New Developments with Promise to Improve the Educational Lives of Students with Visual Impairments

William Daugherty, Superintendent TSBVI

Abstract: In this article Superintendent Daugherty shares information on recently passed and new legislation that will impact the education of students with visual impairments.

Key words: Blind, Visual Impairment, Anne Sullivan Macy Act of 2013, Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), Orientation and Mobility (O&M), IDEA

Several developments with the potential to have great influence on the educational lives of students with visual impairments have taken place recently, and two more appear to be on the horizon. HB 590 by Representative Naishtat of Austin, also known as the Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Bill, ensures that all students with visual impairments will receive an O&M evaluation. If you were under the impression that this was already happening for all students, you were mistaken. SB 39 by Senator Zaffirini of Laredo, also known as the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) Bill, ensures that all students with visual impairments will receive instruction in the ECC in areas of learning such as career education, sensory efficiency and social skills among others. SB 39 strengthens related law in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA.

I refer to these as being recent developments because, although passed in the last legislative session, our state is still largely in the process of implementation. Thankfully, we already have good examples in some Texas school districts where Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVI) and Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMS) have developed promising systems to ensure that all of this evaluation and instruction occurs. The how-to on this big task is being shared across the state wherever groups of TVIs and COMS are gathered.

On the horizon is the federal Anne Sullivan Macy Act of 2013, still making its way through Congress. This is another example of a bill that essentially strengthens and adds to existing law (IDEA) because of the wide-spread perception that current law was not getting the job done. The following is taken from the bill language:

To promote and ensure delivery of high quality special education and related services to students with visual disabilities through instructional methodologies meeting their unique
learning needs; to enhance accountability for the provision of such services; to establish a national collaborative resource on visual disabilities and educational excellence to supplement the current availability of such services; to support the ongoing professional development of instructors of students with visual disabilities; to foster the proliferation of research supporting the development and evaluation of effective and innovative assessments and instructional methodologies; and for other purposes.

Given that students with visual disabilities require more support than they are currently receiving nationally to acquire services and skills comprising the expanded core curriculum, and given that provision of currently required instruction for such students, such as braille, cannot be adequately assured, IDEA must be strengthened and supplemented to ensure that students with visual disabilities truly receive a free and appropriate public education.

There are some very powerful elements in this law that should be gratifying to all of us who have been concerned about the types and levels of service and supports being delivered to students with visual impairments. To read the text of the bill, go to http://www.afb.org/info/programs-and-services/public-policy-center/education-policy/complete-text-of-macy-act/1235. The American Foundation for the Blind website does a nice job of organizing it, and it only takes about 10 minutes to read. In it you will find references to many of the common worries we hear in our field about students being underserved relative to all of their educational needs. I think that the Macy Act will provide an excellent foundation for the type of advocacy and action required for any law to truly be effective.

Also on the horizon is something that I hope will be a welcomed development by students in the hunt for high school credits. TSBVI has submitted a proposal to TEA for consideration of approval for three “Innovative Courses”. These are Braille, Orientation and Mobility and General Employability Skills. Initial feedback from TEA is very promising. When accepted, any school in the state will be able to give elective credit if they generally follow the course requirements. More on this later, but there is a very good chance these will be available during the 2014-2015 school year. A good source of information on these courses is Debra Sewell, Curriculum Coordinator at TSBVI (sewelld@tsbvi.edu) .