions related to education for children who are blind or visually impaired. These are:

- technical assistance;
- consultative and direct instruction;
- material resource center; and
- financial support for instructional materials and services.

Each one is described in more detail below. An overview of the division's organization, basic budget information, and a description of the intake and service planning process is also provided in this chapter.

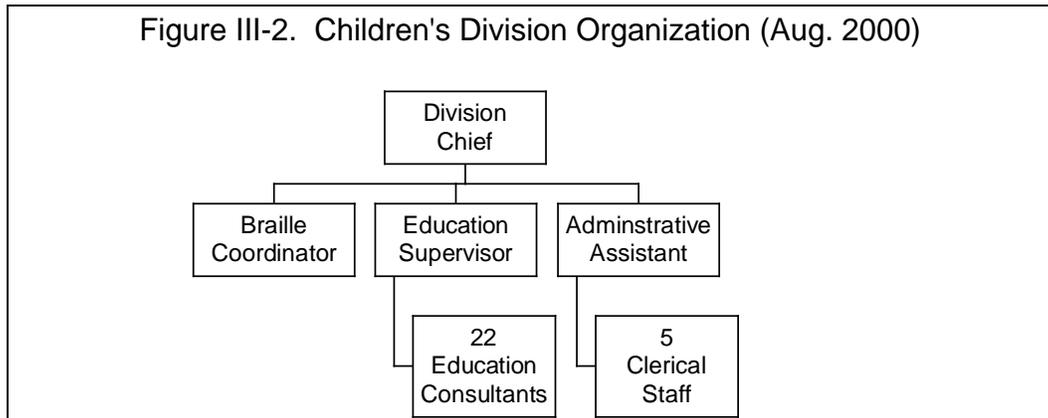
It is important to note that the Board of Education and Services for the Blind is in a significant transition period. The current executive director was appointed at beginning of 2000 after several years of scandal and questionable practices by top officials in the agency. The new director has reorganized and replaced many manager-level personnel and is formalizing agency policies and procedures. He also initiated a strategic planning process, the first for the agency, and is considering a major restructuring of all BESB services, including educational services for children. After several years of development, a new computerized accounting system is nearing completion and is expected to be fully in place sometime next year.

All of these changes will have an impact on the Children's Services Division operations described below and may result in improvements in several critical areas. For example, no policy manual has been developed for the division and there are few written policies or procedures. A planning document with goals, objectives, and outcome measures has never been prepared for the Children's Service Division. At present, the agency's data on educational services are fragmented and some has yet to be automated, making it difficult for the division to integrate and summarize client services and expenditure information for planning or monitoring purposes.

## **Organization**

The organization chart presented in Figure III-2 shows the Children's Services Division is composed of 31 positions, most of which are education consultants, and is headed by a division chief. There has been considerable turnover in the chief position and it is currently vacant. Plans to fill the position are on hold while the BESB management team considers agency-wide restructuring options.

The division's education supervisor position, which oversees the education consultant staff, is relatively new. It was established about three years ago to bring more accountability and uniformity to the agency's teaching services. The education consultants and the education supervisor all are certified teachers of the visually impaired. At present, 2 of the 22 education consultant positions are vacant and have remained unfilled for a number of years.



The Braille coordinator position is responsible for maintaining the division's educational material resource center, described in more detail below. The division's six administrative support staff positions, in addition to standard clerical functions, do the initial processing of district requests for material and equipment purchases and for reimbursement of special education costs. The actual purchasing process and final processing and accounting is handled by the agency's business office.

### Budget

Each year since FY 95, BESB has paid between about \$6.5 million and almost \$11.5 million of the special education costs of students who are blind or visually impaired. Expenditures are shown for each year and each children's services program category (i.e., preschool, visually impaired, legally blind, and multi-handicapped) in Table III-1. The amounts shown are only the expenditures the agency makes in accordance with its statutory per-child special education grant program. Costs associated with BESB education consultant services or other educational services provided by the agency at no charge to local districts are not included. The agency was unable to compile information on personnel and other expenses related to children's services requested by program review committee staff during the study.

	<b>FY 95</b>	<b>FY 96</b>	<b>FY 97</b>	<b>FY 98</b>	<b>FY 99</b>	<b>FY 00*</b>
Total (All Categories)	\$ 7.821	\$ 11.421	\$ 8.771	\$ 7.107	\$ 6.458	\$ 7.476
Preschool	\$ .025	\$ .024	\$ .024	\$ .024	\$ .074	\$ .124
Visually Impaired	\$ .375	\$ .440	\$ 4.471	\$ .261	\$ .442	\$ .442
Legally Blind	\$ .914	\$ .970	\$ .949	\$ .709	\$ 1.171	\$ 1.171
Multi-Handicapped	\$ 6.506	\$ 9.987	\$ 7.326	\$ 6.111	\$ 4.770	\$ 5.738

\* Appropriated; all other years actual expenditures  
Source of Data: Board of Education and Services for the Blind

The spike in children's services program expenditures in FY 96 is apparently due to an effort by agency fiscal staff to clear up a longstanding backlog of town requests for special education cost reimbursements. The drop-off in payments within the multi-handicapped program after FY 97 reflects a change in the agency's reimbursement policy instituted by the children's services chief with the support of the executive director during that year. The policy, which is still in effect, strictly interprets what special education services, materials, and equipment are vision-related and only makes payments for costs directly related to the visual impairment of a student.

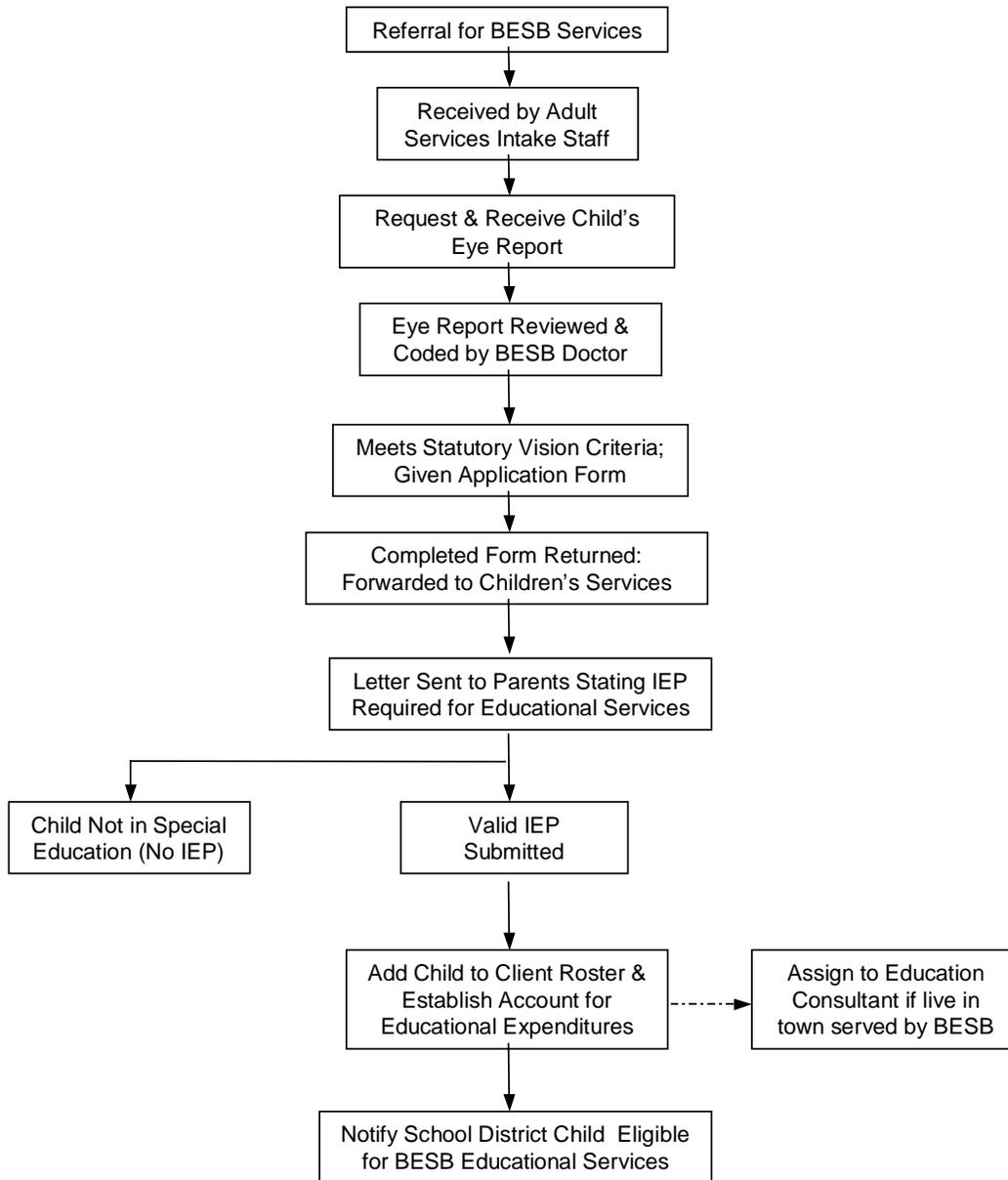
Expenditure information presented in Table III-2 shows total payments made for FY 01 divided by the total number of children funded in each major service category. Expenditures on a per client basis were highest for multi-handicapped children (\$9,516) and lowest for preschool program clients (\$1,212). The table also shows average expenditures per student for visually impaired and legally blind children do not come close to the statutory cap of \$6,400. More detailed information on actual expenditures per child and by purpose was compiled and analyzed by program review committee staff to determine what types of services BESB special education funding is used for, and what, if any, funding patterns exist among children. Findings resulting from this analysis are presented in the following chapter.

<b>Table III-2. Estimated BESB Special Education Expenditures Per Child: FY 01</b>					
	<i>Multi-Handicapped*</i>	<i>Preschool</i>	<i>Visually Impaired</i>	<i>Legally Blind</i>	<i>Total</i>
No. Children**	603	103	206	288	1,200
FY 01 Appropriation	\$5,738,166	\$124,887	\$442,672	\$1,171,220	\$7,476,945
Cost Per Client	\$9,516	\$1,212	\$2,148	\$4,066	\$6,230
* Includes deaf-blind children					
** Active cases as of June 7, 2000					
Source of Data: LPR&IC staff analysis of BESB data					

### **Intake and Service Planning Process**

The main steps in the process for becoming a BESB educational services client are outlined in Figure III-3. Children can be referred for BESB educational services from a number of sources – schools, medical professionals, the Birth to Three program, other programs that work with children, and sometimes directly by parents. The initial intake process for all agency clients including children is handled by social work staff in the Adult Services Division. In addition to an application form, an eye report from an eye professional must be submitted to the agency to determine if the child's vision meets the statutory criteria (i.e., legally blind or visually impaired) for BESB services.

Figure III-3. Intake Process for BESB Children's Educational Services



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Once a child has been found eligible for BESB services, the approved application packet is sent to the Children Services Division. The division then sends a letter to the child's parents and school district saying the child may be eligible for BESB educational services if documentation of special education status and a current individual education program are submitted. (For infants and toddlers in the Birth to Three program, the division requires the child's individual family service plan be submitted.)

When a child's special education (or Birth to Three) paperwork is received, he or she is added to the division's client roster, a file is opened, and an account is set up to track client expenditures. Preschoolers and school-age children who live in towns served by BESB education consultants are assigned to one of the division's teachers.

Children's teachers, whether BESB education consultants or district itinerants, are the liaisons between the school districts and the agency regarding vision-related education matters including eligibility for agency education funds and services. BESB regulations require teachers to provide the agency with annual progress reports on each child and to report within 45 days any changes in residence, needs, visual functioning, or services provided. Children remain clients of the division until they graduate high school (or turn 21) unless their vision improves beyond the statutory definition of visual impairment or they no longer qualify for special education. (As adults, they remain BESB clients, eligible for all other services, as long as they are legally blind.)

The types and amounts of educational services BESB provides and funds are guided by the special education IEP process (see Appendix B) and, for Birth to Three clients, the similar IFSP process. BESB responsibilities for direct instruction, books and other materials, or any specialized equipment are discussed by the IEP team and included in the written education program document. Any modifications in the agency's role outlined in a child's program, like any IEP changes, must be made through a team meeting.

BESB regulations on special education cost reimbursement and internal policies on funding priorities also determine the division's level of participation in a child's educational program. Direct instruction service levels are additionally dependent on available teaching staff resources.

### **Technical Assistance and Instruction Services**

The education consultants of the Children's Services Division provide direct services to special education students and youngsters in the Birth to Three program. For the 2000-01 school year, 14 of the division's 20 education consultants worked with school-age students and six worked with preschool children. One of the school-age and one of the preschool teachers specialized in serving children who are deaf-blind. The division supplements its educational services workforce through a contract with the Capitol Region Education Council, the greater Hartford area regional education service center. During the last school year, the division contracted for the services of four preschool teachers of the visually impaired, two professionals

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who conduct psychological and educational evaluations, a family therapist, and an assistive technology expert.

Although called education consultants, the BESB staff act as itinerant teachers of the visually impaired in a number of school districts. They are responsible for instructing children and advising local district personnel and parents on all vision-related education matters. At present, BESB teachers serve preschoolers in about 80 towns and work with school age children in nearly 100 municipalities. As noted in the previous section, the agency provides its teacher services at no cost to local school districts. School systems with BESB education consultants, therefore, essentially receive more state financial assistance for special education costs than those that hire their own teachers of the visually impaired.

The assignment of agency education consultants to local school districts is historical and there is no written policy on the matter. BESB started providing teachers to the smaller and more rural school districts that had few students and trouble obtaining the part-time services they needed when special education mainstreaming began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Larger school systems had enough blind and visually impaired students in their schools to require full-time positions and hired their own teaching staff. It is the division's practice not to provide its teacher services to districts that traditionally have hired their own staff so assignments have not changed over time. Another reason assignments have not expanded is the authorized staffing level for BESB teachers, despite increasing caseloads and requests for services from districts not currently served, has remained at 22 positions over the last 10 years.

The BESB education consultants are classified state employees. Under their current contract with the agency, all education consultants work from September 1 through June 30. Their services, therefore, are not available during the summer unless special arrangements are made and additional funding is available for that purpose. The lack of summer services is considered a problem by a number of parents and teachers and may be a federal compliance issue in the Birth to Three program.

**Committees.** The Children's Services Division provides technical assistance to local district personnel and parents through a number of projects organized by committees of BESB education consultants. The professional development committee, in addition to supporting training for BESB personnel, organizes in-service programs on vision-related education matters for all staff who work with the division's clients. Recently, the division sponsored Braille courses for paraprofessionals who work with blind children. Another committee is involved in developing special events for blind and visually impaired children and their parents throughout the state. A separate committee was also formed to create and maintain a professional library for individuals working with blind and visually impaired children. A technology committee is examining skills children need to use computers effectively and ways to provide training programs, possibly through summer camps sponsored by BESB.

### **Material Resource Center**

A critical component of the education program of a student who is blind or visually is having all instructional materials, from textbooks to homework "dittos," available in an

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accessible format. For many students this means materials available to sighted classmates in regular print form must be transcribed into Braille or published in large print. The material resource center within BESB's children's services center coordinates the transcription and circulation of Braille and large print materials for all clients of the Children's Services Division.

Any teacher of the visually impaired can place orders for instructional materials for their students who are children's services clients with the division's Braille coordinator, who manages the material resources center. Each year, the center provides materials to about 300 students. As of September 5, 2000, the center had received 593 orders for Braille materials and 833 orders for large print items for the current school year.

The center maintains an inventory of thousands of Braille and large print materials which are circulated to students throughout the state at no charge. If a text book or other item required for a course is not "on shelf," the coordinator will try to purchase it from one of the many vendors of Braille and large print books throughout the country. If the item is not available from a vendor (or is extraordinarily expensive), the Braille coordinator, with the assistance of a staff of volunteers, will transcribe it for the student. Materials prepared in-house are provided at no charge to the student.

Using the BESB material resource center can significantly reduce vision-related special education costs for a local school district. Braille books in particular are expensive, costing on average between \$300 and \$500; many older school-age children need at least 10 to 15 books each year. Commercial vendors may charge \$2,000 to \$2,500 for the Braille version of a high school chemistry or trigonometry textbook. The amount of materials the center can provide with in-house services at no charge rather than purchase, however, is limited by available staff and volunteer resources.

## **Financial Support**

As discussed in Chapter I, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind is authorized to provide state funding toward the costs of vision-related special education services; by law it can expend up to \$6,400 per year for visually impaired or legally blind children and up to \$11,000 for multiply handicapped children who are blind or visually impaired. The Children's Services Division, under regulations promulgated in 1989 and internal policy developed in 1998, distributes this financial assistance in two main ways: 1) it purchases vision-related instructional materials and equipment for districts on behalf of eligible students; and 2) it reimburses towns for vision-related instructional services and tuition provided to division clients.

The division's priorities for special education funding according to a 1998 letter sent to all districts are as follows:

- 1) devices (eyeglass lenses, frames, etc.) and low vision evaluations;
- 2) Braille and large print books;
- 3) services of teachers of the visually impaired hired by districts;

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- 4) visually related materials, equipment, and supplies; and
  - 5) visually related services and special instruction.

Except for the items included in the first category, materials, equipment, and services will only be funded by the division if they are recommended by the child's IEP team and included in the child's written education program on file with BESB.

**Purchasing process.** Under agency regulations, the division will not reimburse towns for the costs of "tangible items" (basically, any materials, supplies, or equipment) students require for their educational programs. Instead, districts, through the student's teacher of the visually impaired, must request the division to buy tangible items, which can range from special paper for children with low vision to computer systems and software.

The teachers submit the requests in writing to the division chief for review and approval. The division clerical staff prepare the necessary paperwork for approved purchases and make sure the proposed expenditure will not exceed the child's statutory funding cap. If adequate funding is available, the request is forwarded to the BESB business office for processing. The business office staff carry out the purchasing process in accordance with general state requirements and policies. Some inexpensive and common materials and supplies are available from the agency storeroom; otherwise, items are purchased from vendors and inventoried by the agency purchasing unit, and then delivered to clients.

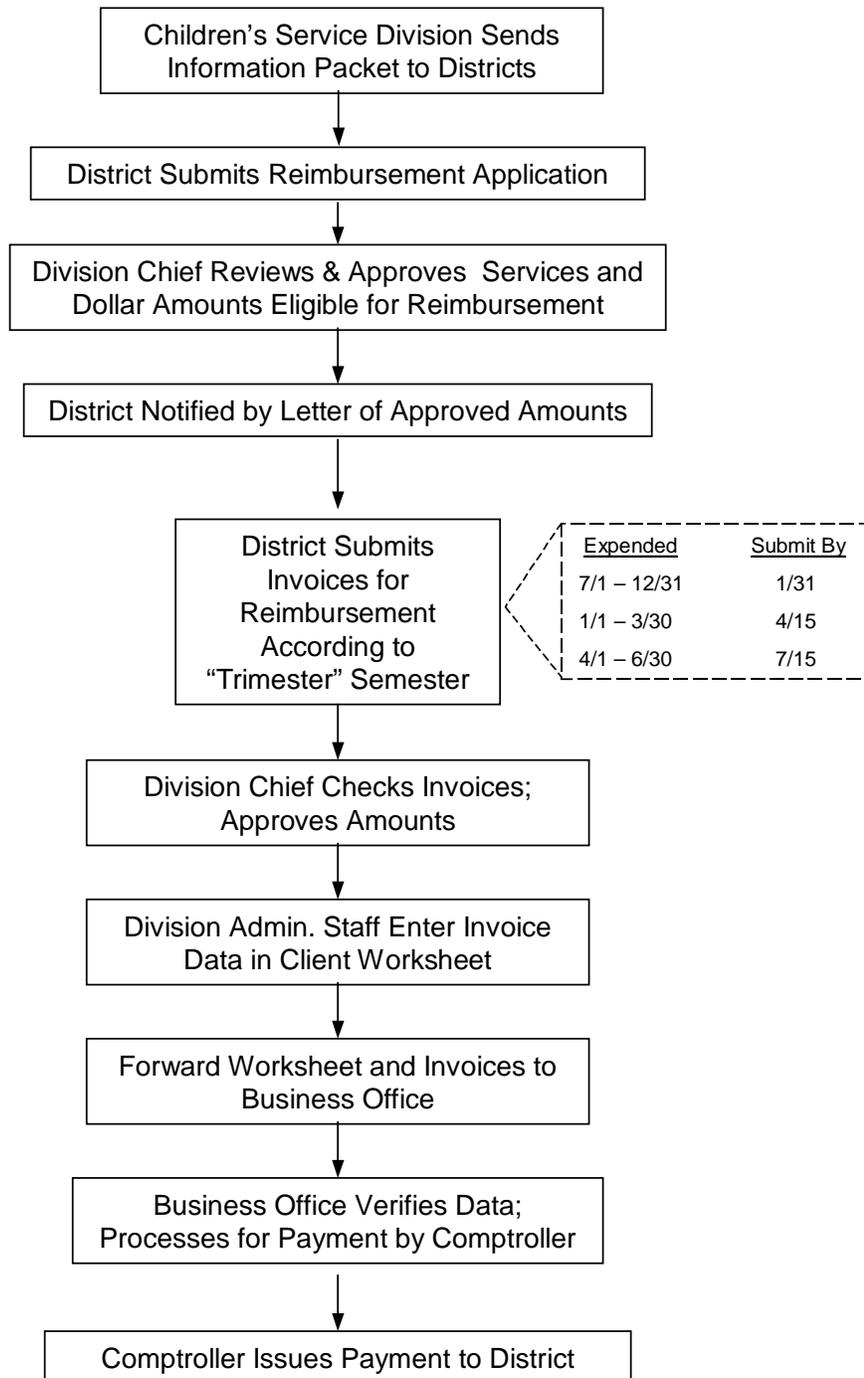
The purchasing process for children's materials and equipment is frequently criticized by teachers, districts, and parents as cumbersome and fragmented. Orders are difficult to track and processing delays are common. A lack of in-house expertise on computer hardware and software, telecommunications equipment, and assistive technology is another weakness the division and its clients recognize. The agency does not compile statistics on items purchased, processing times, or purchasing outcomes and was unable to develop some data in this area as requested by program review committee staff.

**Reimbursement process.** Local school districts can request reimbursement from the division for certain expenses related to services of teachers of the visually impaired, special education classroom teachers, and others who provide services directly related to a child's visual disability such as aides, tutors, and readers. Division policy issued in 1998 put in place a strict interpretation of vision-related services and clarified the types of reimbursable services as well as the formulas for calculating reimbursements of personnel costs. Districts can also be reimbursed for (or make arrangements for direct payment of) tuition costs at special facilities that serve their students who are blind or visually impaired.

The reimbursement process has many steps and requirements, as Figure III-4 shows. Districts must submit an application for reimbursement for each student that contains detailed information on proposed services including providers' names, dates of services, rates, and amounts of services. The application is reviewed and approved by the division chief. Once approved, the district is sent a letter stating the maximum amounts approved for possible reimbursement.

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Figure III-4. Steps in the District Cost Reimbursement Process



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To receive payments, a district must submit invoices according to a three-phase (“trimester”) schedule. The invoices are reviewed and approved by the division chief before they are given to clerical staff for initial processing. The division clerical staff enter the information in a client worksheet and check another database to make sure the requested expenditures in combination with other payments (e.g., for books and supplies) are within the child’s statutory funding cap. If adequate funding is available, invoices are forwarded to the business office for final processing. The business office completes the necessary paperwork to send the state comptroller’s office for payment.

The BESB fiscal office was asked by program review to compile data on the types and amounts of reimbursements requested and paid, as well as the total payments made to each district for the past two fiscal years. Due to limitations of the agency’s accounting system, including automation delays and other technical problems, the data were not provided.

### Findings and Recommendations

There is general agreement among vision education professionals and the blind community about the factors that contribute to quality educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired. The key elements include:

- a supportive administrative structure;
- a comprehensive array of services;
- an adequate supply of qualified specialized teachers; and
- ready access to education services, instructional materials and equipment, and assistive technology.

Based on its review of Connecticut's system for providing educational services to students with vision-related disabilities, the program review committee found each of these elements needs improvement. At present, there is no strong leadership structure to support and promote quality educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired. The committee also found state and local roles are confused.

Furthermore, Connecticut lacks some components of a full continuum of services to meet the needs of its students with vision-related disabilities. Like the rest of the nation, the state also faces a serious shortage of certified teachers of the visually impaired and other vision education professionals. Neither the State Department of Education (SDE) nor the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) have the mandate or resources to address gaps in the educational system for children who are visually impaired. No effective plan for ensuring an adequate supply of specialized educators is in place or under development by either agency.

Access to specialized services and materials by students with vision-related disabilities varies among local school districts, in part because of historic state funding policies. Overall, the program review committee found state support of vision-related education services is unfairly and inefficiently distributed.

To address the deficiencies identified during its study, the committee adopted a number of legislative and administrative recommendations. The proposed changes discussed in this chapter have four main goals:

- strengthen leadership and clarify roles for vision-related education;
- improve access to quality education services;

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- redirect state funding to support education goals for children who are blind or visually impaired; and
  - promote accountability for education outcomes.

## **Leadership**

According to experts, quality educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired depend on a supportive administrative structure at both the state and local levels.<sup>1</sup> States, at a minimum, need to have a mechanism for supervising local implementation of education policies concerning children with vision disabilities and evaluating outcomes. The State Department of Education (SDE), primarily through its special education bureau, carries out this role in Connecticut.

Ideally, a supportive state structure also includes centralized resources that help school districts meet the highly specialized and diverse education needs of this very low incidence disability population. An effective state resource center provides: technical advice; assistance in acquiring, developing, and coordinating services; and leadership on matters related to vision education. It can be located within a state's education department, agency for the blind, or school for the blind. In Connecticut, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind and, to some extent, SDE, provide expertise and other support for vision education to local school districts and other state agencies.

*Neither agency, however, provides strong leadership for vision education in terms of proactive programming, planning, or policy development.* The program review committee found few steps have been taken to address serious service gaps, including insufficient teacher services during summer months and the lack of training in the use of computer technology. Central resources offered to school districts are limited in scope as well as quantity. BESB's main support for school districts -- free services from its staff of 20 certified teachers of the visually impaired -- is not available to all towns in the state.

*No state planning document outlines goals and objectives for education services for students with vision-related disabilities.* Best practice guidelines, which were developed through a national project in 1999, have not been distributed to local districts. Connecticut is one of only five states that has not designated a state coordinator to follow up on the widely accepted vision education reforms of the National Agenda project described in Chapter I.

In part, leadership within the system is weak because historic practices and funding policies have confused roles. Before federal and state special education laws went into effect, the Board of Education and Services for the Blind was the principal agency for educating children who were blind or visually impaired. Now, local education agencies clearly have primary responsibility for providing a free and appropriate public education to all students in their school systems, including those with vision-related or other disabilities. However, because

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<sup>1</sup> See: Pugh G.S. and Erin, J., eds. *Blind and Visually Impaired Students: Educational Service Guidelines*. National Association of State Directors of Special Education in cooperation with Hilton/Perkins Program. Watertown, MA.: Perkins School for the Blind, 1999.

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BESB pays a portion of the costs of special education services for children with visual impairments and in many cases supplies a child's teacher of the visually impaired and instructional materials, some school personnel and parents believe the state agency is in charge of the student's education program.

Similarly, BESB is the state agency with expertise on vision education, but it has no authority to set policies or address unmet service needs. The state education department, which has responsibility for all education policy-making and compliance, can and has consulted with BESB staff on issues related to education services for students who are blind or visually impaired. *The program review committee found, however, there is no mechanism for regular collaboration between the two agencies.*

*Strong leadership is further impeded by unclear statutes regarding BESB's education services mission.* The agency's only statutory mandate for education services is to administer the per-child grants that reimburse towns for special education costs of students who are blind or visually impaired. In addition, the current BESB statutes contain archaic references to the agency's authority to compel a student to attend a residential school for the blind and to provide clothing and transportation allowances for needy blind or visually impaired students.

Current law does not reflect the broader role the agency has undertaken to support education services for children who are blind or visually impaired. Over the years, BESB evolved to become a comprehensive service provider agency for blind and deaf blind persons of all ages. While not mandated by law, it has continued a tradition that began in the late 1950s of providing teachers to certain school districts throughout the state. For many years it has operated as a clearinghouse for acquiring and producing Braille and large print instructional materials for any student in the state who is blind or visually impaired. BESB also is the statewide Birth to Three service provider for infants and toddlers with vision-related disabilities and their families

Agency teaching staff have taken the unofficial lead on providing professional development and training opportunities for educators and paraprofessionals who work with children with vision-related disabilities throughout the state. With the assistance of a statewide parent organization, they organize social and recreational events for children who are blind or visually impaired. None of these activities are specified in statute.

*The program review committee found BESB has the potential to be the supportive state administrative structure and central resource Connecticut needs to provide quality education services for children with vision-related disabilities.* To promote leadership for vision education and clarify roles within the system, **the committee recommends the statutes be amended to articulate BESB's education services mission as follows: the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in collaboration with the state department of education, shall support local school districts in meeting the educational needs of children with vision-related disabilities by providing, within available appropriations, advice, assistance, and resources, including the specialized educational services and materials children require because of their blindness or visual impairment.**

*The committee also concluded removing the term "board of education" from the agency's title would further clarify its actual role in the education system.* When established,

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BESB was responsible by law for the “care and supervision” of pupils receiving instruction at the residential school for the blind in the state. With the enactment of federal and state special education laws, it no longer has authority over students or educational policies and programs. BESB has evolved to become a service agency for all persons with vision-related disabilities and its title should reflect that role. Since its current name is misleading, **the program review committee recommends the Board of Education and Services for the Blind be renamed Connecticut Services for the Blind. The agency’s current seven-member advisory board should also be renamed Connecticut Services for the Blind Advisory Board.**

The new title underscores that BESB is a service agency; its education role is to be a resource for local school districts and other state agencies, and an advocate for vision education. It also makes clear that districts and the state board of education -- not BESB -- have primary authority over and responsibility for students and their education programs.

As lead advocate for vision education, BESB’s goal should be improving the quality of and accessibility to the expanded core curriculum for students who are blind or visually impaired in Connecticut.<sup>2</sup> Many consider Texas to have one of the best state resource centers and advocates for vision education, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). The program review committee believes BESB should use TSBVI as its model in carrying out its new statutory mission.

The school describes itself as a partner with school districts in Texas in providing instructional and related services to students who are blind, deaf-blind, or visually impaired, including those with additional disabilities. In addition to running the state’s residential school for this client population, TSBVI provides a wide range of outreach services that includes:

- on-site consultation and technical assistance on educational programming and teaching techniques as well as various therapies, assessments, and materials and equipment;
- information and support for parents;
- technical assistance for children birth to age five;
- statewide staff development;
- a statewide system for ordering, distributing, and repairing specialized materials and equipment;
- educational technology information, assessments, equipment, and training as well as a technology loan program; and
- support for recruitment and training of vision education professionals.

In addition, the school offers conferences, workshops, and targeted training for parents and various professionals working with children who are visually impaired. It develops training

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<sup>2</sup> As described in Chapter II, the expanded core curriculum for children with vision related disabilities incorporates the following: compensatory or functional academic skills; social interaction skills; recreation and leisure skills; independent living skills; orientation and mobility; use of assistive technology; visual efficiency skills; and career education.

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and professional reference materials, maintains a professional library, and makes available current research, teaching information, and resources on transition. TSBVI has an extensive website and publishes, with the state commission on the blind, a quarterly newsletter for parents and professionals.

Connecticut has no school for the blind or higher education institution with a teacher of the visually impaired preparation program to take on some or all of these leadership functions. BESB, with its staff of specialized teachers, Braille and large print materials center, and Birth to Three program, has the basic elements of a comprehensive vision education resource like TSBVI in place. In building centralized services to support vision education, it can also draw upon resources throughout the agency, such as the counselors in the vocational rehabilitation division, and rehabilitation teachers and mobility specialists from the adult services division.

**Relationship with SDE.** Under the committee recommendation, BESB's leadership role for vision education is strengthened but the authority to make and enforce all education policy continues to rest with the state board of education and its administrative arm, the education department. The two agencies still need to work together to develop and implement policies and programs that promote quality education services for children who are blind or visually impaired. Staff from both agencies meet now on an informal basis from time to time to work on joint projects, but there is no formal link between BESB and SDE.

*The program review committee found there have been occasions where initiatives to improve vision education services have been undertaken by one of the agencies without participation by the other.* For example, the education department recently developed and issued a request for proposals from higher education institutions for recruiting and training new teachers of the visually impaired without involving any BESB staff in the process. Similarly, BESB did not consult the education department when it adopted its "Learning Media Assessment (LMA)," a tool teachers of the visually impaired can use to assess which learning media (e.g., regular print, large print, Braille, or auditory.) best meets the needs of a student with vision-related disabilities. BESB also adopted its standardized form teachers of the visually impaired can use to track individual student progress in key compensatory skill areas without SDE input.

To facilitate collaboration between the agencies in the future, **the program review committee recommends a representative from the special education staff of the state education department, designated by the commissioner of education, be added as an ex officio member to the BESB advisory board.** While the BESB board is only an advisory body, its meetings provide a forum for regularly discussing vision education issues and an opportunity for the two agencies to formally share information.

**The committee also recommends that the Board of Education and Services for the Blind and State Department of Education work together to develop and issue to local districts, policy and best practices guidelines related to education services for children with vision-related disabilities.** Promoting quality education services at the local level requires a strong partnership between the two state agencies. BESB has the expertise to design and assess educational policies and programs for children who are blind or visually impaired and SDE has the authority to oversee local implementation of educational mandates.

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One of the first items the department should endorse and notify all districts about is the educational service guidelines for blind and visually impaired students published by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education in 1999. Following these nationally recognized best practices, which were developed by experts and organizations that serve persons with vision-related disabilities, can help districts provide quality education services. SDE notified local districts about guidelines for deaf and hard-of-hearing students developed by the same organization in 1994.

The department should also recommend local school districts require their staff to use BESB's learning media assessment tool and student skill tracking form for all students with vision-related disabilities. Both mechanisms can help ensure students receive services appropriate to their needs and promote accountability for education outcomes.

Professional development and training is another key area for cooperation. At present, BESB is the main source of in-service training on vision education for teachers, other professionals, and paraprofessionals who work with students who are blind or visually impaired. The state education department through its Special Education Resource Center (SERC) provides training, professional development, technical assistance, and resources to local schools related to all special education populations and programs. The two agencies recently arranged a series of regional workshops on teaching methods for multiply disabled children, with BESB supplying the training experts and SERC taking care of administrative details. Jointly sponsored training programs are an efficient use of both agency's resources and should be continued and expanded.

**Advisory council.** During the last legislative session, an advisory council on Braille literacy was created to focus attention on issues related to the ability of children who are blind or visually impaired to read and write. *The program review committee found the new council, with some modifications of its mandate, can also assist BESB in fulfilling its leadership role for vision education.*

The advisory council's current duties, while centered on issues of Braille literacy, already encompass broader aspects of educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired, such as caseloads, teacher qualifications, and state funding policies. The review and assessment function the council is intended to perform for Braille services could be expanded to all education services provided to children who are blind or visually impaired. The result would be greater oversight and accountability for the whole system.

To accomplish this purpose, **the program review committee recommends the Braille literacy advisory council's responsibilities be amended to include evaluating and reporting on: the array of education services available to children with vision-related disabilities; access to services, materials, equipment and technology; and outcomes of the services provided.**

**The committee also recommends the name of the council be changed to the Advisory Council on Vision Education Services. Finally, it is recommended the membership of the council be increased to include a parent of a child who is blind or visually impaired and has additional disabilities and a teacher who specializes in providing vision-related education services to multiply disabled students.**

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## Access to Services and Materials

An effective system for educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired ensures students have ready access to qualified teachers as well as the materials and equipment required for their educational program. *The program review committee found inequities as well as inefficiencies in the way specialized teacher services are supplied under the current system.* In addition, while the state has taken some steps to address what is becoming a critical shortage of teachers of the visually impaired, more efforts are needed to secure an adequate supply in the future.

*The committee also found the materials resource center operated by BESB provides a valuable service to students throughout the state but is understaffed and unable to meet current demand. The agency's capacity to provide technical assistance and support on adaptive technology, including specialized computer equipment and software, is limited. Administration of the agency's Birth to Three program has been cited for deficiencies by the Department of Mental Retardation (DMR).* The program review committee concluded a number of changes to the current system, discussed in detail below, are needed to improve access to education services and materials by children who are blind or visually impaired.

**Teacher services.** BESB employs certified teachers of the visually impaired and provides their professional services to school-age children in about 100 of the state's 169 towns. Agency teachers also serve preschool children anywhere in the state. BESB teachers additionally staff the agency's Birth to Three program, which provides early intervention services to infants and toddlers with vision-related disabilities and their families statewide.

In supplying school districts with the professional services they need to meet the special education needs of students with a low incidence disability, BESB is performing the functions of a regional education service center (RESC). Like a RESC, it recruits, supervises, and supports the training needs of specialized teachers and makes their services available to districts who need personnel on an itinerant basis. Unlike a RESC, however, BESB does not charge districts any fee for its teacher services.

At existing staffing levels, BESB is unable to supply free personnel to every district that needs the services of a teacher of the visually impaired. Current assignments of BESB are based on historic practice rather than district needs and resources. The committee found, as a result of these factors, a significant state resource for vision education is unfairly and inefficiently distributed to local districts.

*The program review committee concluded BESB should continue to offer the services of its vision education professionals to local districts provided the unfairness of the current system is addressed. To make access to BESB teaching staff equitable, the program review committee recommends the agency provide its teachers to districts on a fee-for-service basis starting in the 2002-03 school year.*

*The committee also found the agency needs to address the lack of access to its teacher services during the summer months, especially for clients of the Birth to Three program. At present, all teachers work under contract that is for the period September 1 to June 30. While it*

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is not likely the entire teaching staff is needed all year, some coverage is required for the summer months. Teachers of the visually impaired must be available to conduct timely assessments of all newly referred children and to consult whenever a student's early intervention or special education program needs modification. In addition, the lack of continuous service is a potential federal compliance issue for BESB's Birth to Three program.

**The program review committee recommends BESB pursue contract revisions to ensure the availability of teachers of the visually impaired services all 12 months of the year during its next collective bargaining negotiations. It is further recommended the agency make teacher services available year-round for its Birth to Three program, through collective bargaining negotiations or other arrangements, before June 30, 2001.**

Under the committee recommendation, BESB teacher services would be available for a fee to any district in the state. This would eliminate current inequities in state financial support for vision education among towns as districts would no longer receive free teachers from the state. Ensuring the expertise of a teacher of the visually impaired is available year-round will mean better access to services for all children and address noncompliance issues in the agency's Birth to Three program. This change is needed whether or not a fee-for-service structure is adopted.

The change to fee-for-service system will mean new expenses for many local school districts. Costs could be significant in a few cases. There are at least a dozen towns with 10 or more students who are blind or visually impaired that now have free BESB teachers. They may need to hire or contract for the services of a full-time teacher of the visually impaired whose salary costs alone could range from about \$40,000 to over \$60,000 per year. Changes in state vision education funding policies recommended by the committee in the following section could relieve some of this new financial burden.

Fairness could be achieved by providing free teacher services to all districts but this option is not recommended. First, it would entail a significant new expense in the state budget. Second, all teacher of the visually impaired services would be subject to the state budget constraints that create problems for BESB now. The agency has too few teachers to adequately meet current demand but additional staff positions cannot be authorized. As a result, BESB teacher caseloads are high and service hours provided to individual students are dictated by availability of personnel.

This approach also is inconsistent with the state policy about local control over education services. In addition, a number of complicated labor issues would need to be negotiated if the state were to absorb teachers now employed by local districts. Finally, there are districts, according to committee survey results, that do not want state teachers working in their school systems but outside of their control even if they are free.

The committee supports retaining teaching staff within BESB for several reasons. The main reason is the agency needs the expertise of experienced vision education professionals to effectively carry out its mission as central resource for technical advice, assistance, and advocacy. Given the shortage of teachers of the visually impaired, it seems efficient to also continue to make their services available for direct instruction of students.

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Furthermore, the services provided by BESB teachers are generally well-regarded, according to testimony the committee received during its public hearing, responses to the committee survey of special education directors, and committee staff interviews conducted with parents, educators, and interest groups. Nearly all the teachers have advanced degrees, most have many years of experience, and all BESB teachers participate in agency-sponsored professional development and training programs. Outside of a residential school for the blind, it is unusual to have a large group of teachers working together, supervised by vision education professional, and able to develop specialties and share expertise.

It is possible one or more regional education service centers could, over time, replicate the level and scope of teacher services now at BESB. A comprehensive array of education services for deaf and hearing impaired children is available through the Soundbridge auditory oral program operated by CREC, the regional education service center for the central area of the state. In addition to providing teachers of the hearing impaired to school districts on a fee basis, Soundbridge offers the services of other professionals such as audiologists and therapists, assessment services, equipment maintenance services, parent programs, and Birth to Three services. The Soundbridge model could be applied to vision education services. *However, to ensure continuity of services and retain a core of expertise, the program review committee found it makes sense to maintain a direct service role within BESB at the present time.*

Therefore, **the program review committee recommends the statutes be revised to authorize the agency to provide teachers of the visually impaired services on a fee-for-service basis to any school district in state. Legislation should also be enacted to establish a self-sustaining account to receive fees from districts and pay costs related to supplying teacher services.**

The committee believes making BESB function more like a regional education service center can correct current inequities and increase the availability of teacher services to all districts. In addition, changing the structure for providing agency services can also free up existing General Fund resources for other agency purposes that support quality education services for children who are blind or visually impaired.

**Expanded centralized services.** *The program review committee found BESB, at present, has few resources and little funding flexibility to support its statewide technical assistance, training, and advocacy functions.* Most of its professional development and program development activities are carried out by the teaching staff in addition to direct service responsibilities. At present, BESB in-service training sessions are the only opportunities for continuing education on visual impairment issues offered in the state. The agency's ability to meet statewide training and professional development needs is constrained by the heavy teaching caseloads of its staff.

The agency's Birth to Three Program is coordinated by one of the BESB preschool teachers with limited administrative support. DMR, the state's Birth to Three lead agency, has criticized BESB for failing to: make timely referrals; submit required monitoring data; be included in the program's third-party billing system; and participate in free service coordination training.

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The state parents' association for the blind and visually disabled has taken the lead on outreach efforts by publishing a newsletter, compiling program resource directories, and organizing parent workshops and conferences. An agency web page is planned but there is no internet access to BESB education service resources at present.

The agency's materials resource center has a lending library of 15,000 items and has received more than 1,500 requests for adapted materials such as Braille and large print books so far this school year. Until the current fiscal year, it was staffed by one person and a team of volunteers. One clerical assistant position was recently assigned to work with the center's Braille coordinator. The center is unable to fulfill all requests for its transcription services and the coordinator has insufficient time to train additional volunteers.

Technology expertise among the BESB teaching staff is limited. At this time, one specialist is available on a contract basis to provide technical support on computer hardware and software matters for all of the nearly 1,200 children with vision-disabilities BESB serves.

The annual salary and fringe benefit costs of teacher positions included in the agency's General Fund budget total about \$1.6 million for the current fiscal year. Depending on the number of positions transferred to the self-sustaining account under the fee-for-service model proposed above, a significant amount of this money could be made available to: 1) expand BESB's material resources center services; 2) establish new technology services; 3) augment training, outreach, and parent support efforts; and 4) strengthen administration of the agency's Birth to Three Program. **The program review committee recommends the state funds formerly allocated for BESB teacher costs be used to augment the agency's centralized resources and support services.**

**Supply of qualified teachers.** An adequate supply of specially trained and appropriately certified teachers is essential to providing quality education services to children who are blind or visually impaired. *The program review committee found the severe shortage of teachers of the visually impaired in Connecticut and nationwide has strained the resources of BESB's teaching staff and limited student access to instructional services throughout the state.*

Responses to the committee's survey of local special education directors indicated many districts have had difficulty obtaining the services of certified teachers of the visually impaired over the past five years. Survey responses and testimony presented at the committee's public hearing revealed several districts have had inadequate or no teacher services available for their students with vision-related disabilities for an entire school year.

Both the state education department and BESB are taking steps to increase the state's supply of teachers of the visually impaired. As noted above, SDE is using federal grant funds to develop programs at Connecticut institutions of higher education to train teachers of students with visual impairments. Staff at BESB are involved in effort by several northeast states to establish a regional collaborative teacher preparation program with "distance learning" opportunities through the University of Massachusetts at Boston. In addition, one of the duties of the new Braille literacy advisory council, whose members include SDE and BESB representatives, is to develop a plan to attract qualified teachers of the visually impaired. The

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department and BESB are also required to report on efforts concerning the certification of teachers of the visually impaired to the council and the legislature.

*The program review committee concluded these various initiatives, if effectively coordinated, can begin to address the state's teacher shortage problem.* The previous committee recommendations to add an education department representative to the BESB board and to expand the role of the advisory council should promote interagency communication and cooperation on this and other vision education issues. **However, it is also recommended SDE officially include BESB education staff in planning, evaluating, and monitoring the activities undertaken through its federal teacher training grant project.**

**The committee further recommends the department, in consultation with BESB, determine the number of teachers and other personnel, such as orientation and mobility specialists, that are required to meet the education needs of children with vision-related disabilities in Connecticut at present and over the next ten years and report its results to the advisory council by July 1, 2001.** A long-range needs assessment should be the basis for the state's strategies for ensuring children who are blind or visually impaired have ready access to education services. The critical first step for effective planning has been overlooked by both state agencies to date.

### **Funding Process and Policy**

The state, through BESB, currently reimburses local school districts for certain special education costs related to serving students with vision disabilities. Towns can receive an annual per-pupil grant capped at \$6,400 for students who are legally blind or visually impaired and \$11,000 for children with vision and other disabilities. Over the past five fiscal years, total state aid provided to towns through BESB averaged about \$7.5 million per year. *The program review committee found the present funding mechanism is not only cumbersome but ineffective in supporting the specialized services and materials needed by students who are blind or visually impaired.*

Agency staff and local school officials strongly agree the way towns are reimbursed for vision-related special education costs needs to be streamlined and simplified. The current BESB funding process was a major source of complaints from local school personnel interviewed and surveyed by program review committee staff.

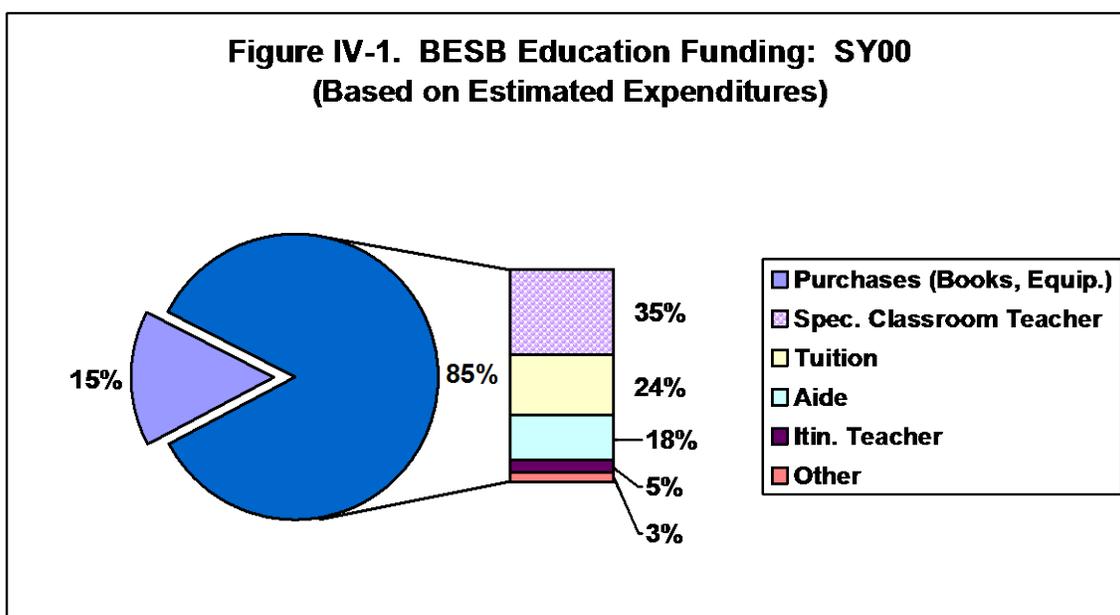
Although the amounts requested for reimbursement are relatively small (ranging in total from just a few thousand dollars for towns with only one or two students up to about \$350,000 for a city with a large number of children with vision-related disabilities), the process involves substantial paperwork and three payment periods. There are no clear guidelines about eligible costs and payment delays are common. As of mid-November 2000, for example, BESB had not processed the payments for the town claims for reimbursement from the third period of the last school year.

*The program review committee found much of the funding BESB provides to towns appears to subsidize basic special education expenses rather than the specialized instruction or materials required by students with vision-related disabilities.* Most agency funding – almost

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80 percent during the last school year – offsets either: 1) local expenditures for tuition at out-of-district placements, which primarily serve multiply disabled students; or 2) the salaries of district special classroom teachers and aides who work with students who are blind or visually impaired.

Much smaller portions of BESB funding are applied to education services solely required because of visual impairment such as salaries of teachers of the visually impaired, Braille and large print books, adaptive equipment and assistive technology for vision disabilities, and orientation and mobility training. The distribution of the BESB education funding for school year 1999-00 is shown in Figure IV-1. In total, direct purchases of instructional materials by BESB on behalf of school districts made up 15 percent of all expenditures while reimbursements to towns for various education expenses such as teacher salaries and out-of-district tuition payments accounted for 85 percent.



Committee staff analysis further indicates a significant amount of the state’s vision education funds, both in total and on a per-child basis, is allocated to students who are non-readers. As Table IV-I shows, more than \$2.6 million in BESB funding for the last school year was spent on educational services for children who are non-readers. Based on the preliminary data from the 1999-00 school year, the committee also found towns received reimbursements in amounts above \$6,400 for 379 multiply handicapped students; 221 of these students (58 percent) were non-readers.

*A substantial amount of agency funding supports special education services for students whose primary disability is not vision-related.* Based on this finding, the program review committee considered proposing BESB grant resources be added to the appropriation made for state special education grants. In effect, state support to local districts for exceptional special education costs would not change in total although individual towns might get more or less state funding than they did under the separate BESB grant.

<b>Table IV-1. Estimated BESB Funding by Reading Mode: School Year 1999-00*</b>			
<b>Reading Mode</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>BESB Funding: Mean</b>	<b>BESB Funding: Sum</b>
Non-Reading	389	\$6,970	\$2,634,768
Pre-Reader	319	\$3,423	\$951,731
Large Print Reader	214	\$5,034	\$1,001,953
Regular Print Reader	186	\$3,622	\$561,495
Braille Reader	51	\$6,788	\$332,612
Auditory Reader	29	\$7,462	\$208,937
* Based on preliminary annual expenditure data Source of Data: LPR&IC staff analysis of BESB client database and expenditures records			

Further, eliminating the per-child BESB grant should not impact what services, materials, or equipment a special education student with vision-related disabilities receives. Local districts are obligated by state and federal law to implement child’s individual education program (IEP), providing all items called for in the document developed by the child’s IEP team.

The main drawback to this proposal is it conflicts with long-standing state policy; funding would no longer be dedicated to meeting the special education needs of children who are blind or visually impaired. It has been state policy since the beginning of last century to underwrite educational programs for children with sensory disabilities. The state has supported Connecticut’s residential schools for the blind and for the deaf with General Fund monies, and until 1980, even operated one special educational facility, the Mystic Oral School for the Deaf.<sup>3</sup>

The General Assembly still makes an annual appropriation (about \$7.3 million at present) toward the operating expenses of the private American School for the Deaf and now provides towns with additional aid to serve children who are blind or visually impaired through the BESB grants. Many advocates fear that without dedicated funding, the unique needs of students with low incidence sensory disabilities would be overlooked by local school systems.

*The program review committee believes dedicated funding can be an effective way to promote the quality and accessibility of education services for children with vision-related disabilities. However, to achieve these goals, major changes to the current funding structure are needed. First, the funding process must be simpler to administer. Second, funding policies must more flexible and directed at the unique education needs of students who are blind or visually impaired.*

**Therefore, the program review committee recommends the current statutory provisions on state payment of special education costs for blind or visually impaired children be repealed and replaced with language establishing a grant program for vision-related education services to be administered by the Board of Education and Services for**

<sup>3</sup> Declining enrollments led the state to close the Mystic Oral School and plan alternative placements for the remaining students including other residential schools and local or regional programs for hearing impaired children. At present there is no state special education funding dedicated to auditory oral education services for children who are deaf or hearing impaired.

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**the Blind. The grant program shall be funded at an amount equal to \$6,400 times the number of blind and visually impaired children in the state as determined by BESB.**

**BESB shall use the state funding to provide eligible students who are blind or visually impaired with the specialized instructional materials, including Braille and large print books, and adaptive equipment and technology they require to access their education programs. The state shall also annually provide a \$2,000 entitlement to districts for the special education costs of each child who is blind or visually impaired.**

**The remaining balance of grant funding shall be used to provide supplemental funding to reimburse local school districts on a proportional basis for the costs of consultation and instructional services provided by teachers of the visually impaired and other services related to providing expanded core curriculum for blind or visually impaired students including but not limited to orientation and mobility training and independent living skills. Only districts that have expended an amount greater than the total amount of entitlement funding received on educational services required for vision-related disabilities shall be eligible to apply for supplemental funding.**

**The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in consultation with the State Department of Education, shall develop a proposed statutory funding formula for the grant program and a description of all expenses eligible for funding to present to the legislature for its consideration by January 1, 2002. The new grant program for vision education should go into effect by January 1, 2003.**

Under the committee recommendation, state aid for vision-related special education costs is focused on services students require because of blindness or visual impairment. Statutory caps on individual spending are eliminated, allowing more flexibility in the use of funds as well as simpler accounting and payment procedures. Requiring in statute the program be funded in total at \$6,400 for each eligible child preserves the entitlement aspect of the current funding mechanism. At the same time, the state's financial commitment to vision-related special education is maintained at approximately its present level.

BESB is already required under P.A. 00-127 to review and report on funding patterns of the current grant program to the legislature and the Braille Literacy Advisory Council by January 1, 2002. New automated financial systems being implemented at the agency should facilitate this project, which should also produce the data needed to design a new funding formula.

Making the grant program easy to administer should be a priority as BESB develops related policies and procedures. There should be a simple one-step application and payment process, clear instructions, and concise written guidelines for districts to follow. Funding policies should promote flexibility, allowing districts to pool grant monies and to assign them to educational service providers.

The proposed funding mechanism gives priority to instructional materials and adaptive equipment, which is a continuation of current BESB policy. However, without per-child caps on spending, the agency has the ability to provide all books and complete computer systems to students in accordance with their education needs. BESB could buy certain equipment in bulk,

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which should reduce purchasing costs and simplify technical support, maintenance and repairs. Opportunities to share equipment and recirculate instructional materials among students would also be facilitated.

Reimbursement for specialized teacher services was by far the top funding priority among the approximately 100 district special education directors who responded to a program review committee survey. Under the new grant, towns would continue to be reimbursed for expenses related to certified teachers of the visually impaired however they are employed by the district. New costs some districts will incur because of the prior committee recommendation to eliminate free BESB teachers could be offset, to a degree, by the entitlement and supplemental funding sources.

The proposed funding mechanism could result in towns receiving significantly less aid for tuition costs of out-of-district educational placements for students who are blind or visually impaired and have other disabilities. Only placements at vision-related educational programs should be eligible for supplemental funding under the new grant program. However, towns with students who require expensive out-of-district placements generally receive state aid toward these costs under the special education equity and “catastrophic” costs grants administered by the state education department.

### **Outcomes and Strategic Planning**

In its position statement on measuring success, the State Board of Education points out defining standards, measuring success, and reporting results are important steps in the process of improving education. Assessing student performance and monitoring progress toward education goals promotes accountability. Measuring outcomes also permits informed decisions on allocation of resources, programming priorities, and new initiatives.

*How well the current system for serving students with vision-related disabilities achieves education goals is unknown at this time.* Neither BESB nor the state education department track educational outcomes for this population. The program review committee found no data are compiled on drop-out rates, post-graduation employment rates, or literacy rates among students with vision-related disabilities. While a number of students who are blind or visually impaired participate in statewide standardized testing (the Connecticut Mastery Tests and the Connecticut Academic Achievement Test), results have not been reviewed and compared with other groups or state goals.

**The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education, in consultation with the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, establish, monitor, and report on outcome measures for educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Monitoring results should be included as part of the department’s annual report on special education beginning in 2002.**

Gathering and analyzing outcome data will allow education professionals and policymakers to better assess the effectiveness of various instruction methods, materials, and assistive technology. The analysis can also help BESB and the education department develop

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guidelines for services in such areas as optimal teacher caseload size and appropriate amounts of direct instruction time for students who are blind or visually impaired.

BESB and education department, aware of the need to measure outcomes of special education services, have initiated projects to assess the performance of students with vision-related disabilities in the future. As described earlier, BESB recently developed a system for monitoring individual student progress in specific skill areas. Under the 1997 revisions to the federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all states must expand efforts to assess special education students and report on their progress. In response, SDE is establishing a system that will build on current statewide testing of academic performance and include a new alternative assessment mechanism for special education students who are not in academic programs.

**Strategic plan.** For the first time in many years, BESB is engaged in an agency-wide planning effort. With the assistance of the Department of Administrative Services, it is developing a strategic plan for integrating and enhancing its continuum of services for all clients, including children. The process is in the initial stages and no firm schedule or methodology has been adopted.

A comprehensive blueprint for carrying out the agency's education mission is critical to quality services, particularly if BESB is made the lead advocate and central resource for vision education as recommended previously. **The program review committee recommends the portion of the agency's strategic plan concerning education services for children who are blind or visually impaired be completed by July 1, 2001, and be updated annually. The strategic plan should incorporate and specifically address the outcome measures developed under the prior recommendation.**

In preparing its strategic plan for vision education services, BESB should consult with the state department of education, the Braille Literacy Advisory Council and representatives of the many stakeholders in the system such as parent groups, professional associations, and organizations that serve the blind. To facilitate discussion and broad participation during the initial planning process, **the program review committee recommends BESB, with the assistance of the State Department of Education, arrange for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) to conduct one of its training seminars on improving educational services for the sensory impaired in Connecticut.**

NASDSE is the organization that developed the education service guidelines for students who are blind or visually impaired. Its training seminar is intended for teachers and school administrator from regular and special education, related professions, and community and parent groups. The seminar covers a number of topics useful for strategic planning including federal and state policies and promising practices in education service delivery. Staff in the SDE special education bureau have made an initial contact with the seminar organizer and the department is willing to absorb costs related to the seminar in its SERC training budget.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A**

### **Agency Responses:**

**Board of Education and Services for the Blind  
State Department of Education**



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Board of **EDUCATION AND SERVICES FOR THE BLIND**

**Via United States Mail**

Ms. Jill Jensen  
Legislative Program Review & Investigations  
Room 506  
State Capitol  
Hartford, CT 06106

Jill:

Please find enclosed a hard copy of the document that we emailed to you yesterday, containing our responses to the proposed recommendations in your report on educational support services to children who are blind or visually impaired.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph P. Clary".

Joseph P. Clary  
Director of Legislation, Regulation, and Communications

- c: Larry Alibozek, BESB Executive Director
- Dr. Donna Balaski, BESB Acting Executive Director
- Brian Sigman, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Merrily Moynihan, Legislative Relations

*"Creating Independence and Integration"*

Telephone: 1-860-602-4000 Toll Free: 1-800-842-4510 FAX 1-860-602-4020  
184 Windsor Avenue, Windsor, Connecticut 06095

## **BESB Agency Response to LPR&IC Findings and Recommendations**

1. The program review committee found BESB has the potential to be the supportive state administrative structure and central resource Connecticut needs to provide quality education services for children with vision-related disabilities. To promote leadership for vision education and clarify roles within the system, **the committee recommends the statutes be amended to articulate BESB’s education services mission as follows: the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in collaboration with the state department of education, shall support local school districts in meeting the educational needs of children with vision-related disabilities by providing, within available appropriations, advice, assistance, and resources, including the specialized educational services and materials children require because of their blindness or visual impairment.**

*AGENCY RESPONSE: We are generally supportive of a change in statutory language that clarifies the agency mission in addressing the disability-related needs of children who are blind and visually impaired so that they can meet with educational success. However, BESB’s role as the lead agency in delivering support services and goods to children must remain clear. Accordingly, we request the following language to clarify the agency’s role as the lead agency in this area: The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in collaboration with the state department of education, shall support local school districts in meeting the vision-related needs of children who are blind and visually impaired to promote their educational achievement and success. The Board shall be the lead agency in providing, within available appropriations, advice, assistance, and resources, including the specialized educational services, materials, and equipment that children require because of their blindness or visual impairment.*

2. The committee also concluded removing the term “board of education” from the agency’s title would further clarify its actual role in the education system. When established, BESB was responsible by law for the “care and supervision” of pupils receiving instruction at the residential school for the blind in the state. With the enactment of federal and state special education laws, it no longer has authority over students or educational policies and programs. BESB has evolved to become a service agency for all persons with vision-related disabilities and its title should reflect that role. Since its current name is misleading, **the program review committee recommends the Board of Education and Services for the Blind be renamed Connecticut Services for the Blind. The agency’s current seven-member advisory board should also be renamed Connecticut Services for the Blind Advisory Board.**

*AGENCY RESPONSE: We support a change in the name of the agency, and will forward a proposed new name after full consultation with stakeholders, including agency employees.*

3. The program review committee found there have been occasions where initiatives to improve vision education services have been undertaken by one of the agencies without participation by the other. For example, the education department recently developed and issued a request for proposals from higher education institutions for recruiting and training new teachers of the visually impaired without involving any BESB staff in the process. Similarly, BESB did not consult the education department when it adopted its “Learning Media Assessment (LMA),” a tool teachers of the visually impaired can use to assess which learning media (e.g., regular print, large print, Braille, or auditory) best meets the needs of a student with vision-related disabilities. BESB also adopted its standardized form teachers of the visually impaired can use to track individual student progress in key compensatory skill areas without SDE input. To facilitate collaboration between the agencies in the future, **the program review committee recommends a representative from the special education staff of the state education department, designated by the commissioner of education, be added as an ex officio member to the BESB advisory board.** While the BESB board is only an advisory body, its meetings provide a forum for regularly discussing vision education issues and an opportunity for the two agencies to formally share information.

*AGENCY RESPONSE: We support the recommendation that would add an ex officio representative of SDE to the agency’s Board of Directors.*

4. **The committee also recommends that the Board of Education and Services for the Blind and State Department of Education work together to develop and issue to local districts, policy and best practices guidelines related to education services for children with vision-related disabilities.** Promoting quality education services at the local level requires a strong partnership between the two state agencies. BESB has the

expertise to design and assess educational policies and programs for children who are blind or visually impaired and SDE has the authority to oversee local implementation of educational mandates.

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** We generally support the vision of closer collaboration between the agency and SDE. To clarify BESB's role and responsibility as the lead agency in serving children who are blind or visually impaired, we recommend the following language: The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in consultation with the State Department of Education, shall develop and issue to local school districts policy and best practices guidelines related to educational services and achievement for children with vision-related disabilities.*

5. During the last legislative session, an advisory council on Braille literacy was created to focus attention on issues related to the ability of children who are blind or visually impaired to read and write. The program review committee found the new council, with some modifications of its mandate, can also assist BESB in fulfilling its leadership role for vision education. The advisory council's current duties, while centered on issues of Braille literacy, already encompass broader aspects of educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired, such as caseloads, teacher qualifications, and state funding policies. The review and assessment function the council is intended to perform for Braille services could be expanded to all education services provided to children who are blind or visually impaired. The result would be greater oversight and accountability for the whole system. To accomplish this purpose, **the program review committee recommends the Braille literacy advisory council's responsibilities be amended to include evaluating and reporting on: the array of education services available to children with vision-related disabilities; access to services, materials, equipment and technology; and outcomes of the services provided.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** We support the recommendation to integrate various issues and otherwise expand upon the tasks before the Braille Literacy Advisory Council. To clarify without delineating the Council's role, we recommend the following language: Amend the Braille Literacy Advisory Council's responsibilities to include evaluating and reporting on the educational services and goods available to children with vision-related disabilities.*

**6. The committee also recommends the name of the council be changed to the Advisory Council on Education Services.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** We support a change in the name of the Council to clarify its role. We suggest that the new name might specifically reference "visual impairments" and/or "blindness."*

**7. It is recommended the membership of the council be increased to include a parent of a child who is blind or visually impaired and has additional disabilities and a teacher who specializes in providing vision-related education services to multiply disabled students.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** For clarification, we suggest the following language: ". . . to include a parent of a child who is blind or visually impaired and has additional disabilities and an education consultant employed by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind who specializes in providing vision-related education services to students with multiple disabilities."*

8. The program review committee concluded BESB should continue to offer the services of its vision education professionals to local districts provided the unfairness of the current system is addressed. **To make access to BESB teaching staff equitable, the program review committee recommends the agency provide its teachers to districts on a fee-for-service basis starting in the 2002-03 school year.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** The agency supports the recommendation to provide educational consultants to school districts on a fee-for-service basis.*

9. The committee also found the agency needs to address the lack of access to its teacher services during the summer months, especially for clients of the Birth-to-Three program. At present, all teachers work under contract that is for the period September 1 to June 30. While it is not likely the entire teaching staff is needed all year, some coverage is required for the summer months. Teachers of the visually impaired must be available to conduct timely assessments of all newly referred children and to consult whenever a student's early intervention or special education program needs modification. In addition, the lack of continuous service is a potential federal compliance

issue for BESB's Birth-to-Three program. **The program review committee recommends BESB pursue contract revisions to ensure the availability of teachers of the visually impaired services all 12 months of the year during its next collective bargaining negotiations. It is further recommended the agency make teacher services available year-round for its Birth-to-Three program, through collective bargaining negotiations or other arrangements, before June 30, 2001.**

*AGENCY RESPONSE: The agency currently is working with the relevant collective bargaining group to provide educational consultants during the summer months. To promote the goal of year-round availability of teachers while taking into account issues of funding and contract negotiation, the agency requests the following language: The committee recommends that BESB pursue contract revisions or other arrangements to promote the availability of educational consultants for blind and visually impaired services for children (including those served in the Birth-to-Three program) throughout the year.*

10. **The program review committee recommends the statutes be revised to authorize the agency to provide services from education consultants of the visually impaired on a fee-for-service basis to any school district in state. Legislation should also be enacted to establish a self-sustaining account to receive fees from districts and pay costs related to supplying teacher services.** The committee believes making BESB function more like a regional education service center can correct current inequities and increase the availability of teacher services to all districts. In addition, changing the structure for providing agency services can also free up existing General Fund resources for other agency purposes that support quality education services for children who are blind or visually impaired.

*AGENCY RESPONSE: We support this recommendation, provided that the changes are cost neutral or promote cost savings for the agency.*

11. **The program review committee recommends the state funds formerly allocated for BESB teacher costs be used to augment the agency's centralized resources and support services.**

*AGENCY RESPONSE: If the statutes are amended to establish a fee-for-service approach to service delivery and a self-sustaining account, then the agency would support the use of existing resources, previously made available for educational consultants' salaries, to help fund centralized resources and support services offered to towns under this approach, including additional staffing needs (such as rehabilitation technologists, rehabilitation teachers, mobility instructors, and clerical support). The costs associated with these related services that would be made available to all towns should not rest solely with those towns that choose to hire BESB educational consultants. Accordingly, the agency would have to establish a tiered fee schedule to ensure the equitable apportionment of these costs. For purposes of clarity the agency recommends the following language: State funds formerly allocated for costs associated with agency educational consultants should be used to augment the agency's centralized resources, such as rehabilitation technology and technologists, rehabilitation teaching, mobility instructors, and related clerical support. The agency should establish an equitable, tiered fee schedule for these services to ensure that towns that avail themselves of services from BESB educational consultants do not bear an inequitable share of the cost of providing these support services.*

12. The program review committee found the severe shortage of teachers of the visually impaired in Connecticut and nationwide has strained the resources of BESB's teaching staff and limited student access to instructional services throughout the state. The program review committee concluded these various initiatives, if effectively coordinated, can begin to address the state's teacher shortage problem. The previous committee recommendations to add an education department representative to the BESB board and to expand the role of the advisory council should promote interagency communication and cooperation on this and other vision education issues. **However, it is also recommended SDE officially include BESB education staff in planning, evaluating, and monitoring the activities undertaken through its federal teacher training grant project.**

*AGENCY RESPONSE: The agency enthusiastically supports this recommendation.*

13. **The committee further recommends the department, in consultation with BESB, determine the number of teachers and other personnel, such as orientation and mobility specialists, that are required to meet the education needs of children with vision-related disabilities in Connecticut at present and over the next ten**

**years and report its results to the advisory council by July 1, 2001.** A long-range needs assessment should be the basis for the state's strategies for ensuring children who are blind or visually impaired have ready access to education services. The critical first step for effective planning has been overlooked by both state agencies to date.

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** To clarify BESB's role as the lead agency in this area, and to ensure a complete review and assessment of current and projected needs, the agency recommends the following language: In consultation with the State Department of Education, BESB shall determine the number of teachers and other personnel, such as orientation and mobility specialists and related support staff, who are required to meet the educational needs of children with vision-related disabilities in Connecticut.*

14. The state, through BESB, currently reimburses local school districts for certain special education costs related to serving students with vision disabilities. Towns can receive an annual per-pupil grant capped at \$6,400 for students who are legally blind or visually impaired and \$11,000 for children with vision and other disabilities. Over the past five fiscal years, total state aid provided to towns through BESB averaged about \$7.5 million per year. The program review committee found the present funding mechanism is not only cumbersome but ineffective in supporting the specialized services and materials needed by students who are blind or visually impaired. The program review committee found much of the funding BESB provides to towns appears to subsidize basic special education expenses rather than the specialized instruction or materials required by students with vision-related disabilities. Most agency funding – almost 80 percent during the last school year – offsets either: 1) local expenditures for tuition at out-of-district placements, which primarily serve multiply disabled students; or 2) the salaries of district special classroom teachers and aides who work with students who are blind or visually impaired. A substantial amount of agency funding supports special education services for students whose primary disability is not vision-related.

Based on this finding, the program review committee considered proposing BESB grant resources be added to the appropriation made for state special education grants. In effect, state support to local districts for exceptional special education costs would not change in total although individual towns might get more or less state funding than they did under the separate BESB grant. The program review committee believes dedicated funding can be an effective way to promote the quality and accessibility of education services for children with vision-related disabilities. However, to achieve these goals, major changes to the current funding structure are needed. First, the funding process must be simpler to administer. Second, funding policies must more flexible and directed at the unique education needs of students who are blind or visually impaired.

**Therefore, the program review committee recommends the current statutory provisions on state payment of special education costs for blind or visually impaired children be repealed and replaced with language establishing a grant program for vision-related education services to be administered by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. (a) The grant program shall be funded at an amount equal to \$6,400 times the number of blind and visually impaired children in the state as determined by BESB. (b) BESB shall use the state funding to provide eligible students who are blind or visually impaired with the specialized instructional materials, including Braille and large print books, and adaptive equipment and technology they require to access their education programs. The state shall also annually provide a \$2,000 entitlement to districts for the special education costs of each child who is blind or visually impaired. (c) The remaining balance of grant funding shall be used to provide supplemental funding to reimburse local school districts on a proportional basis for the costs of consultation and instructional services provided by teachers of the visually impaired and other services related to providing expanded core curriculum for blind or visually impaired students including but not limited to orientation and mobility training and independent living skills. Only districts that have expended an amount greater than the total amount of entitlement funding received on educational services required for vision-related disabilities shall be eligible to apply for supplemental funding. (d) The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in consultation with the State Department of Education, shall develop a proposed statutory funding formula for the grant program and a description of all expenses eligible for funding to present to the legislature for its consideration by January 1, 2002. The new grant program for vision education should go into effect by January 1, 2003.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** This recommendation and our response constitute the most significant and important components of the committee's report. The agency supports section (a) and part of section (b) of this recommendation. Regarding section (b), the agency stresses the following: If both the General Assembly and the Administration desire to create an "entitlement" grant to towns for every child who is legally blind or visually*

*impaired, BESB would support this approach provided that the final appropriation and/or allocation was above and beyond the funding level required by section (a). Under the number of children currently registered with BESB, this would represent an appropriation/allocation of approximately \$2.4 million per year. BESB would be unable to address the children's needs for services and goods if funding under section (a) was diverted to cover this new provision. Regarding the creation of a formula to distribute remaining funds to the towns, BESB supports an approach whereby BESB would develop the formula with consultation from SDE. Our goal would be to use remaining funds to offset the fees paid by the towns under the fee-for-service approach, so that towns would receive credits as is appropriate.*

15. How well the current system for serving students with vision-related disabilities achieves education goals is unknown at this time. Neither BESB nor the state education department track educational outcomes for this population. The program review committee found no data are compiled on drop-out rates, post-graduation employment rates, or literacy rates among students with vision-related disabilities. While a number of students who are blind or visually impaired participate in statewide standardized testing (the Connecticut Mastery Tests and the Connecticut Academic Achievement Test), results have not been reviewed and compared with other groups or state goals. **The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education, in consultation with the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, establish, monitor, and report on outcome measures for educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Monitoring results should be included as part of the department's annual report on special education beginning in 2002.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** The agency affirms the needs for effective benchmarks and performance measures on a statewide level. At the same time, the agency stresses that services to blind or visually impaired children were provided in Connecticut long before the creation of Special Education. While there is sometimes overlap between Special Ed and services for the blind, they are, for the most part, two very distinct and separate approaches, particularly because of the exceptional needs of children who are blind or visually impaired. The agency expresses deep concern that services for the blind would become enmeshed with or subsumed by Special Education. The agency further expresses a concern that the agencies' shared role and the agencies' distinct and separate leadership roles must remain clear. The agency recommends the following language: The State Department of Education, in collaboration with the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, shall establish, monitor, and report on outcome measures for the academic achievement of children who are blind or visually impaired. Monitoring results should be included in a distinct annual report produced by SDE on an annual basis.*

16. For the first time in many years, BESB is engaged in an agency-wide planning effort. With the assistance of the Department of Administrative Services, it is developing a strategic plan for integrating and enhancing its continuum of services for all clients, including children. The process is in the initial stages and no firm schedule or methodology has been adopted. A comprehensive blueprint for carrying out the agency's education mission is critical to quality services, particularly if BESB is made the lead advocate and central resource for vision education as recommended previously. **The program review committee recommends the portion of the agency's strategic plan concerning education services for children who are blind or visually impaired be completed by July 1, 2001, and be updated annually. The strategic plan should incorporate and specifically address the outcome measures developed under the prior recommendation.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** The agency supports the goals reflected in this recommendation, with two caveats. First, the agency is striving for greater integration of all of its services. Accordingly, education services for children cannot be simply separated from the rest of the agency in the strategic planning process. Second, the agency's outcome measures for its services to children will not necessarily be limited to those produced with SDE.*

17. To facilitate discussion and broad participation during the initial planning process, **the program review committee recommends BESB, with the assistance of the State Department of Education, arrange for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) to conduct one of its training seminars on improving educational services for the sensory impaired in Connecticut.**

***AGENCY RESPONSE:** We support the recommendation for an in-service training seminar on sensory impairments, and will work toward hosting such an event prior to June 30, 2002.*



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



February 2, 2001

Mr. Michael L. Nauer, Director  
Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee  
State Office Building  
Room 506  
Hartford, Connecticut 06106-1591

Dear Director Nauer:

The attached represents the State Department of Education's response to your committee's report, *Educational Services for Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired*.

The Department is in general agreement with a majority of the report and its recommendations and believes that a number of issues could be dealt with and accomplished without statutory changes. Our comments and concerns about specific recommendations are indicated on the attached pages.

If you have further questions, please contact Mr. George Dowaliby, Chief of the Bureau of Special Education and Pupil Services, at (860) 807-2025.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Theodore S. Sergi".

Theodore S. Sergi  
Commissioner of Education

TSS/gd  
Enclosure

Connecticut State Department of Education

*Response to Educational Services for Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired*

**The committee recommends the statutes be amended to articulate BESB's education services mission as follows: the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in collaboration with the State Department of Education, shall support local school districts in meeting the educational needs of children with vision-related disabilities by providing, within available appropriations, advice, assistance, and resources, including the specialized educational services and materials children require because of their blindness or visual impairment.**

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), local school districts are responsible for the provision of all services indicated on an Individual Educational Program (IEP) for students eligible for special education. The State Department of Education (SDE) provides and will continue to provide technical assistance to districts, but does not assume responsibility for provision of services, materials and other resources related to individual student needs. Districts receive IDEA and state funds to help support their efforts.

**The program review committee recommends a representative from the special education staff of the State Department of Education, designated by the Commissioner of Education, be added as an ex officio member to the BESB advisory board.**

The SDE has worked closely with BESB for several years and anticipates continuing to do so in the future as it relates to children with vision-related disabilities. The SDE believes that this relationship does not need to be formalized in statute.

**The committee also recommends that the Board of Education and Services for the Blind and State Department of Education work together to develop and issue to local districts, policy and best practices guidelines related to education services for children with vision-related disabilities.**

The SDE agrees with the need to disseminate the document from the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (1999) that details guidelines and best practices.

**The program review committee recommends the Braille literacy advisory council's responsibilities be amended to include evaluating and reporting on: the array of education services available to children with vision-related disabilities; access to services, materials, equipment and technology; and outcomes of the services provided.**

**The program review committee recommends the State Department of Education, in consultation with the Board of Education and Services for the Blind, establish, monitor, and report on outcome measures for educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired. Monitoring results should be included as part of the department's annual report on special education beginning in 2002.**

The SDE currently reports on various outcome measures for students with disabilities who are eligible for special education in conjunction with requirements from the U.S. D.O.E. The SDE does not support reporting to the level of detail recommended.

Also, it is not appropriate for this council to have evaluative functions that deal with individual student outcomes. It may be more appropriate for this council, much like the State Advisory Council for Special Education, to advise the SDE and BESB on unmet needs for children with visual impairments.

**The program review committee recommends the agency provide its teachers to districts on a fee-for-service basis starting in the 2002-03 school year.**

**The program review committee recommends the statutes be revised to authorize the agency to provide teachers of the visually impaired services on a fee-for-service basis to any school district in state. Legislation should also be enacted to establish a self-sustaining account to receive fees from districts and pay costs related to supplying teacher services.**

More information is needed before the SDE can comment on this recommendation. What will the fee structure be? Will it be subsidized or competitive with other vendors? How will it be determined which districts will receive services under this recommendation? Though this change may result in a possible increase in staff resources available in the future (through supply and demand), there will continue to be finite resources for the immediate future.

**The committee further recommends the State Department of Education, in consultation with BESB, determine the number of teachers and other personnel, such as orientation and mobility specialists, that are required to meet the education needs of children with vision-related disabilities in Connecticut at present and over the next ten years and report its results to the advisory council by July 1, 2001.**

Though there is no objection, in general, to this recommendation, the timeline may be unrealistic dependent upon the timing of the approval of this recommendation. The purpose of this activity needs to be clarified.

**The program review committee recommends the current statutory provisions on state payment of special education costs for blind or visually impaired children be repealed and replaced with language establishing a grant program for vision-related education services to be administered by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. The grant program shall be funded at an amount equal to \$6,400 times the number of blind and visually impaired children in the state as determined by BESB.**

**BESB shall use the state funding to provide eligible students who are blind or visually impaired with the specialized instructional materials, including Braille and large print books, and adaptive equipment and technology they require to access their education programs. The state shall also annually provide a \$2,000 entitlement to districts for the special education costs of each child who is blind or visually impaired.**

**The remaining balance of grant funding shall be used to provide supplemental funding to reimburse local school districts on a proportional basis for the costs of consultation and instructional services provided by teachers of the visually impaired and other services related to providing expanded core curriculum for blind or visually impaired students including but not limited to orientation and mobility training and independent living skills. Only districts that have expended an amount greater than the total amount of entitlement funding received on educational services required for vision-related disabilities shall be eligible to apply for supplemental funding.**

**The Board of Education and Services for the Blind, in consultation with the State Department of Education, shall develop a proposed statutory funding formula for the grant program and a description of all expenses eligible for funding to present to the legislature for its consideration by January 1, 2002. The new grant program for vision education should go into effect by January 1, 2003.**

Further study is required. Currently there is no other disability-specific reimbursement formula.

## APPENDIX B

### Major Federal Special Education Provisions

Under federal legislation enacted in 1975 and amended in 1990 and 1997, children with disabilities between the ages of three and 21 have the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.<sup>1</sup> Free and appropriate public education (FAPE) has been interpreted to mean special education and related services designed to meet the unique needs of disabled students and prepare them for employment and independent living.

There are 13 categories of disabilities defined in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that establish eligibility for services. They are:

- autism;
- deaf-blindness;
- hearing impairment;
- mental retardation;
- multiple disabilities;
- orthopedic impairment;
- other health impairment;
- serious emotional disturbance;
- specific learning disability;
- speech or language impairment;
- traumatic brain injury; and
- visual impairment.

To be eligible for services, a student must have one or more of the listed disabilities and that disability must adversely affect the child's educational performance, resulting in the need for special education and related services.

Related services include transportation and developmental, corrective and supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education. Examples include: speech and language, audiology, psychological, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, orientation and mobility, social work, counseling, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes.

#### **Individualized Education Program -- IEP**

Each child diagnosed with a disability and who qualifies for special education and related services must have a current Individual Education Program (IEP) in place at the beginning of

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<sup>1</sup> The original legislation, Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was renamed The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990. Congress initially committed federal funds for up to 40 percent of the additional costs related to special education but has never provided more than 11 percent. Federal funding currently accounts for about 9 percent of special education spending in Connecticut.

each school year. The IEP specifies in writing the services to be provided and includes statements regarding the following areas:

- present levels of educational performance and how the child's disability affects involvement and progress in general curriculum;
- measurable annual goals, including benchmarks to meet child's educational needs to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum;
- special education, related services, supplementary aids and services to be provided;
- program modifications or personnel support that will be provided;
- individual modifications of administration of assessments and, if necessary, why regular assessment is not appropriate and how child will be assessed through alternatives (and whether child will be involved in state testing, such as the CMTs and CAPTs Connecticut).

The IEP also must indicate in writing how supplementary aids, services, program modifications, and support personnel will help the child:

- advance appropriately toward annual goals;
- be involved in and progress in general curriculum;
- participate in extracurricular and non-academic activities; and
- be educated and participate in activities with other children with disabilities and with non-disabled children.

The IEP must be accessible to the child's regular education teacher, special education teacher, related service provider(s), and other service providers responsible for implementation. Each teacher and provider described in the IEP must be informed of his or her specific responsibilities related to implementation and the specific accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided. The IEP must also include:

- an explanation of the extent to which, if any, child will not participate with non-disabled children in the regular class;
- how the child's progress toward annual goals will be measured and how the parents will be informed; and
- transitional services to be provided beginning at age 14.

An Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), a written plan for providing early intervention services, may serve as IEP for child aged 3 through 5 if: it is developed in accordance with IDEA requirements; is permitted by state law; and both the school district and child's parents agree.

### **IEP Team (Formerly the Planning and Placement Team, PPT)**

A child's IEP must be developed by team of individuals that includes:

- the parents of disabled child

- an individual who can interpret instructional implications of evaluation results;
- at least one of the child's regular classroom teachers;
- at least one of the child's special education teacher (or if appropriate one special education provider);
- other individuals with knowledge or special expertise about the child including related service personnel at the parent's discretion;
- a representative of the district qualified to provide or supervise specially designed instruction, knowledgeable about the general curriculum and availability of local resources; and
- the disabled child when appropriate.

Under new rules established by the 1997 amendments to IDEA, the IEP team must consider the following:

- the strengths of the child and the concerns of the parents for enhancing child's education as well as evaluation results;
- special factors pertaining to behavior problems, limited English language proficiency, children who are blind or visually impaired, communication needs and assistive technology.

### **Review and Modification**

Each IEP must be reviewed at least annually to determine if annual goals are being achieved. If either the child's parent or the school district believes components of an IEP should be changed, a team meeting must be conducted. An IEP is to be revised as appropriate to address:

- any lack of expected progress toward annual goals;
- any lack of expected progress in general curriculum;
- results of any re-evaluations;
- information about child provided by parent; and
- transition objectives.

### **Parental Rights**

Parental consent must be obtained before an initial evaluation can take place to determine if a child has a disability and how the child's educational needs will be met. It is also required for any re-evaluation. Parents have the right to obtain an independent educational evaluation at public expense. Parental consent is required for initial placement of a child into special education services or a private placement.

Parents are members of the IEP team and have the right to request a team meeting at any time. Parent must be informed of their child's progress at least as often as parents of non-disabled children. Parents have the right to:

- examine all records pertaining to their child;

- prior written notice whenever a district proposes or refuses to initiate or change an identification, evaluation, educational placement, or provision of FAPE;
- an opportunity for mediation to resolve certain disputes;
- an opportunity to present complaints in certain matters (and states must develop a model form to assist parents in filing a complaint); and
- due process hearings and appeal processes for complaints and regarding the determination that a child's behavior was not a manifestation of the child's disability.

Prior written notice must include:

- a description of the action proposed or refused by the district;
- an explanation why the action is proposed or refused;
- a description of other options considered and why they were rejected
- a description of each evaluation procedure, test, record, or report used in the district's decision;
- a description of any other factors relevant to the district's decision;
- a statement of the parent's procedural safeguards and the means for obtaining them; and
- sources for the parents to contact for assistance in understanding their rights.

Parents cannot transfer children to private schools without giving districts the opportunity to match the service. Disagreements over the availability of an appropriate program and financial responsibility questions are subject to due process procedures.

## **BRAILLE**

### **What is Braille?**

Braille is a series of raised dots which can be read with the fingers by people who are blind or whose eyesight is not sufficient for reading printed material. Teachers, parents and others who are not visually impaired ordinarily read braille with their eyes. Braille is not a language. Rather, it is a code by which languages such as English or Spanish may be written and read.

### **What Does Braille Look Like?**

Braille symbols are formed within units of space known as braille cells. A full braille cell consists of six raised dots arranged in two parallel rows each having three dots. The dot positions are identified by numbers from one through six. Sixty-four combinations are possible using one or more of these six dots. A single cell can be used to represent an alphabet letter, number, punctuation mark or even a whole word.

### **How Was Braille Invented?**

Louis Braille was born in Coupvray, France on January 4, 1809. He attended the National Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, France as a student. While attending the Institute, Braille yearned for more books to read. He experimented with ways to make an alphabet that was easy to read with the fingertips. The writing system he invented, at age fifteen, evolved from the tactile "Ecriture Nocturne" (night writing) code invented by Charles Barbier for sending military messages that could be read on the battlefield at night, without light.

### **How is Braille Written?**

When every letter of every word is expressed in braille, it is referred to as grade one braille. Very few books or other reading material are transcribed in grade one braille. However, many newly blinded adults find this useful for labeling personal or kitchen items.

The system used for reproducing most textbooks and publications is known as grade two braille. In this system cells are used individually or in combination with others to form a variety of contractions or whole words. For example, in grade one braille the phrase "you like him" requires twelve cell spaces. If written in grade two braille, this same phrase would take only six cell spaces to write. This is because the letters Y and L are also used for the whole words "you" and "like" respectively. Likewise, the word "him" is formed by combining the letters H and M. There are 189 different letter contractions and 76 short form words used in grade two braille. These "short cuts" are used to reduce the volume of paper needed for reproducing books in braille and to make the reading process easier. Just as printed matter can be produced with a paper and pencil, typewriter or printer, braille can also be written in several ways. The braille equivalent of paper and pencil is the slate and stylus. This consists of a slate or template with evenly spaced depressions for the dots of braille cells, and a stylus

for creating the individual braille dots. With paper placed in the slate, tactile dots are made by pushing the pointed end of the stylus into the paper over the depressions. The paper bulges on its reverse side forming "dots". Because of their portability, the slate and stylus are especially helpful for taking notes during lectures and for labeling such things as file folders.

Braille is also produced by a machine known as a braille writer. Unlike a typewriter which has more than fifty keys, the braille writer has only six keys and a space bar. These keys are numbered to correspond with the six dots of a braille cell. In that most braille symbols contain more than a single dot, all or any of the braille writer keys can be pushed at the same time.

Technological developments in the computer industry have provided and continue to expand additional avenues of literacy for braille users. Software programs and portable electronic braille notetakers allow users to save and edit their writing, have it displayed back to them either verbally or tactually and produce a hard copy via a desktop computer-driven braille embosser.

Since its development in France by Louis Braille in the latter part of the 19th century, braille has become not only an effective means of communication, but also a proven avenue for achieving and enhancing literacy for people who are blind or have significant vision loss.

In keeping with AFB's mission to achieve equality of access to information for people who are blind or visually impaired, this document is available, upon request, in one or more of the following formats: electronic file, braille, large print, and audio recording.

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## **Braille Technology**

**Prepared by: AFB National Technology Program**

**Updated: February 2000**

Blind or visually impaired people who read braille can use the following specialized equipment:

- braille display technology that provides access to the information on a computer screen in braille;
- braille printers that provide hard copy information from computer devices; and
- electronic braille notetakers that provide a powerful alternative to mechanical notetakers such as the Perkins Braille or slate and stylus.

### **Braille Displays**

These devices operate by raising and lowering different combinations of pins electronically to produce in braille what appears on a portion of the computer screen. They show up to 80 characters from the screen and are refreshable, that is, they change continuously as the user moves around on the screen. The braille display sits on the user's desk, often underneath the computer keyboard. The advantage of the braille display in comparison to synthetic speech is in its direct access to information, the ability to check format, spacing, and spelling, and the fact that it is quiet. The cost of braille displays is in the \$3,500 to \$15,000 price range, depending on the number of characters displayed.

## **Braille Printers**

After being sent information to be brailled from computer devices, braille printers do the actual embossing of braille onto paper. They are the braille counterparts to ink printers, but they differ in that they use solenoids to control embossing pins, typically print on heavyweight paper, require more pages than print, and they are much slower and noisier. Interpoint printers emboss braille on both sides of the page. The price of a braille printer is directly related to the volume of braille production required -- between \$1,800 and \$5,000 for smaller volume production and between \$10,000 and \$80,000 for larger volume production.

The first step in converting a computer file into a braille document is to choose the type of braille. Computer braille is a one-to-one representation of what appears on the screen. Grade 1 braille consists of letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, and grade 2 braille includes contractions of common combinations of letters and words. To print grade 2 braille requires the use of a braille translation program that takes the computer text file, inserts the proper contractions, and formats the document properly for the braille page. The cost of braille translation programs is between \$200 and \$500, depending on the sophistication of the program.

## **Electronic Braille Notetakers**

Electronic braille notetakers are small, portable devices with braille keyboards for entering information. They use a speech synthesizer or braille display for output. The user enters the information on the braille keyboard and has the option of transferring it to a larger computer with more memory, reviewing it using the built-in speech synthesizer or braille display, or printing it on a braille or inkprint printer. The cost of a basic electronic braille notetaker is between \$1,000 and \$3,000, with the option of products containing more sophisticated features that can cost up to \$15,000.

## **Appendix C**

### **Overview of Braille**

## **BRAILLE**

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for creating the individual braille dots. With paper placed in the slate, tactile dots are made by pushing the pointed end of the stylus into the paper over the depressions. The paper bulges on its reverse side forming "dots". Because of their portability, the slate and stylus are especially helpful for taking notes during lectures and for labeling such things as file folders.

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Since its development in France by Louis Braille in the latter part of the 19th century, braille has become not only an effective means of communication, but also a proven avenue for achieving and enhancing literacy for people who are blind or have significant vision loss.

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## **Braille Printers**

After being sent information to be brailled from computer devices, braille printers do the actual embossing of braille onto paper. They are the braille counterparts to ink printers, but they differ in that they use solenoids to control embossing pins, typically print on heavyweight paper, require more pages than print, and they are much slower and noisier. Interpoint printers emboss braille on both sides of the page. The price of a braille printer is directly related to the volume of braille production required -- between \$1,800 and \$5,000 for smaller volume production and between \$10,000 and \$80,000 for larger volume production.

The first step in converting a computer file into a braille document is to choose the type of braille. Computer braille is a one-to-one representation of what appears on the screen. Grade 1 braille consists of letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, and grade 2 braille includes contractions of common combinations of letters and words. To print grade 2 braille requires the use of a braille translation program that takes the computer text file, inserts the proper contractions, and formats the document properly for the braille page. The cost of braille translation programs is between \$200 and \$500, depending on the sophistication of the program.

## **Electronic Braille Notetakers**

Electronic braille notetakers are small, portable devices with braille keyboards for entering information. They use a speech synthesizer or braille display for output. The user enters the information on the braille keyboard and has the option of transferring it to a larger computer with more memory, reviewing it using the built-in speech synthesizer or braille display, or printing it on a braille or inkprint printer. The cost of a basic electronic braille notetaker is between \$1,000 and \$3,000, with the option of products containing more sophisticated features that can cost up to \$15,000.

## APPENDIX D

### **LPR&IC Survey of Special Education Directors Regarding Educational Services for Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired**

Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee staff developed and administered a written questionnaire for special education directors to gather their opinions about the quality and efficiency of educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired. Surveys were sent in September 2000 to 166 directors of special education for local and regional school districts throughout the state as well as the six regional education service centers.

A total of 84 completed surveys (51 percent response rate) were returned and analyzed. (An additional 15 surveys were received too late to include in the analysis but responses, which generally paralleled those of the earlier group, were reviewed by committee staff.) A copy of the survey instrument, with the responses summarized for each question, is included at the end of this appendix. The major results of the survey are highlighted below.

The directors who participated in the survey represented school districts of varying sizes and from all areas of the state. Districts were almost evenly divided between those served by teachers of the visually impaired supplied by the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (45 percent) and those who arrange for vision-related teaching services on their own (55 percent).

Directors were asked about their district's experiences obtaining the services of certified teachers of the visually impaired over the past five years. Almost two-thirds of those responding to the question had tried to obtain specialized teachers for students with vision-related disabilities during that period. Half of those respondents reported it was difficult or very difficult to do so, providing evidence of the shortage of certified teachers of the visually impaired in the state.

The special education directors were asked to rate BESB's overall performance of eleven functions related to educational services for children who are blind or visually impaired. Overall, responses were mixed, with agency performance most frequently rated as adequate (i.e., some improvement needed but performance is generally acceptable) in most areas. BESB received its most positive ratings in the areas of providing assistance in obtaining adapted instructional materials and for the services provided by its teachers (e.g., direct instruction, consultation on methods and modifications, and collaboration in the IEP process). The most negative ratings were given in the areas of developing enrichment activities, providing leadership on vision education issues, and processing reimbursement requests from districts.

When asked about their priorities for state funding for vision-related special education services, the overwhelming majority of the special education directors ranked the services of teachers of the visually impaired as the highest priority. Textbooks and other instructional materials, assistive technology, and paraprofessional services were also high priorities for state financial assistance in the opinions of the directors.

The special education directors were also asked about several options regarding BESB teacher services. The majority (58 percent) of the 76 respondents who answered the question favored retaining the current system where the state provides teachers at no charge to some districts. (Not surprisingly, most of the directors who support the current system -- 83 percent -- were from districts that receive free BESB teacher services now.) However, over one-third (37 percent) supported going to a fee-for-service system for all districts and the remainder (5 percent) would prefer BESB have no role in providing teachers of the visually impaired to school districts.

Many of the survey respondents added comments about the options they favored and about the system in general. Inequities in the way BESB teachers are assigned to school districts was the most frequently cited concern; it was noted as a problem by directors from districts that benefit from the current system as well as those that do not receive free teacher services. The most common subject for complaints was the agency's reimbursement process, with many directors noting burdensome paperwork requirements, inconsistent procedures, and payment delays.

**LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM REVIEW & INVESTIGATIONS COMMITTEE:  
SURVEY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS (SEPTEMBER 2000)**

1. Are any blind or visually impaired students in your district currently receiving any materials, direct instruction, or any other services from the state Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)? **(N =84)**

**89% YES** (how many students? **range: 1- 61** )      **11% NO**

a) IF NO, when was the last time BESB provided services to blind or visually impaired students in your district?  
School Year \_\_\_\_\_ (how many students? \_\_\_\_\_)

***If you have not had a student who is blind or visually impaired in your district education system since school year 1994-95, please skip to question 6 on the back of this page.***

2. Does BESB provide the services of a teacher of the visually impaired to instruct school-age students in your district?

**(N=80) 45% YES 55% NO**

a) IF NO, what is the current arrangement for such teacher services in your district? **(N=34)**

**7** employ own teacher(s) of the visually impaired      **13** arrange for teacher services from a RESC

**14** other (explain e.g., share with another district, combination of arrangements, etc.)

3. Overall, how satisfied are you with the quality of specialized teaching services provided to students who are blind or visually impaired in your district? **(N=75) 37% Very Satisfied 43% Satisfied 15% Dissatisfied 5% Very Dissatisfied**

a) If you are not satisfied, what is the main reason for your dissatisfaction? **(N=13)**

**1** teacher of the visually impaired lacks necessary skills and training

**6** hours of service teacher of the visually impaired is able to provide are insufficient

**6** other (describe: e.g., unskilled and insufficient time )

4. In the past five years, how difficult has it been for your district to obtain the services of certified teachers of the visually impaired for your blind or visually impaired students? **(N=76)**

**20% Very Difficult 10% Difficult 34% Not Difficult 36% Not Applicable** (Have not needed to obtain services)

5. How would you rate BESB's overall performance in each of the areas listed below, using a scale of "Excellent" (little or no improvement needed), "Adequate" (some improvement needed but performance is generally acceptable) or "Poor" (major improvement needed). If you are not familiar with BESB's performance in an area, you can circle "No Opinion."

	Excellent	Adequate	Poor	No Opinion
a) direct instruction of students who are blind or visually impaired <b>(N=76)</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>41%</b>
b) consultation with teachers and other education professionals on methods and modifications related to visual impairment <b>(N=78)</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>10%</b>
c) collaboration in the IEP process for students with vision-related disabilities <b>(N=76)</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>12%</b>
d) assistance obtaining adapted instructional materials (Braille or large print textbooks, vision-related supplies, etc.) <b>(N=77)</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>9%</b>
e) advice on assistive technology including computer equipment for students with vision-related disabilities <b>(N=77)</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>13%</b>
f) processing reimbursement requests from districts for special education costs related to children who are blind or visually impaired <b>(N=78)</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>18%</b>
g) professional development opportunities related to education of students who are blind or visually impaired <b>(N=78)</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>13%</b>
h) public information on educational needs of children with visual impairment and what resources are available <b>(N=78)</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>22%</b>
i) leadership on issues related to educational services for children with vision-related disabilities <b>(N=78)</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>26%</b>
j) developing enrichment activities for students with vision-related disabilities <b>(N=77)</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>34%</b>
k) assisting students with the transition from school to work <b>(N=78)</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>54%</b>

*Please Continue on Back*

6. In your opinion, what should be the priorities for state funding provided to districts through BESB for special education and related services for students who are blind or visually impaired? Please rank the following items, with number 1 being your highest priority. If an item you believe should be a priority is not listed, add it in the space(s) provided below for "other."

**Number = number of respondents who ranked item as 1, highest priority**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>7</b> a) textbooks & other instructional materials          | <b>7</b> e) assistive technology including computers            |
| <b>45</b> b) teacher of the visually impaired services         | <b>3</b> f) orientation and mobility training                   |
| <b>7</b> c) paraprofessional services                          | <b>3</b> g) daily living skills training                        |
| <b>9</b> d) tuition at a special facility or program           | <b>1</b> h) extracurricular activities to develop social skills |
| <b>2</b> i) other (describe: <b>all are highest priority</b> ) | j) other (describe _____)                                       |

7. Which one of the following options do you favor regarding BESB teacher services: **(N=76)**

**58%** Current system (BESB provides the services of its teachers of the visually impaired at no cost to some districts)

**37%** BESB would provide teachers of the visually impaired to any district in the state on a fee-for-services basis

**5%** BESB would have no role in providing districts with services of teachers of the visually impaired

a) Please explain why you favor this option \_\_\_\_\_

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8. If you have any other comments or specific suggestions about how to improve the quality and efficiency of educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired, please include them below or in an attachment.

*Thank you for your cooperation.*

*Please return your completed survey **by October 15, 2000**, in the enclosed envelope.*