

Need for VI Professionals:

Results of a 2005
survey of special
education
administrators in
Texas

Texas School for the Blind
and Visually Impaired

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Introduction

In April of 2005 directors of special education received a survey that explored factors related to recruitment of and their need for professionals in visual impairments (VI teachers and O&M specialists). This report provides an overview of that data.

A similar survey was distributed in 1997 and 2001. Many of the questions were repeated from previous surveys. When data from the prior surveys is available, it will be included in the information.

Comparing the data from this survey with two independent sources of data, the distribution of students with visual impairments and number of VI professionals employed in Texas, the data included herein is considered to be highly representative of administrators statewide.

Summary of Significant Findings

This report includes several significant findings, some of which reinforce data from other sources, or from the same survey completed in previous years. Some of the data is new and compelling. Below is a summary of these findings.

- 62% of the respondents identified a need for additional VI teachers either in their districts or at the regional education service center (ESC).
- 60% of the respondents identified a need for more O&M specialists either in their districts or at the regional education service center (ESC).
- Directors identified a need for **229 VI teachers** and **119 O&M specialists** (for a total of 348 additional VI professionals) in districts in Texas.
- 58% of the participants would like to see more VI teacher and/or O&M expertise at the ESCs.
- 77% of those who have tried to hire a VI professional report that recruiting VI professionals is either very or moderately difficult.
- Only between 3% and 14% report the use of any of seven typical recruitment strategies to be “very effective”

The findings highlighted above confirm that Texas has a continuing and significant need both for VI professionals and to increase its capacity to effectively recruit VI professionals.

Participation and Distribution

The survey was distributed by email, with the results gathered via a 3rd party Internet survey service. The list of participants was developed from information included in the directory published by the Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education (TCASE). Based on data from the *2005 Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments*, very few charter or private schools have students with visual impairments. In light of that data, surveys were not sent to private or charter schools.

The initial distribution of 484 names resulted in 102 being returned (or “bounced”). Each bounced email was distributed to the VI consultant at the relevant regional education service center (ESC). Nineteen of 20 regions included bounced emails; Region 18 was the exception. Twelve of the VI consultants responded to the request for updated information and 11 were able to provide corrections. As a result fewer than 50 email addresses were inaccurate.

The response rate was initially very low. The survey was re-sent and information about the survey was also sent to TCASE, which included it in their weekly email alerts. In addition, those regions that, proportionally, had a low response rate received another request to participate. The response rate picked up significantly after these actions. This final report represents data from 171 surveys. These surveys represent 35.3% of the special education administrators in Texas public schools. It must be noted that as in the case with many surveys, not all respondents responded to all questions, and the final number of respondents for any specific question may vary slightly.

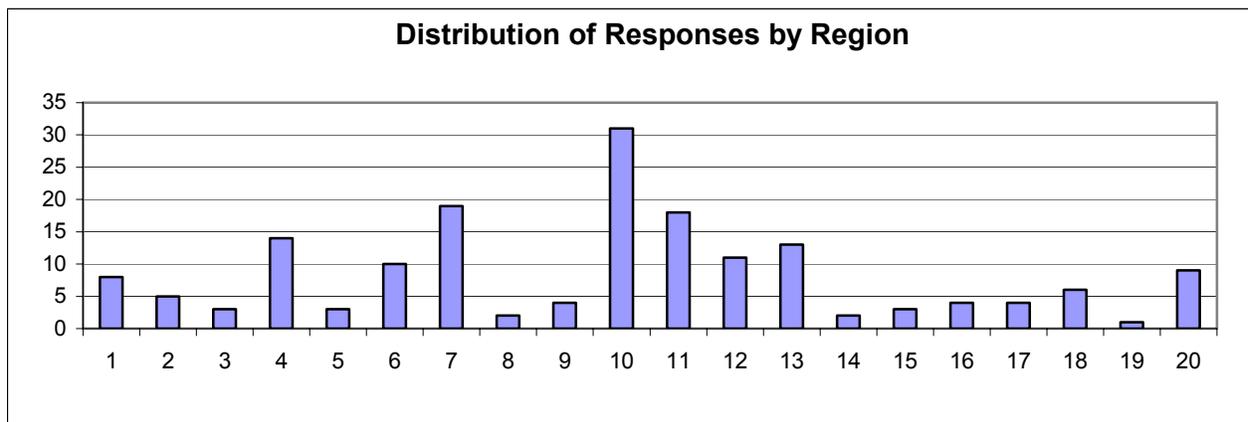


Figure 1: Displays the distribution of respondents across Texas. Note that respondents live in urban, rural, and suburban areas.

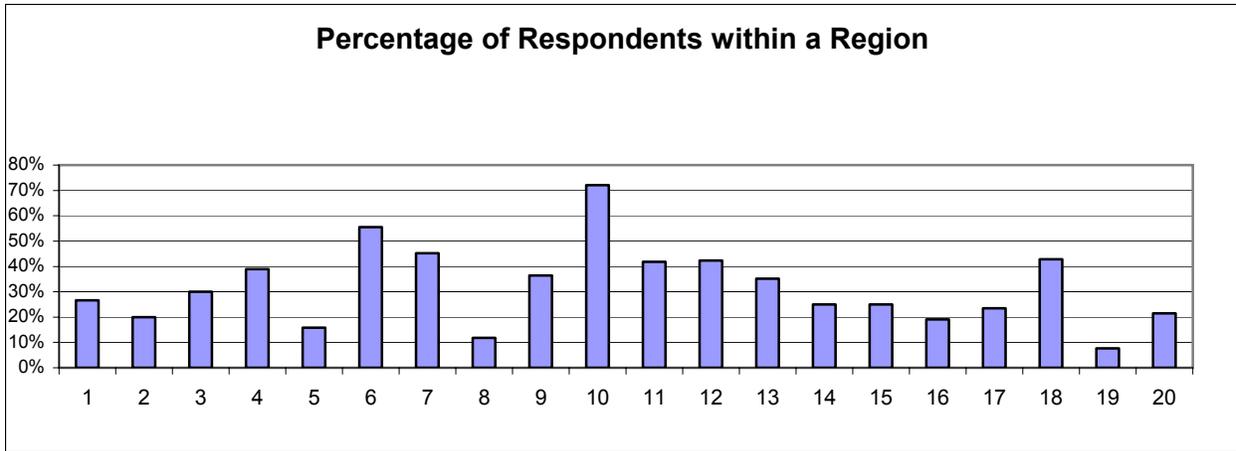


Figure 2: Displays the percentage of respondents compared to all special education administrators within a region. Note that in most regions at least 20% of all public schools are represented and in 7 regions at least 40% responded to the survey.

Information about the Participants

In order to evaluate the data it is necessary to understand the context of the responses. The survey was totally anonymous. The information gathered included data about the number of students with visual impairments in the district, as well as the number of VI professionals who serve those students. The number of students with visual impairments within a responding district or SSA was then compared to statewide data.

In order to determine how representative of Texas the respondents were, the number of students with visual impairments as reported on this survey was compared with the number of students with visual impairments as reported on the *2005 Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* (TEA, 2005). The distribution of the respondents mirrored the distribution pattern statewide. Additionally, the number and distribution of VI professionals was also compared to the *2004 Annual Summary of Need for VI Professionals in Texas* (TSBVI, 2004). That report includes information about various characteristics of VI professionals. The data contained in this report was very representative of the data in the *Annual Summary of Need* document. Based on the above comparison, the data described in this document is considered to be representative of the State of Texas.

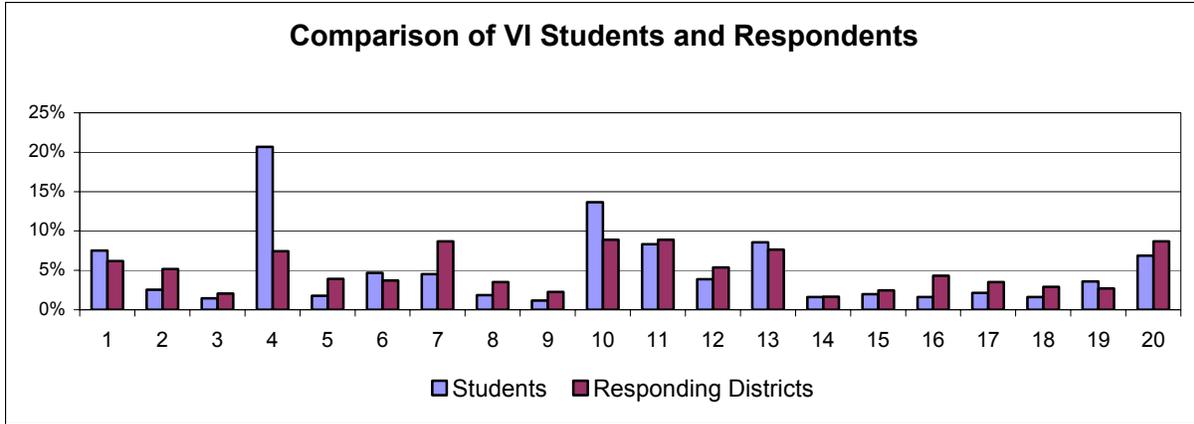


Figure 3 This chart shows the close relationship between the percent of respondents statewide and the number of students with visual impairments in Texas.

A large majority of the responses (73%) were from single member districts. The remanders were members of either special education cooperatives or shared service arrangements (SSA). The respondents were asked how many students with visual impairments were in their district/SSA.

Number of students with visual impairments in districts/SSAs and statewide

Number of students	Responses	Percentage
0	0	0%
1 – 3	26	16%
4 – 14	64	38%
15 – 30	27	16%
31 – 44	14	8%
45 – 60	8	5%
61 +	29	17%

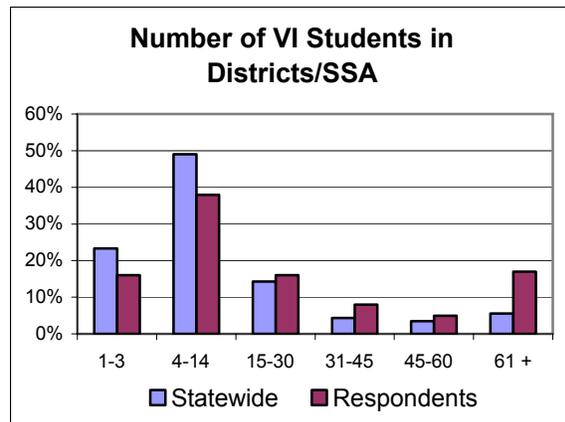


Figure 4: The pattern of distribution, with most districts/SSAs having between 4-14 students, mirrors the distribution statewide.

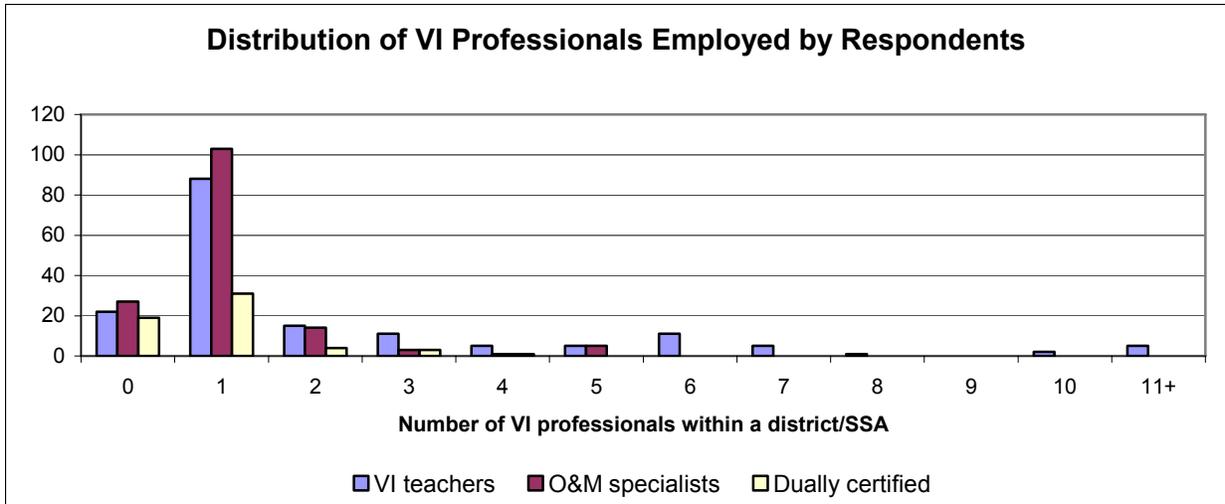


Figure 5: As indicated on this chart, most districts or SSAs employ a single VI teacher, O&M specialist and/or dually certified professional.

Determining Need

TEA does not collect this data, making this information especially valuable.

Identifying the need for VI professionals is a delicate task. It may appear that the district, by describing the need for additional qualified VI professionals, is at-risk for publicly stating they are not providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Questions must provide participants with the opportunity to respond candidly without putting their district at-risk for not meeting the FAPE guidelines. This is especially challenging for specialized personnel. Specialized personnel, such as those certified in visual impairments, may be difficult to find or train and require extraordinary recruitment efforts.

Wanting to be sensitive to this situation and elicit as many candid responses as possible, this survey was anonymous, and administered through a third-party Internet site.

Data about the need for special educators, including VI professionals, is *not* collected by the Texas Education Agency. As a result, data directly from program administrators is especially valuable. The only other assessment of professional need is collected by TSBVI via the VI consultants at each regional service center. Data from the regional VI consultants has been published annually since 1997. (The 2004 report is published on the TSBVI website: www.TSBVI.edu/pds/index, then click on *2004 Summary of Need for VI Professionals in Texas Report*.)

In previous editions of this survey participants responded to two questions about need. The first question focuses on the relationship between willingness to advocate for a new or additional VI professional and their confidence that the position could be filled.

The same question was asked on the 1997 and the 2001 surveys. Each time the results are remarkably similar. In 2005, 73% of the respondents (nearly a 3:1 ratio) stated that they believed that more positions would be advertised if more people were available and trained in visual impairments. In 1997 and 2001, 73% and 85% (respectively) believed that advocating for new/additional VI professionals was highly correlated with perception of availability. These data show a strong trend; that the availability of jobs is directly related to the supply of VI professionals.

For the 3rd time, administrators overwhelmingly confirm that willingness to advocate for VI professionals is *directly* related to perceptions of supply.

Participants were also asked how many additional VI professionals they would like to have on staff. Knowing that it may take 12 – 18 months to establish a VI position, or that many districts prefer to keep their VI staff flexible, the question purposefully did not ask how many VI positions they could fill at this time. Also, many districts rely on ESCs for VI services, especially O&M services, and this was included as a response option. Results from the respondents are shown in the table below.

Number of respondents identifying need for additional VI professionals

Additional VI professionals per district	VI Teachers	Percentage	O&M Specialists	Percentage
0	59	38%	60	47%
1	58	37%	36	28%
2	11	7%	3	2%
3-4	0	0%	0	0%
5 or more	1	1%	0	0%
None locally, but more at ESC	26	17%	30	23%
Total districts needing VI professionals	96	62%	65	53%

Figure 6: The table indicates the number of districts/SSAs who would like to hire at least one VI professional. The total number of VI professionals needed is determined by multiplying the number of programs that would like to hire VI professionals and the number desired.

These are remarkable results. When the number of districts needing VI professionals is converted to the number of individual VI professionals districts would like to be able to hire, the results are even more compelling. These respondents (35% of the districts and SSAs in Texas) would like to have 81 additional VI teachers and 42 additional O&M specialists in their districts. Additionally, respondents identified a need for more VI professionals to be hired at ESCs.

Many districts do not have enough students with visual impairments in their district and/or they rely on the ESC for direct services for other reasons. As a result, in addition to having additional VI professionals on staff, respondents could indicate they didn't need additional VI professionals at the district level, but would like more at the ESC. Twenty-six respondents from 12 regions indicated

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they would like additional VI teachers at the ESC and 30 participants representing 14 regions stated they would like additional ESC-based O&M specialists.

It is interesting to compare this data on need with that provided by the VI consultants at the ESCs. Each year the regional VI consultants are asked how many additional VI professionals they would like to have available in the region. The VI consultants are asked how many additional VI professionals they would like in the region within the next 12 months and within the next 24 months. Additionally the statewide need for VI professionals is assessed based on nationally accepted caseload guidelines. The recommended caseload range is 8-15 students per VI professional, with the mean being reported here.

Below is a table that compares the data from the *2004 Summary of Need for VI Professionals in Texas* report and the data collected from this survey. It should be noted that *2004 Summary of Need for VI Professionals in Texas* reflects the need of the entire state. Given the confidence that the data in this report is reflective of the entire state, the need identified by the responding directors has been extended to include all of Texas. This leads to a need for an additional 229 VI teachers and 119 O&M specialists, or 30.4% more than our existing supply of individuals certified to teach students with visual impairments.

**Texas needs an
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according to
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Comparison of various methods for determining need for VI professionals

Method for determining need	VI Teachers	O&M Specialists	Dually Certified	Total Needed
VI consultants’				
Within 12 months	77	28	8	113
Within 24 months	82	31	51	164
Caseload formula	225	58	N/A	283
Directors’ Survey*	229	119	N/A	348*

Figure 7: Since there is no way to project the number of VI professionals that could be needed at the ESC, these figures reflect ONLY those that could be hired by districts. It must be assumed that an additional unknown number is needed at the ESCs. *These figures are based on the confidence that the data provided by the respondents is representative of the entire state.

Recruiting VI Professionals

Developing a message that appeals to future candidates and getting that message to the candidates is an important part of the recruitment process. Participants were asked about their confidence that their recruitment message was effective and reaching the best candidates. Seventy percent of those who had tried to recruit VI professionals were either very or moderately confident that their recruitment message was reaching the best candidates.

However, in strong contrast to these figures are the data that reflects the perceived results of those efforts. Even with a significant collaborative statewide project, training and hiring highly qualified VI teachers and O&M specialists remains difficult. More than 75% of the respondents reported that VI professionals were either very or moderately difficult to find. If the message was truly reaching the best candidates, those who are either ready to move to the district, change job assignments, or willing to participate in training, it is supposed that the districts would experience less difficulty hiring VI professionals.

Respondents were also asked what recruitment strategies they had used, and how effective those strategies had been. The question provided participants with a list of options and asked them to rate its effectiveness.

The options included the following:

- Distribute flyers from ESCs, TSBVI, and/or universities
- Newspaper advertisements in local papers
- Newspaper advertisement in major metropolitan newspaper
- Reliance on human resource offices to find a VI professional
- Post information and/or flyers at the ESC, conferences, etc.
- Recruit an existing educator on staff to be trained in VI (“home grown”)
- Send information about the district and the vacancy to universities with VI programs.

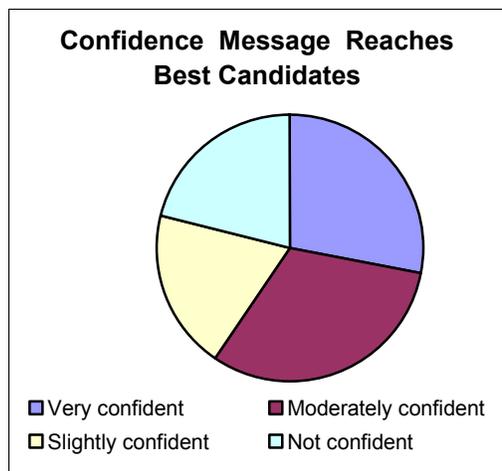


Figure 8: These two charts demonstrate the dissonance between the respondents' confidence in their recruiting message and the results of the recruiting methods.

The results from the respondents are included in the chart below.

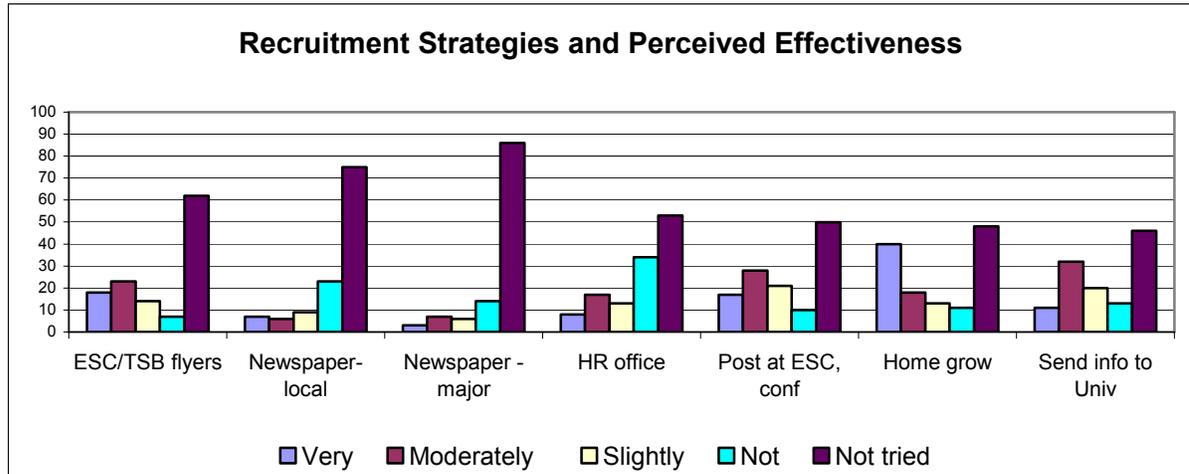


Figure 9: Displays the frequency each, if any, recruitment strategy has been used by respondents.

It appears that most of the strategies identified have not been tried. It must be recalled that approximately 40% of the respondents have not tried to recruit a VI professional. Unfortunately, a separate response option for those who have not needed to recruit a VI professional was not offered. Overall, and regardless of effectiveness, the most popular options were recruiting and training someone from within the district (“home grown”) and sending information to the ESC and university training programs.

When reviewing only those strategies that have been tried, a slightly different picture emerges. Recruiting from within the district was still the most popular choice and considered to be very effective. The benefit of this strategy is that the administrator is knowledgeable about the unique needs of the students with visual impairments and the specific skills and aptitudes of the staff at the district. Relying on the human resources (HR) office was most frequently considered as not effective. HR staff may not be knowledgeable about distinctive characteristics of a VI position. Additionally, since this is such a small field, even within special education, it is possible that VI positions get “lost” within the districts’ total hiring plan or that the HR office is not knowledgeable about where or how to effectively find VI professionals. Advertisements in newspapers, either major metropolitan or local papers were also not considered popular or effective methods of recruiting VI professionals.

It is not known how administrators identify future VI professionals and what, if anything, they give them to help the candidate determine whether to take on the challenge and how to get trained.

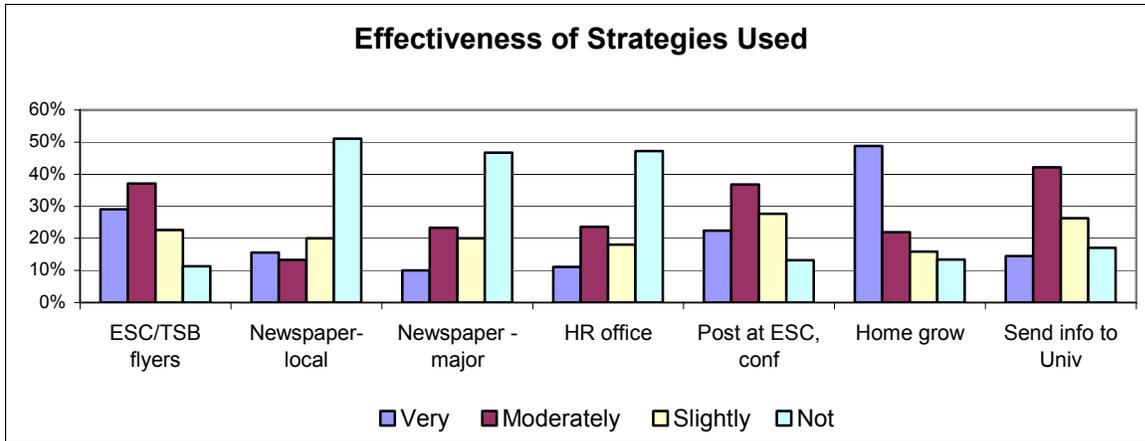


Figure 10: Displays the perceived effectiveness of those methods used. Developing expertise from within the district is considered the most effective, and relying on the HR office and/or newspapers are the least effective.

What can't be measured on this survey is the message that the districts are including in their recruitment activities. Previous research cites the importance of matching the message with the needs of the potential applicant (*Positioning: How to be seen in an overcrowded marketplace*, Reis and Trout, 2001). For example, future applicants are first interested in knowing more about the community in which they might live and consider program information second. If districts are not including such information in their recruitment documents, they may not be maximizing their recruitment efforts. Additionally, many districts do not include salary information on their recruitment materials. This information is very important to potential applicants. As a result, the perceived effectiveness (or lack thereof) of a particular method reflects, not only on the strategy used, but also on the information provided.

One strategy in the recruitment process can be using various incentives to recruit or retain specialized professionals. The survey offered five specific options, plus an opportunity to offer unique options. A majority of the respondents (54%) do not provide incentives. Of those that offer incentives, an additional stipend was the most common. The short table below shows the type and frequency of incentives offered.

Hiring incentives	Responses	Percentage
Signing bonus	3	4%
Additional stipends	47	65%
Higher pay scale	16	22%
Other (e.g. supporting VI training or cell phones)	6	8%

Figure 11: Displays the types and frequencies of incentives used with VI professionals. Note that only 72 respondents (46%) reported use of incentives.

Collaborating with the ESC

Many, many districts have strong relationships with the ESC for vision-related needs. In some regions ESC staff provide direct services, serving as the VI professional on the IEP. ESCs also provide technical assistance and leadership skills and resources. Additionally, ESCs offer training via workshops or seminars. The strength of the ESCs in Texas has often been cited as one of the reasons that Texas has a note-worthy and robust statewide system of services to students with visual impairments.

Lately, VI services at ESCs have been changing. VI personnel have been given more and more non-VI specific tasks. This survey included questions to examine whether ESC VI-related services the are meeting the needs of the directors in the districts. The participants were asked if they would like more VI expertise at the service center. More than half of the respondents (58%) stated that the need for VI teacher expertise exceeded the availability, and 58% repeated the need for additional O&M expertise at the regional education service center.

Another factor that highlights the need for VI staff at the ESC is the need for direct service personnel at the ESCs, as referenced in the *Determining Need* section. Twenty-six respondents, representing 11 ESCs, voiced a need for additional direct service personnel in visual impairments, and 30 respondents (from 13 regional service centers) supported additional O&M services from the ESC.

Districts are reporting the need for additional VI expertise at the ESC, noting a possible weakening in the nationally recognized system of services to students with visual impairments.

Increasing Recruiting Capacity

The current and increasing need for special educators (not limited to VI) has been cited elsewhere. As the need for special educators becomes more acute, and retirements become more common, the need for specialized knowledge of recruitment strategies for special education may also increase. Participants were asked if they would be interested in special education recruitment training, not limited to VI issues. The results were very mixed, with just over half (51%) either being moderately or very interested, and almost half (49%) being either slightly or not interested.



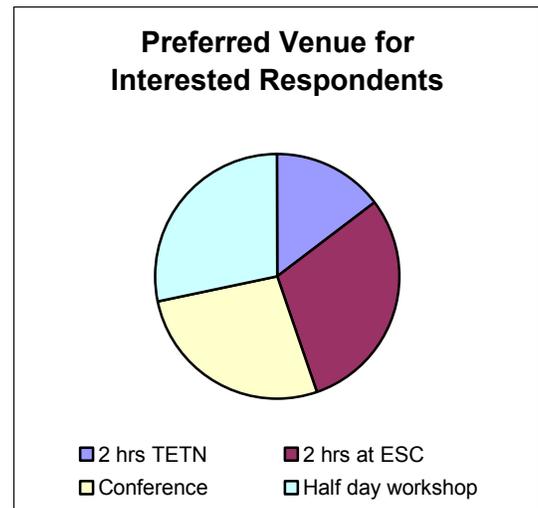
Figure 12: Interest in increasing training for recruiting special educators is very mixed.

While there may not be a mandate for training in recruitment, the continuing need for special educators in general, and the specific responses from this survey indicate that serious consideration should be given to increasing capacity for effective recruitment techniques.

The respondents were then asked to identify a preferred method for delivering the training. The preferences are listed in the table below.

Training venue	Responses	Percentage
2 hours on TETN	29	10%
2 hours at ESC	59	38%
Concurrent session at conference, e.g. TCASE	53	34%
Half-day workshop with hands-on experiences	56	36%
Not interested	39	25%

Figure 13: Displays information about preferred training in recruiting special educators. Note that 65% of all respondents stated a preference with the responses being nearly equally mixed between the 3 face-to-face options.



Another recruitment strategy is to help administrators to understand more about VI programs. With that in mind the 1997 edition of this survey queried directors about printed resources. Based on the results of that survey the Administrator’s Toolbox was developed and published in 2000. The Toolbox was distributed to all of the special education directors in Texas and posted on the TSBVI website. With more than 12,000 visits in the last six months, it has remained popular and has been modified and replicated by another disability group. However, the Toolbox is now out of date, and with the popularity of the TSBVI website, it is clear that the new edition needs to include resources that are not Texas-specific.

This survey asked a very similar question as was asked in 1997: For which topics would you like more resources? The results are listed below.

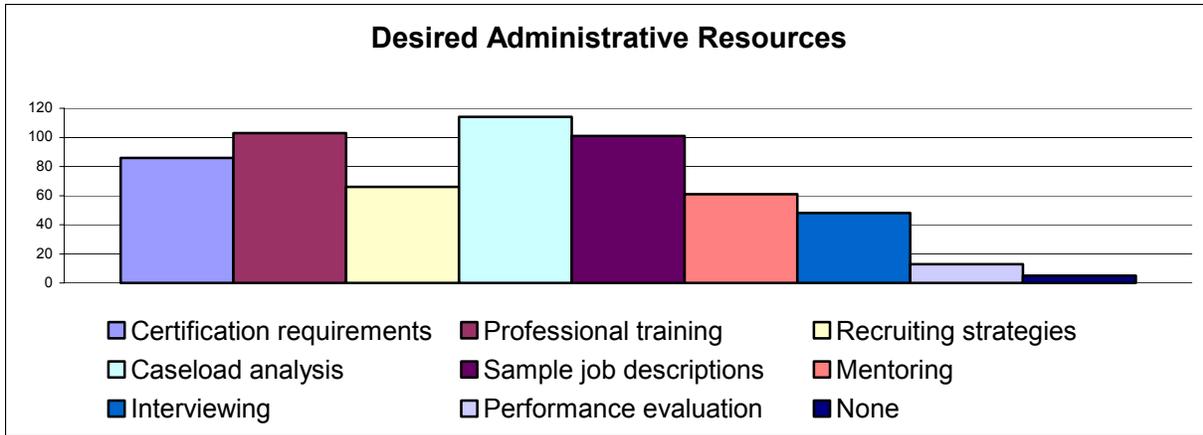


Figure 14: Displays the preferences for additional information used to administer VI programs. Note the prominence of caseload analysis tools. Understanding caseload is directly related to retention and recruiting VI professionals (Dignan, Murrell, and Toelle, 1998, Survey of Caseload Issues, AERBVI presentation)

The Toolbox needs to be revised and expanded to include issues beyond Texas. The data provided by this survey will guide the development of the second edition.

Summary

The third in a series of surveys about issues relative to visual impairments was distributed via email to all public school special education administrators in Texas. The previous surveys were conducted in 1997 and 2001. Due to a low initial response rate and a significant number of faulty email addresses, the survey was resent to the administrators. Ultimately, 171 responses were received, representing 35.3% of the districts or shared service arrangements (SSA) in Texas. The numbers of students with visual impairments in each district/SSA and the number of VI professionals employed by the respondents were compared to other known distributions. The responses were found to be highly reflective of the state of Texas.

Most of the respondents had between 4 and 14 students with visual impairments, employed a single VI teacher, and used the services of one O&M specialist (although the O&M specialist may not be full time in that district).

The respondents described a significant need for VI professionals. A large majority (62%) of the respondents identified a need for additional VI teachers either in their districts or at the regional education service center (ESC). Additionally, 60% of the respondents identified a need for more O&M specialists either in their districts or at the regional education service center (ESC). If these data are used to factor the need for VI professionals statewide, Texas needs **229 VI teachers** and **119 O&M specialists** (for a total of 348 additional VI professionals) in districts in Texas, **plus** additional direct service personnel at ESCs.

Due in part to the ESCs, Texas has long been known as a national leader in the education of children with visual impairments. However, professional roles at the ESC are changing. Anecdotal

reports indicate that VI consultants are being required to do more non-VI duties and there are few other resources for VI-specific expertise at the ESC. Administrators were asked if there was sufficient VI expertise at their service center. A majority of the respondents (57%) would like to see more VI teacher and/or O&M expertise at the ESCs.

Respondents were also asked about the ease of finding VI professionals, the link between the supply of VI professionals and new positions, and their success in recruiting needed VI staff members. As in the previous two surveys, in a three-to-one margin, the administrators linked their willingness to advocate for a new VI professional with their confidence that they could fill the position. Results reaffirm that if a supply of VI professionals is available, it is more likely that positions will be made for them.

Even though 60% of those who have tried to hire a VI professional report that they were either very or moderately confident that their recruitment message is reaching the best candidates, 77% report that recruiting VI professionals is either very or moderately difficult. Additionally, only between 3% and 14% report the use of any of the seven typical recruitment strategies offered to be “very effective”

<p>The findings highlighted above confirm that Texas has a continuing and significant need both for additional VI professionals and to increase its capacity to effectively recruit VI professionals.</p>
