



**LEGISLATION TO
EXCLUDE TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS (TVI'S)
FROM
CERTIFICATION BASED ONLY ON EXAMINATION**

Problem:

- The *Texas Supplemental Certification in Visual Impairment (VI)* can be obtained without appropriate training, if a teacher can pass the two relatively easy required state certification tests.
- Unlike most subject content areas, insufficiently trained teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) can cause life-long physical, social, and intellectual harm to children whose safety and education are already at risk due to their visual impairment.
- TVIs do not have textbooks, curricula, knowledgeable supervisors, etc., to support their unique consultative and instructional roles. They must have a strong basic foundation based on coursework, field experience and internships.

Solution:

- Pass legislation to require TVIs to complete all of the SBEC-approved programs before taking the TExES in Visual Impairment and before becoming certified.
- Prevent teachers of students with visual impairments from being certified simply by passing the required exams.

Current Requirements:

- Currently, in Texas, teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) are able to obtain the *Supplemental Visual Impairment Certification* through one of two routes:
 - complete an approved university preparation program or an approved alternative certification program and pass two TExES exams: Braille and Visual Impairment; or,
 - bypass any or all of the essential coursework and just pass the two TExES exams.
- If they are able to pass these minimal level exams, they can become fully-certified TVIs—with no indication of the route on the certification.

The Role of a TVI: Assessment, Instruction, Consultation

- TVIs provide instructional and consultative services to infants, children, and young adults with visual impairments who must develop a myriad of unique skills to compensate for their visual loss to be safe, independent, and educationally successful.
- Students on a TVI's caseload can range from birth to 22 years of age; with tremendous variations of visual loss and etiologies; with or without any combination of other disabilities, including deafblindness; and a full range of cognitive abilities and disabilities.
- TVIs provide specialized instruction such as Braille reading and writing, Nemeth math code, use of low vision devices, basic orientation and mobility (getting around in the environment), complex assistive technology, social skills, daily living skills, tactile learning, concept development, etc.

- Competent TVIs must modify the school environment to reduce physical dangers and increase opportunities for independence.
- TVIs consult with regular and other special educators who are the primary classroom teachers for students with visual impairments. These professionals depend on the TVI's guidance to adapt their visually-based teaching strategies to ones that will have meaning when vision is limited or absent.
- The TVI ensures that specially adapted materials, such as braille or large print will be available.
- TVIs provide training and supervision to braille transcribers and other paraprofessionals.
- The special education evaluation teams rely on the expertise of the TVI for guidance in their assessment methods and tools to ensure the results are unbiased and non-discriminatory.
- Without this input, inappropriate evaluations result, often with a life-long negative impact.
- The TVI also conducts specific evaluations required by law: a functional vision evaluation to determine how a student does and could use his vision; a learning media assessment to determine if he will need braille, large print, assistive technology, etc., for literacy and access; and evaluation of the expanded core curriculum—those specialized skill areas unique to visual impairment.
- A proficient TVI is the child's bridge between a bright future and no future.

TVI Teacher Preparation

- The State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC) has approved eight entry level standards with 79 knowledges and 79 applications which are not duplicated in any other teacher certification. <http://www.sbec.state.tx.us/SBECOnline/standtest/standards/vibraise.pdf> An entry level TVI must be able to apply these to an incredibly diverse population of students.
- TVIs need extensive formal training by experts in the field—beyond their initial teaching certificate—to gain just a minimal level of skills sufficient to begin to serve this diverse group of children without causing harm.
- Texas Tech University, Stephen F. Austin University, and the Region II Education Service Center Alternative Certification Program address these entry-level competencies through rigorous coursework, field experiences, and internships, designed to provide the foundation and specialized knowledge base for a life-long professional journey towards expertise.
- The current option of certification-based-on-examination circumvents this essential professional development path, leaving children already vulnerable because of their limited vision, even more at-risk.
- Passing the required Visually Impaired TExES exam and the Braille TExES exam indicates that a teacher has some knowledge of a tiny sample of the approved standards (or that the person guesses well on tests!) Successful completion of approved coursework that addresses all of the standards in depth PLUS passing the two required TExES exams are much better indicators of entry-level success.

Consequences of Insufficient Certification Requirements

- A real danger of a system that may inadvertently perpetuate unprepared TVIs is that their incompetence may go unrecognized.
- Because supervisors and administrators seldom have experience with this population, they may be unable to recognize inappropriate or harmful services.
- A recent survey of supervisors of TVIs indicated that 24% of the supervisors did not even know how the TVIs they supervised became certified, and 84% were not trained in the area of visual impairment themselves.
- Because of the low incidence of blindness, children and their teachers are typically isolated geographically from other TVIs, precluding on-the-job mentoring and quick correction of errors.
- Life-altering decisions can be made by an unknowledgeable TVI, such as deciding not to introduce a student to Braille as his literacy medium when he really needs it, resulting in poor literacy skills for a lifetime.
- Inappropriate decisions about orientation and mobility can be life-threatening!
- A single TVI, who, because of inadequate training, has limited knowledge of the full spectrum of possibilities and resources may send many children, their families, and entire school districts on a downward spiral of low

expectations and minimal services, resulting in poor educational performance and the need for adult services, at additional taxpayer expense, after graduation.

- Districts who hire insufficiently trained TVIs are vulnerable under the IDEA, ADA, and Section 504.

Impact on Teacher Shortage

- Eliminating the certification by exam option for the VI Supplemental Certification will not significantly impact the teacher shortage problem in the state. It *will* ensure a higher standard of quality, and greater retention.
- Districts may hire a TVI under a Probationary Certification through SBEC in order to fill an open position. This requires the teacher to take two specified vision courses and be enrolled in a third course. The probationary TVI commits to completing the rest of their coursework through an agreement between the school district and the university and are assigned a mentor from the Statewide Mentor Program at TSBVI which partners with the university programs to ensure that they have the necessary support as they complete their coursework and their internship/practicum experience while already being on the job.
- Jobs are being filled successfully by this probationary system throughout the state. All VI courses are available via distance education to meet the needs of the geographically diverse TVI certification students.
- Research repeatedly confirms that unprepared teachers leave the field earlier. Requiring sufficient training will lead to higher retention rates, *thereby reducing TVI teacher shortages*. Today, most TVIs-in-training are in a probationary on-the-job training status—and most receive federal or state financial support for tuition.
- A requirement to complete programs maximizes our tax dollars by reducing the need for ESCs to bail out unprepared teachers, and duplicate the universities' teacher prep mission. It creates little hardship for the teacher beyond the personal commitment to spend time on coursework.

Data and Survey Results

- A review of the Texas Tech University program indicates that from 2002-2007, of the 174 teachers who started the TVI program, 25 (14%) obtained the supplemental certification by exam without completing the coursework. (Accurate data on this population is not available from SBEC.)
- A survey of the regional education service centers (ESCs) asked about the success of those TVIs who were certified via the examination-only route. A sample of responses included the following: "The person had no knowledge; the ESC is always trying to clean up his mistakes." "We had several, and they were unprepared in basic ways." "Of two, one has no info, needs LOTS of help, but at least asks for help. The other presumes that coursework isn't needed but really doesn't know what he's doing." "Because they do not know what they do not know, they are led by administrators to dilute the process, to shortcut the assessments, to deny services to students. Administrators, I hope, are not doing this knowingly, or maliciously, but out of ignorance." Excessive support by ESCs is an inappropriate use of their limited resources targeted for children with visual impairments.
- Of the 46 states that responded to a national survey of TVI certification requirements, 80% require testing plus completion of approved coursework or just completion of approved coursework. Only two other states besides Texas were found to allow certification by examination only for this specialized field: Mississippi and Oklahoma.

Recommendation:

- Legislation is being proposed to require all Texas teachers of students with visual impairments to (1) complete all SBEC/SBOE approved coursework and (2) pass the two state exams in Braille and Visual Impairment. This legislation will increase the likelihood that the children who are blind or have low vision in Texas will have a highly prepared and truly qualified teacher to serve them.
- Protect the children of Texas who are blind and visually impaired by raising the standard for Texas.

The Alliance of and for Visually Impaired Texans (AVIT) is a non-profit coalition of 26 member organizations committed to speak on behalf of children and adults with visual impairments. We include organizations of parents, consumers, educators, medical professionals, and other service providers.

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Relevant Citations:

TEC § 21.056. Additional Certification

*The board by rule shall provide for a certified educator to qualify for additional certification to teach at a **grade level or in a subject area** not covered by the educator's certificate upon satisfactory completion of an examination or other assessment of the educator's qualification.*

TAC §230.437 Issuance of Certificates Based on Examination

General provisions.

*A teacher who holds a valid provisional, professional, or standard classroom teaching certificate or a valid temporary classroom teaching certificate issued under the provisions of Subchapter O of this chapter (relating to Texas Educator Certificates Based on Certification and College Credentials from Other States or Territories of the United States), or Chapter 245 of this title (relating to Certification of Educators from Other Countries), and a bachelor's degree may qualify for an **additional teaching field or certification to teach at another level** by passing the appropriate certification examination(s) for that subject. The rule shall not be used to qualify a classroom teacher for:*

- 1) *initial certification;*
- 2) *career and technology certification based on skill and experience;*
- 3) *another class of certificate, as listed in 19 TAC Chapter 232, Subchapter M, of this title (relating to Types and Classes of Certificates);*
- 4) *certification for which no certification examination has been developed.*

For additional information and testimonies related to this issue please go to: www.tsbvi.edu/avit

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Cooper Alexander

Age: 13

Student at Valley View Middle School, Valley View ISD, Cooke County, Texas

RE: SB 2249: In Support of the Bill That Ensures A Visually Impaired Teacher Complete Coursework in Visually Impaired Training in Addition to Examination as a Requirement for Visually Impaired Certification

Position: For SB 2249- Zaffirini



My name is Cooper Alexander, I'm 13 and an 8th grader at Valley View ISD in Valley View, Texas. I want to let you know how important my teacher of the visually impaired is to me.

When I was born I was too early and didn't weigh even two pounds. A month later I had bacterial meningitis and almost died. Because of that, I have an eye condition called Cortical Visual Impairment or CVI and mild cerebral palsy. I see light and dark, some colors and sometimes shapes. Sometimes, I see less, sometimes more, it changes depending on my health, surroundings and stress levels. I can walk pretty good, but I fall a lot if I'm not careful. I use a white cane to navigate my school and when I'm out running around.

My mom found out about Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) when I was 2 months old, because they told her at the hospital I would be blind, have cerebral palsy and mental retardation. But I'm pretty smart and this is why: She has told me she and Dad were desperate to find some way to help me. ECI sent out Mary Ann Foster to look me over and decide how best to start. From the time I was 6 months old, Miss Mary Ann,

Teacher of the Visually Impaired has looked out for me. I don't remember any of the early stuff, but Mom said she did lots of eye therapy with me and tried to help me interact with my surroundings. I know she must have helped because I'm an all A student now.

It's hard to tell you in this short a time what Miss Mary Ann does for me each day, but I'll try. She started me on Braille by the time I was 3. Because I am a Braille student, she has to see me at my school a lot. By 1st grade I had a type of Braille note-taker and all my books were brailled. By 3rd grade, she made sure I was reading contracted Braille so I wouldn't fall behind the other kids. Now, she makes sure I have audio textbooks as well as the Braille, because there is a lot of reading! In 2nd grade she started teaching me Nemeth Code for math. It's a special Braille code just for advanced math, and it's hard. She gets me the technology I need to succeed in my classroom. I have a Braille note-taker that I write on and read from, a screen reader for my computer and tons more equipment she had to know how to teach me.

She has teacher worksheets brailled for me, math papers fixed so I can feel the diagrams or shapes so they make sense to me. Once, I needed the elements chart and she made sure I had it early, so I could start memorizing them. If we use maps, she makes sure I have them; in art class, she helped the teacher understand what would be a good way to teach me. Miss Mary Ann sits with me in math and science sometimes, because it's easy for the classroom teacher to forget I need more description, or because there are changes that need to be made at the last minute so I can understand the lesson. That happens all the time, and she always knows how to help me. She takes a lot of classes at Region eleven and ten so she will know what might help me.

On top of all of that, even when she's seen me hundreds of times that month, she will take me to an event like Sports Extravaganza or a Mentor night at the American Foundation for the Blind center in Dallas because she wants me to be an independent, regular kid. She say's that means I have to go to college and get a good job.

If Miss Mary Ann had not learned Braille, or Nemeth code I wouldn't have gone to Space Camp a couple of years ago, be the president of my 4-H club or be the student I am, because I couldn't do the work. All kids deserve a great teacher like her, and we shouldn't give them anything less. **Please make sure all teachers of visually impaired students get the training they need to help kids like me.** Thank you for voting yes in support of SB 2249!