

2019



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2019 SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONALS IN VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN TEXAS

A review of education professionals who work with Texas students with visual impairments, including a description of selected characteristics, projections of attrition, and projected future needs.



2019 Executive Summary of Need for VI Professionals

Since 1996, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has conducted an annual survey of the Visual Impairment (VI) consultants at the Education Service Centers (ESCs), university VI programs, and TSBVI to assess the characteristics of and need for VI professionals in Texas. “VI professionals” includes teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMS). The most striking findings of the September 2019 survey include:

- In 2019, the **total number of VI professionals**, including leadership positions, **increased** from 956 to 992 individuals. The increase was seen in both the total number of TVIs and COMS across the state with the majority of the increase in the part-time category.
 - The number of part-time TVIs providing direct service grew by 14, from 154 to 168.
 - The number of full-time TVIs did not change significantly, adding only one for a total of 526 individuals this year.
 - There are 306 COMS providing direct service, an increase of 18 individuals. The part-time category increased by 15 and 3 were added to the full-time category.
 - Sixty-three VI professionals are dually certified, providing both TVI and O&M services.
 - Approximately 19% of the total number of individual VI professionals providing direct service are contract service providers.
- **Cultural diversity** of VI professionals showed signs of growth in the number of VI professionals who are Hispanic and African-American. The number of TVI and COMS who are fluent in Spanish dropped by 1% this year.
 - The number of VI professionals who are Hispanic increased by 10.5 percent.
 - The number of VI professionals who are African-American increased by 10 percent.
 - Ten percent of the VI professionals statewide are fluent in Spanish.
- **Attrition in the previous year increased** from 39 to 44 individuals.
 - Last year’s total of 39 matches the 10-year average, increasing by 5 in 2019.
 - ESC consultants anticipate 92 TVIs and 40 COMS, or 12% of existing VI professionals, will retire or otherwise leave the field over the next 3 years.
- **The number of students with visual impairments continues to grow.** In 2019, the number of students reported to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* increased by 332 students, or approximately 3.2%, bringing the total number of students to 10,753. This is significant growth, well over the 2.5% average increase typically seen from year to year. An increase in caseloads reported by many of the VI consultants could be seen as a direct effect of this student growth, however, only 13 individuals (6 FTE) were added to the number of TVIs available in 2019 to support them.

Anticipated Need for VI Professionals

- It is projected that Texas will need up to 72 additional full-time equivalent TVIs and 48 full-time equivalent COMS by 2022 to accommodate **student growth alone**.
- Texas is estimated to need an additional 150-164 full-time equivalent TVIs and 80-97 full-time equivalent COMS in the next 3 years to replace those who are likely to leave the field and respond to anticipated student growth.
- The statewide total number of new professionals entering and completing the programs at **Stephen F. Austin State University and Texas Tech University** declined this year. This could cause future shortages of VI professionals to work with students with visual impairments across Texas.
 - There are 152 future VI professionals in a program leading to certification as either a TVI or COMS. Ninety-six are working toward their TVI certification and 56 are enrolled in an orientation and mobility program. Total enrollment was down approximately 7% from last year.
 - Fifty-seven individuals (36 TVIs and 21 COMS) completed a VI certification program in 2019, 30% fewer than in 2019.
 - The majority of students enrolled in SFASU and TTU TVI and O&M certification training programs receive funding support for coursework. As tuition continues to rise, existing funding will provide less support to students than in previous years. This will in turn create a greater challenge of meeting the need for an adequate number of VI professionals.

Contents

2019 Executive Summary of Need for VI Professionals	1
Contents	3
Introduction.....	4
Characteristics of VI Professionals in Texas.....	4
Number of VI professionals in Texas.....	4
Part-time service providers	9
Contract service providers	9
Dually certified VI professionals.....	10
Direct services provided by ESCs	10
Overall perceptions of caseloads.....	11
Cultural diversity.....	12
VI professionals who have a visual impairment	13
Growth in Population of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals	14
Impact on teachers of students with visual impairments	14
Impact on O&M specialists	15
Variance in growth of students with visual impairments and O&M services	15
Attrition	16
Attrition factors.....	16
Projected 3-year attrition	17
Projected vs. actual attrition.....	18
Anticipated Need.....	19
Posted positions	19
Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals	20
Discussion of projected need and teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs)	22
Discussion of projected need and O&M specialists	23
Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals	24
Students registered in Texas programs.....	24
Students completing Texas certification programs	25
Students receiving financial assistance in Texas certification programs	26
Summary	26
Appendix.....	29
Methodology	29
References	31

Introduction

Since 1996, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) has conducted an annual survey to assess supply and demand for VI professionals in Texas. The term “VI professionals” is used to describe certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and certified orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists (or COMSs). This report provides information about the results of the survey conducted in September 2019.

Data were collected from the 20 regional education service centers (ESCs), the two Texas university personnel preparation programs that prepare VI professionals, and TSBVI. TSBVI serves as a statewide resource, with a concentration of students and VI professionals. As a result, TSBVI data were collected separately from that of the ESCs. Unless otherwise noted, TSBVI data are included in the data presented in this report. Data from TSBVI include information about TSBVI professionals who provide direct services via the Comprehensive Program and who provide statewide training, short-term services, and leadership via the Short-Term Programs and Outreach Programs. (Note: More information about how data were collected is included in the Appendix.)

Characteristics of VI Professionals in Texas

The survey asked about the number of people *functioning* as VI professionals. Although many professionals may hold certification as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) or as an orientation and mobility specialist (COMS or O&M specialist), this report summarizes data on those with a *current job assignment* as a TVI or COMS. Some VI professionals hold *both* TVI and O&M certifications. Those professionals whose current job assignment includes functioning in both roles are considered dually certified for this report.

It is important to note that most VI professionals are not classroom teachers; they are primarily itinerant specialists in visual impairment who work in a variety of schools, community settings, and homes. In addition to direct services, they also provide critical consultations to other team members about the functional impact of specific visual impairments on students in a range of settings, and ensure that appropriately modified materials are available. Additionally, they must travel to their students and provide instruction in the home, school, and community environments, not in a single classroom. Understanding the difference between classroom teachers and VI professionals is crucial when assessing the current and future need for specialists in visual impairment (Correa-Torres & Johnson Howell, 2004).

Number of VI professionals in Texas

The number of VI professionals increased by almost 4 percent in the Fall of 2019, a significant increase for the state. Most of the increase came in the COMS profession.

This information has been gathered annually for 24 years. Over that time the number of VI professionals has risen with an occasional drop in numbers. The 2019 number of VI

professionals in Texas is 992 individuals, or 898.2 full-time equivalents (FTEs). This increase is positive, although it is also important to consider that the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* from Spring 2019 identified 332 additional students, a 3.2% increase in the student population. (TSBVI, 2019). This is much higher than the average annual student increase of 2.5 percent.

Below is a graph that displays the changes in the number of VI professionals over a 10-year span, from 2010-2019.

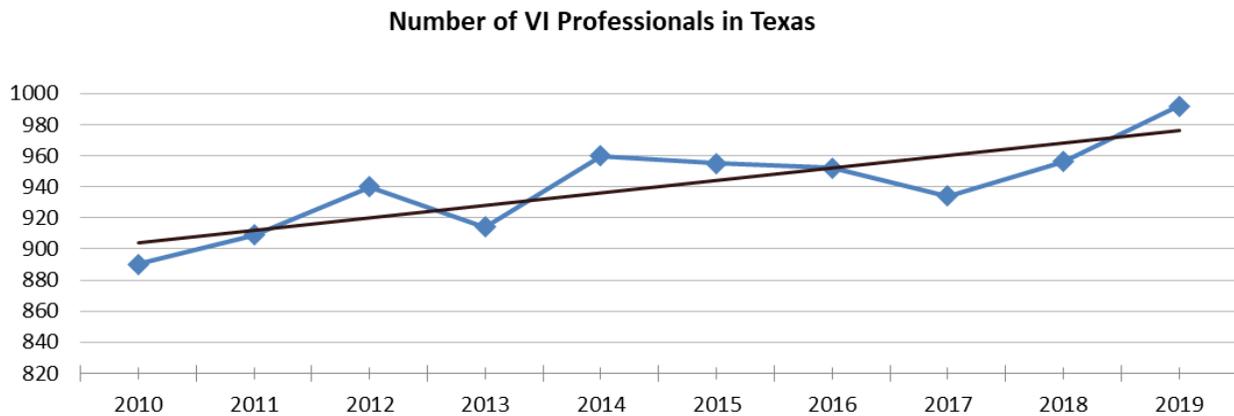


Table 1 that follows provides further details about VI professionals in Texas within the last 3 years. The term “individuals” includes both full- and part-time VI professionals. The full-time equivalent (FTE) data adjusts for the part-time VI professionals, including those who are dually certified.

Table 1: Total VI Professionals Statewide

	2017		2018		2019	
	Individuals	FTE ²	Individuals	FTE ²	Individuals	FTE ²
ESC leadership ¹	25	19	24	19.3	27	23.5
TSBVI statewide ¹	29	26	29	24.8	28	23.8
VI and O&M service providers (adjusted for dually certified professionals)	880	821.5	903	834.5	937	851
Total VI professionals	934	866.5	956	878.6	992	898.3

¹ TSBVI statewide consulting staff (Outreach and Short-Term Programs) and ESC consulting VI staff provide leadership/technical assistance statewide or within their organization. Educators at TSBVI or at ESCs who provide direct educational service to students with visual impairments are counted as "VI and O&M direct-service providers."

² FTE = (part-time x .5) + full-time for all charts

Direct-service providers

The total number of direct-service providers in 2019 was 937 individuals or 851 FTEs (adjusted for dual certified professionals). There were 694 TVIs and 306 COMS providing services to students with visual impairments across the state in 2019.

Below are data regarding full and part-time direct-service providers. The term “direct-service providers” includes teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs), certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs), and dually certified personnel who work with students on a regular basis, and/or are the teacher-of-record for issues related to visual impairments. This category does not include those who provide vision-related leadership, technical assistance, or statewide services at ESCs or TSBVI through the Short-Term Programs and Outreach Programs.

This survey captures information about the number of individuals working with students with visual impairments in the state of Texas in either a full- or part-time capacity. It does not gather information on the number of districts that employ full- and/or part-time VI professionals. Full- and part-time status is broadly defined. The reference to “full-time” and “part-time” refers to the total employment of the VI professional, not to how long a specific district employs a VI professional. Individuals who work part-time in multiple districts are considered “full-time VI professionals.” As a result, the number of “full-time” VI professionals described may vary from the number of districts or co-ops that employ TVIs on a full-time basis.

For the purposes of this survey, professionals who are certified *and* employed in both visual impairments and orientation and mobility (dually certified) are counted as a part-time TVI and a part-time COMS. These specialists are embedded in TVI data and the COMS data. Specific information on dually-certified VI professionals is listed in Table 4. Information about the number of combined direct-service providers has been adjusted for dually certified professionals.

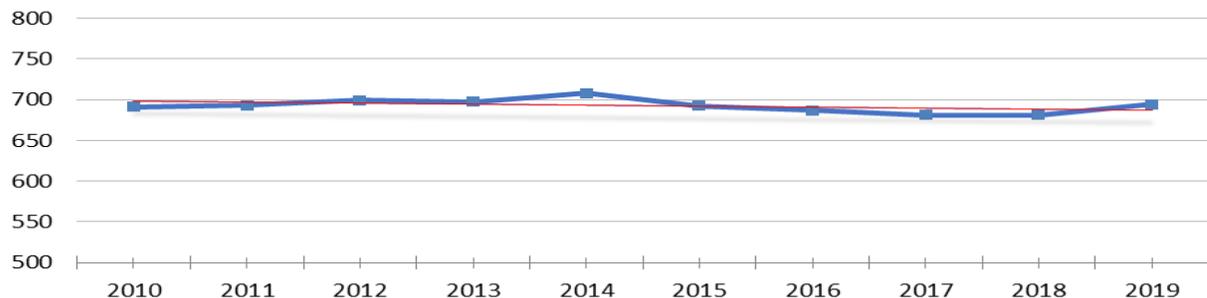
Table 2: Direct-Service Providers: Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs)

	2017		2018		2019	
	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹
Full-time TVIs	537		527		526	
Part-time TVIs	144		154		168	
Total VI staff	681	609	681	604	694	610

1. FTE = part-time x .5 + full-time for all charts

The total number of *individuals* (full and part-time) who work as a TVI in 2019 increased by 13 this year, all added to the part-time category. The full-time individuals dropped by one and the field saw an increase of six TVI FTEs.

Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments in Texas



The graph above shows the absence of significant change in the total number of TVIs across the state. The graph below shows the full - and part-time TVI totals over recent years. The minimal increase in the availability of TVIs in 2019 is a concern given that 1,626 additional students have been added to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* since the number of TVIs peaked at 708 in 2014.

Full- and Part-time TVIs

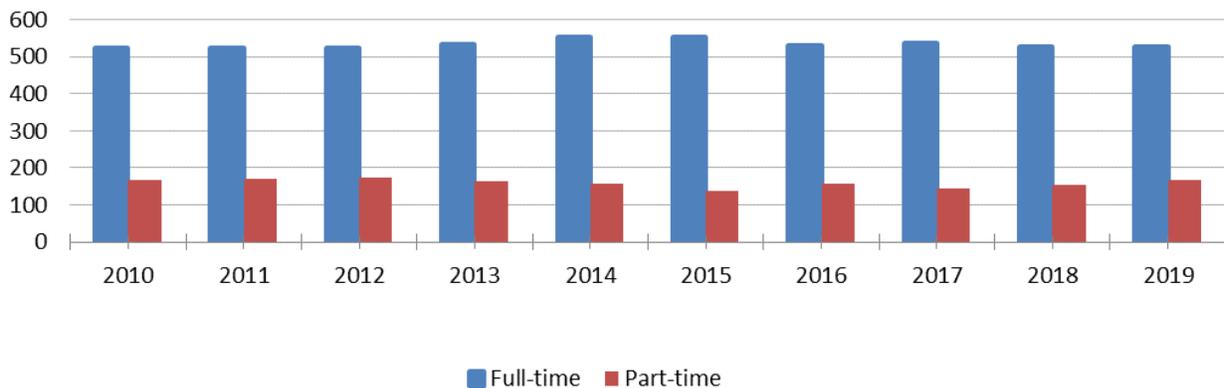


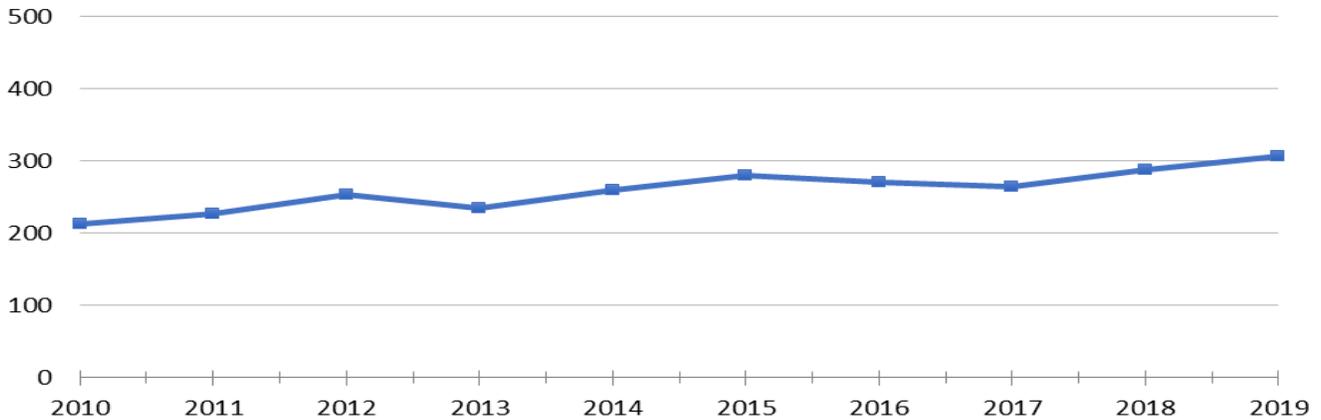
Table 3: Direct-Service Providers: Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMSs)

	2017	2018	2019
	Individuals	Individuals	Individuals
Full-time COMSs	160	173	176
Part-time COMSs	105	115	130
Total O&M staff	265	288	306

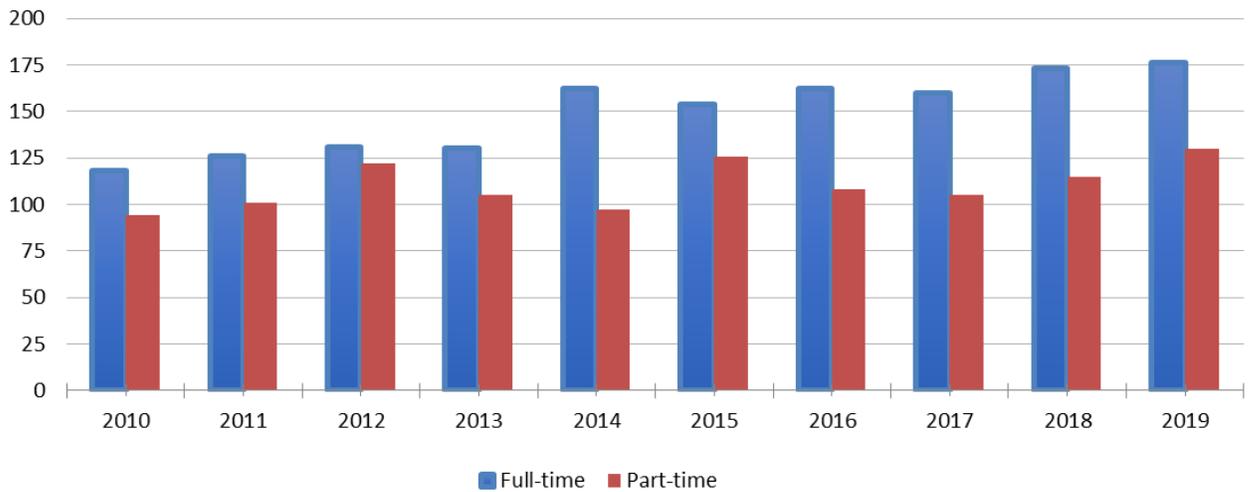
1. FTE = part-time x .5 + full-time for all charts

As noted in Table 3 above and the graphs that follow, the total number of O&M specialists increased this year by 6.25% or by 18 individuals. The majority of this growth was in the part-time category. A total of 41 additional COMS have been added to the VI field between 2017 and 2019.

Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists in Texas



Full- and Part-time COMS



All initial evaluations of students with visual impairments must include an O&M evaluation by a certified O&M specialist in the home, school and community setting per changes made in 2013 to TEC 30.002. Based on the data received this year, we may still be seeing effects of this change in the increase in number of O&M specialists. This past year 344 students were evaluated by a COMS and 175 additional students were identified as needing orientation and mobility services.

Statewide data on the number of students who receive O&M services have been collected since 2001. Since that time, this number of students has increased by 154%, from 1,684 to 4,277. The rate of growth in O&M services over the past 19 years exceeds that of VI services (60%) overall during that same period. Considering the rising number of students receiving O&M services, the increase of 41 COMS serving students in Texas over the last 3 years was essential in order to ensure that all students have access to an O&M evaluation and, as indicated, receive needed orientation and mobility services.

Part-time service providers

There are 298 part-time VI professionals serving students with visual impairments in Texas. The number of part-time TVIs and part-time COMS increased in 2019.

It is important to note that part-time VI professionals have advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include supporting districts with a small number of students with visual impairments to meet their local needs. Part-time VI professionals can increase flexibility in districts that have just a bit more, or a bit less, than a full-time VI professional can reasonably handle and still provide quality services. In addition, part-time VI professionals may either be employed by the district on a part-time, contractual basis for VI-only purposes, or may be hired full-time with duties unrelated to visual impairments.

Disadvantages include logistical challenges in meeting the needs of the students. Due to other commitments and/or responsibilities, part-time staff members are at risk for not being able to provide the full caseload management or comprehensive array of services necessary for even small caseloads. Part-time contract employees may not function as full members of the collaborative educational team if their service hours are limited to direct hours only by the hiring district or co-op, as is frequently the case. It may be hard to carry out collaborative consultation to the degree needed if service delivery time is limited. Without time for collaboration, such VI professionals may not adequately meet the needs of their students since it is other team members who assist with generalization of skills learned when the specialist is not there (TSBVI, n.d.).

Contract service providers

Approximately 19% of the total number of individual VI professionals are contract service providers.

Many VI professionals work for school districts throughout the state as contract service providers on either a part-time or full-time basis. According to ESC consultants, 186 VI professionals serve in this manner. This is a slight increase from last year with the number of COMS contractors growing by 10 individuals and the number of TVI contractors falling by seven. Last year there was an increase of 24.5% in the number of contractors.

The increase in contract service providers may be a culmination of several factors. The increase in charter schools, private staffing companies and retired VI professionals returning to

the field as private contractors could all be considered as contributing factors to the heightened totals seen over the last two years. It should be noted that VI professionals who serve as private contractors may be difficult for ESC consultants to accurately report for the purpose of this document since these service providers may not be directly affiliated with a school district or regional co-op arrangement.

Dually certified VI professionals

Sixty-three individuals functioned in a dually certified role in 2019, providing both VI and O&M services to Texas students.

Dually certified VI professionals are those who are certified and function both as a COMS and as a TVI. While many professionals may hold both certifications, not all dually certified professionals function in both capacities. This survey gathers data only about those who currently *function* as a TVI and an O&M specialist. The total number of dually certified professionals fluctuated between 74 and 62 for fifteen years before falling to 58 in 2016. This total rose beyond the average to 66 last year and fell slightly to 63 in 2019.

Table 4: Dually Certified Professionals

	2017	2018	2019
Dually certified	66	66	63

Dually certified professionals are unique and offer districts maximum flexibility. Administrators are able to modify work assignments according to the needs of the district and the needs of students for a particular year. While these VI professionals may be employed full-time in a district, they must split their time and expertise between two different, although related, professions. An administrator must understand the challenges faced by these professionals to ensure that neither area is slighted.

Direct services provided by ESCs

Each regional education service center (ESC) provides an array of services to districts and for some, that includes direct TVI and O&M services. There were 396 students served directly by ESCs this year.

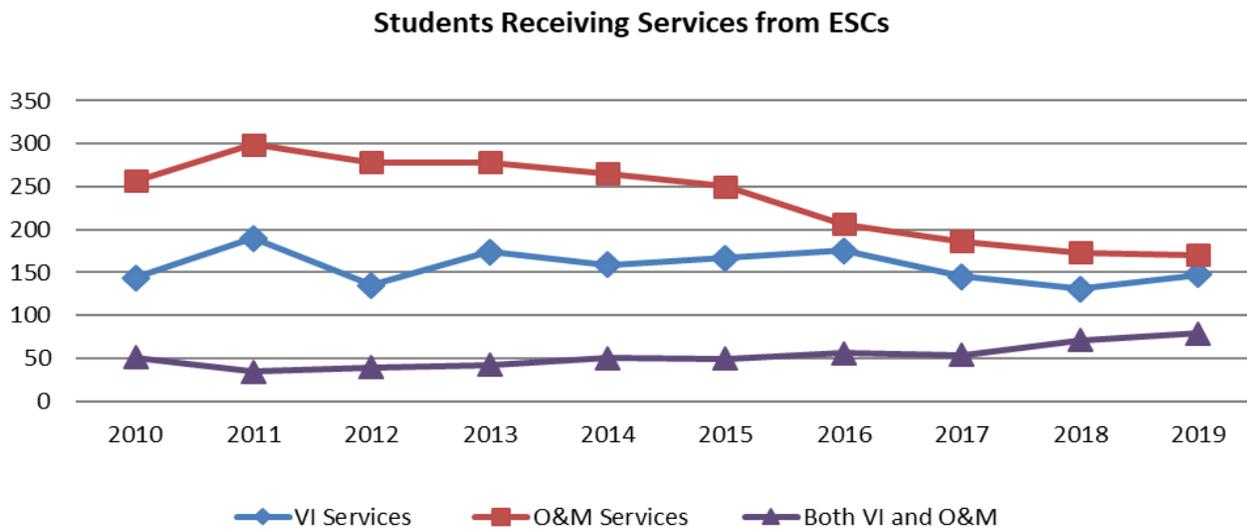
ESCs are a *major* part of the state’s infrastructure that ensures access to high quality VI services. Regional specialists in visual impairments are critical players in the provision of technical assistance, leadership, workshops, and materials for VI professionals, families, and students. They also assist TVIs and 112 braille transcribers within the state in braille production. They act as a vital source of information on VI-related issues for special education administrators in the region. A significant portion of Texas’ reputation for leadership in visual

impairments is due to the high level of skills and services provided by its VI specialists in regional education service centers.

In the regions where direct services are provided, the ESC staff members are listed on the student’s individualized education program (IEP). Currently, 8 ESCs provide O&M services, 5 provide VI services, and 3 provide both. Table 5 reflects the number of students receiving direct services from the ESCs. ESCs are providing more direct services overall this year. ESC consultants noted increases in the number of students in rural areas and in charter schools this year; both could be reasons for the increase.

Table 5: Students Receiving Services from ESCs

	2017	2018	2019
VI-only services (5 regions)	145	131	147
O&M-only services (8 regions)	186	173	170
Both VI and O&M services (3 regions)	54	71	79
Total	385	375	396



The provision of direct services from an ESC depends on many factors, including population size, region/district agreements, regional service delivery options, and fiscal constraints. While many factors can affect the number of students served by ESCs, the local districts’ capacity to meet the needs of their students is a primary one. The increase in local COMS staff likely explains the decrease in O&M services from ESCs over the past decade.

Overall perceptions of caseloads

For the first time in 10 years, fewer than half of the ESCs reported an increase in caseloads for both their TVIs and COMS.

Since 2010, this survey also asked about perceptions of overall changes in caseloads regionally. The survey did not ask about specific districts or how many districts in a region experienced a change. The VI consultants were asked to use their professional expertise in their estimates.

Table 6: VI ESC Consultants’ Perception of Regional Overall Changes in Caseloads

	TVIs	COMS
Increases 2019	9	9
Decreases	2	1
No significant change	6	6
Unknown	3	4

This year, 9 of 20 education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs and COMS (not all ESCs were able to report on caseloads). Others noted caseloads remained the same. Three of the ESCs reported that TVI or O&M caseloads had experienced a decrease in their region. It is likely that the additional 14 part-time TVIs and 15 part-time COMS added to the VI field this year played a significant role in decreasing caseloads in some parts of the state.

Cultural diversity

Texas saw an increase in the total number of VI professionals who are African-American, Asian-American or Hispanic.

Texas is a diverse state and requires a diverse workforce to serve its citizens. This survey asks about African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American VI professionals in relation to services provided. It also queries the number of VI professionals fluent in Spanish. The results from the survey follow.

Table 7: Culturally Diverse VI Professionals

Hispanic VI Professionals

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs	69	82	87
COMSs	18	18	22
Dually certified	6	5	7
Total	93	105	116

Spanish-Speaking VI Professionals

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs	74	77	72
COMSs	26	20	19
Dually certified	8	9	5
Total	108	106	96

African-American VI Professionals

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs	28	34	35
COMSs	16	15	20
Dually certified	1	1	0
Total	45	50	55

Asian-American VI Professionals

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs	6	6	8
COMSs	4	3	5
Dually certified	0	0	0
Total	10	9	13

This year there was an increase in diversity of VI professionals in Texas. Looking at specific categories, the number of VI professionals who are Asian-American increased by 4 individuals, African-American increased by 5 and Hispanic VI professionals increased by 11. Those fluent in Spanish decreased by 10 this year, however, so only 10% of the VI field are fluent Spanish speakers. ESC consultants and TSBVI staff were also asked to provide the number of Native-American and Caucasian VI professionals working in their region/school. Data provided showed that the majority of VI professionals in Texas are Caucasian, and there were no Native-American TVIs or COMSs identified. Recruiting and retaining ethnically and culturally diverse educators continues to be an important goal in Texas to reflect the student demographics.

VI professionals who have a visual impairment

An average of 21 VI professionals with a visual impairment serve in the role of a TVI or O&M specialist in Texas each year.

The ESCs were asked how many VI professionals serving in districts within their regions are visually impaired. The ESCs reported that a total of 23 VI professionals in Texas are blind or

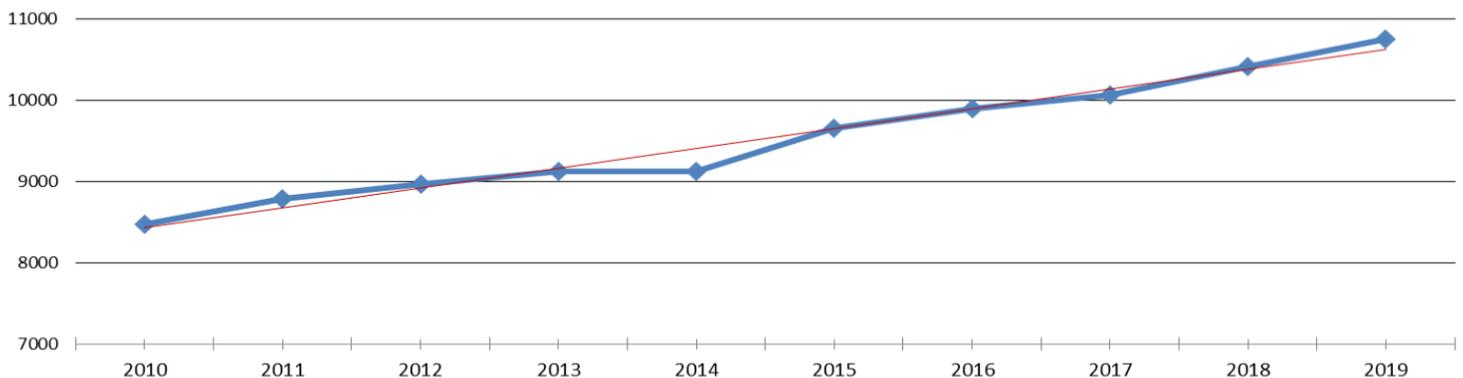
have a visual impairment, a decrease of 1 individual from last year. This includes direct service providers, ESC leadership, and TSBVI statewide consultants.

Growth in Population of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals

In January, 2019 there were 10,753 students with visual impairments in Texas, an increase of 3.2% in just one year. Although Texas has seen considerably higher increases over the last two years (over 3%), data collected since 2000 project that the student population will increase by an average of 2.6% per year over the next 3 years (an additional 868 students) for a total of 11,621 students by 2022.

Below is a graph that displays the growth in the number of students with visual impairments over a 10-year span. Texas has seen a trend of an increase in students each year with a slight drop only in 2014. Totals climbed once again in 2015 with the largest amount of growth seen since data has been reported (5.8%). Totals have continued to rise over the last 4 years.

Students with Visual Impairments in Texas



Impact on teachers of students with visual impairments

It is projected that Texas will need approximately 58 additional full-time equivalent (72 individuals) by 2022 to accommodate student growth alone.

Statewide, the student-to-teacher ratio stayed about the same in 2019 at 17 students per TVI full-time equivalent (FTE) position. Looking back over the past 10 years, caseloads have averaged approximately 15 students per TVI FTE. If this ratio is applied to the number of expected new students, it is projected that Texas will need approximately 58 additional FTEs by 2022 to accommodate student growth. However, given that only 76% of TVIs are full-time, it will take more individuals to meet the expected need of 58 FTEs. If the current average ratio of

full- to part-time teachers continues, the number of TVIs needed to total 58 FTEs will be closer to 72 individuals.

Impact on O&M specialists

It is projected that Texas will need a minimum of 38 full-time equivalent (48 individuals) orientation and mobility specialists to meet expected student growth over the next three years.

Information about students with visual impairments is collected each January. The 2019 *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* indicated that the percentage of students who were receiving O&M services is approximately 40%, a very slight increase from last year. The number of O&M service providers increased significantly this year as an additional 344 students were evaluated for services and 175 students were added to caseloads. It is anticipated that by 2022, 4,957 students will be receiving O&M services, an additional 680 students.

Although the total number of COMS increased this year statewide, the average student-to-COMS caseload stayed at just under 18 students per FTE. Approximately seventeen students per COMS is the average ratio seen over a 10-year period. Using this year's data to predict need, by 2022 Texas will need an additional 40 full-time equivalent (FTE) orientation and mobility specialists to meet expected student growth.

In Texas, full-time equivalent positions can be quite different from the number of individuals needed to equal the FTEs, especially with O&M specialists. In 2019, 57.5% of COMSs were employed full-time. These O&M specialists work full-time in a single district or contract with several districts. If the current ratio of full- to part-time individuals is applied, the number of individual O&M specialists needed to result in 40 FTEs is likely to be closer to 57 individuals.

Variance in growth of students with visual impairments and O&M services

It is unknown how many of the projected 11,621 students with visual impairments may need O&M services by 2022.

The gap in the average growth rate of students (2.6% per yr.) and the lack of change seen in O&M average caseloads is a concern. Although the number of students receiving O&M services in 2019 increased slightly above the 10-year average, the number of students with visual impairments who will be eligible to receive O&M services over the next three years cannot be determined. As of January 2019, approximately 25% of current students had not been evaluated by an O&M specialist.

Attrition

It should be noted that the attrition data collected in this survey specifically addresses those who have left the field. The data do not include those who move from school employment to private contractual work, change districts, or retire and re-hire in the same or a different district.

Attrition increased slightly in 2019 for VI professionals as a whole, by a total of 5 individuals. Specifically, the ESCs reported that 8 COMS, 31 TVIs and 5 dually certified VI professionals left the field in 2019. This year's attrition total of 44 individuals is slightly higher than the 5-year average of thirty-nine.

The VI field's 4.4% attrition rate in 2019 is significantly lower than the steady 10% attrition rate of certified teachers as a whole across the state each year. Although the VI field includes O&M specialists who do not have to be a certified teacher, this comparison is still a good indicator of the high commitment VI professionals have to the VI field and the students they serve. In addition, VI professionals in Texas have the added benefit of being paired with a trained, experienced mentor. Support is also offered at both the region and statewide level through education service centers and the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Programs.

Table 8: Actual Attrition within the Past Year (1-Year Attrition)

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs	38	33	31
COMSs	3	2	8
Dually certified	0	4	5
Total	41	39	44

Attrition factors

Students with visual impairments are a low-prevalence and extremely diverse population. VI professionals are critical to student learning, therefore, a change of just one VI professional in a single district can have a dramatic effect on the annual yearly progress of students.

Currently, the average student-to-teacher ratio for a TVI is equal to that of a classroom teacher and the average number of students on an O&M specialist's caseload is even greater. Therefore, retention is of critical concern. Unlike other disciplines, even in other high-need subject areas, when a VI professional is unavailable, often there is no one else in the district with the specific expertise needed to assess and meet the unique educational needs of students with visual impairments.

Factors that consistently impact recruitment and attrition of general and special education classroom teachers influence VI professionals as well. Administrative support, workload and working conditions and lack of support in their new role are among the factors reported in the most current research. Additional considerations unique to the attrition and retention of the VI professional are:

- VI professionals have a unique skill-set and can be difficult to find.
- TVIs make up less than 0.2% of certified teachers in Texas and O&M Specialists are an even smaller group. Consequently, most administrators and educators are unaware of the VI field and the specialized services that a VI professional provides.
- Most VI professionals are mid-career professionals and are likely to have shorter careers in this second field.

As mentioned previously, the current attrition rate for VI professionals is 4.4%. This might sound small, however, the loss of “just” 44 individuals can have a critical impact on students with visual impairments and the VI field as there are limited number of individuals to replace them.

Recruitment of new candidates into the certification programs is imperative in addition to spreading awareness of the careers that allow for working with students with a visual impairment. Current high school, community/junior college and university students in addition to educators already teaching in the schools must have knowledge of the VI field and its possibilities before they can seek out information and routes that lead to a certification as a TVI or COMS in Texas.

Projected 3-year attrition

ESC consultants project that, overall, 120 VI professionals will leave the field within the next 3 years.

Projected attrition data is valuable for predicting and preparing for the VI professionals needed in the near future. VI consultants at the ESCs are the best and only source for information on future attrition for VI professionals. Gathering accurate data regarding a VI professional’s retirement plans can be challenging. In general, VI consultants at the ESCs must rely on others for the information. Some people may be reluctant to share their plans or their plans may change in the interim period. Others may retire from their job, but take another contractual job in another district. Historically, projection totals are below actual attrition, especially for TVIs. ESCs tend to project that a higher number of COMS will leave the field than actually do.

Individuals who function as dually certified have both VI and O&M expertise. Projecting the attrition of dually certified personnel appears to be especially difficult with a reliable degree of accuracy. This is a fluid group. Based on district need, an individual may function as dually

certified one year but not the next. The information below includes individuals who are dually certified in both categories (and cannot be added). The “Overall” data reflects all VI professionals and has been adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

It is important to note that the data addresses individuals who will leave the field. The data do not include those who move from school employment to private contractual work, change districts, or retire and re-hire in the same or a different district.

Table 9: Projected 3-Year Attrition

Projections made in:	2017	2018	2019
TVIs₁	92	91	92
COMSs₁	27	28	40
Overall₁	105	109	120

¹Projections by ESC consultants reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, TVIs and COMSs include data for dually certified staff and cannot be totaled. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

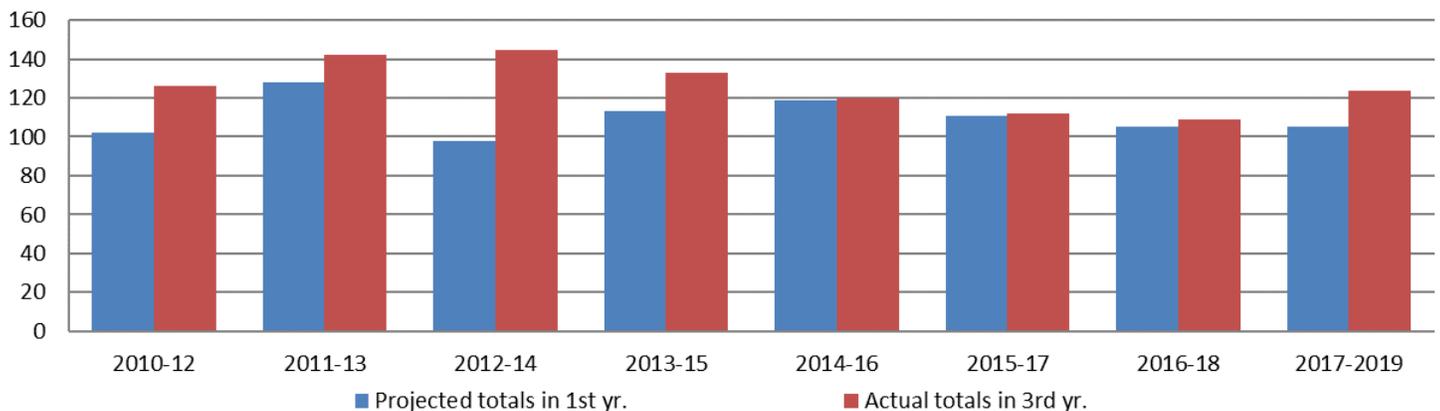
In 2019, VI consultants at the ESCs estimate 40 COMS will leave the field over the next 3 years, the highest total on record. Consultants project that 92 TVIs will leave and, overall, 120 VI professionals will leave the field within the next 3 years. This is a higher number than projected in 2017 and 2018. If the 120 projection is accurate, we can expect that 12% of *existing* VI professionals will retire or otherwise leave the field prior to 2022.

Projected vs. actual attrition

VI professionals at the ESCs are the best and only source for statewide information on attrition over the past year and projected attrition over the next three years.

ESC-estimated three-year attrition projection totals over the last several years have turned out to be extremely close to the actual number of VI professionals who left the field. This year that number was a little higher. Looking at the most recent 3-year time frame, in 2017 it was projected that 105 people would leave the field by 2019. The field actually lost 124 VI professionals, a difference of 19 individuals.

Projected versus Actual Attrition



Actual 3 year attrition	126	142	145	134	120	112	109	124
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* 2017–2019 is the last time frame for which a complete set of data is available.

In summary, during the economic downturn, the projections exceeded the actual attrition. This trend was reversed in 2012 when 25% more VI professionals left the field than projected in 2010. ESCs appeared to be closing the gap between projected and actual attrition starting the following year, however, this year actual attrition exceeded projections once again. Although these ESC projections are the most accurate source available, they may understate real attrition.

Anticipated Need

Interpreting and understanding the need for educational professionals traditionally relies on several factors, including the number of posted positions and recommendations from knowledgeable professionals. Below (Table 10 and the graph that follows) are data from each of these areas. The expected student growth of 868 students over the next 3 years should be kept in mind when considering the anticipated need for VI professionals who will serve them.

Posted positions

This year the number of existing vacancies, after all typical hiring had been completed, increased significantly from 18 to 31.

The respondents at each ESC and at TSBVI were asked how many part- or full-time positions were posted in their regions or at TSBVI in September 2019. These data were collected in September and reflect numbers after all regular hiring for the academic year had been completed. These positions remained unfilled and active because districts were unable to find a VI professional or the positions were opened after the start of the school year.

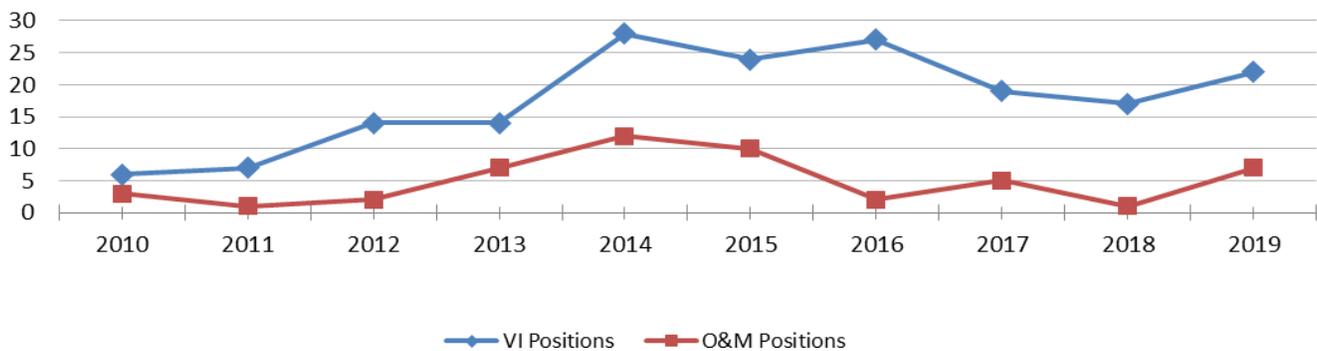
Table 10: Posted Positions

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs	19	17	22
COMSs	5	1	7
Dually certified	3	0	2
Total	27	18	31

Previous formal and informal data indicates that vacancies alone are a poor indicator of actual need. The reasons vary. Many administrators will identify a need and encourage an existing

educator to get VI certification rather than post a vacancy. The need for a private contract TVI or O&M position may not necessarily be posted. Regardless of the reason, data collected since 1996 indicates a poor correlation between vacancies in September and the need for VI professionals. The exception was seen in 2016 when the number of posted positions matched the attrition number. This year, after all typical hiring had been completed, there were a total of 31 posted positions. Although this number is the highest it's been in four years (reached 37 in 2015), it is significantly less than the attrition total of forty-four.

Posted Vacancies for VI Professionals



Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals

The ESCs’ long-term need estimation peaked this year for TVIs at 168, an increase of 34% from 2018 and the highest on record. ESCs anticipate needing 42% more COMS across the state than estimated last year.

Regional VI consultants are the experts in visual impairments for their region. VI consultants and TSBVI staff were asked how many TVIs, O&M specialists, and dually certified personnel were needed in their area based on projected student growth and how many staff are expected to leave the field. The survey asked about projected need, not about positions available. However, historically, positions follow the availability of VI professionals.

There are two ways to assess the shorter- and longer-term projected needs: either by job assignment or by professional expertise. The terms “TVI” or “COMS” indicate a type of expertise as expressed through the certification in a professional discipline. Those in the “dually certified” category hold both certifications and function in both professional disciplines.

Functioning as a dually certified VI professional primarily reflects district need and therefore is a job assignment and not a unique discipline. Dually certified assignments are also very fluid and vary from year to year. For the purposes of this section of the report, the data reported will be by professional expertise, not by job assignment. Understanding need by expertise informs future training and funding needs. Dually certified VI professionals function as part-time TVIs

and part-time COMSs. As such they will be added to both areas as part-time TVIs and O&M specialists.

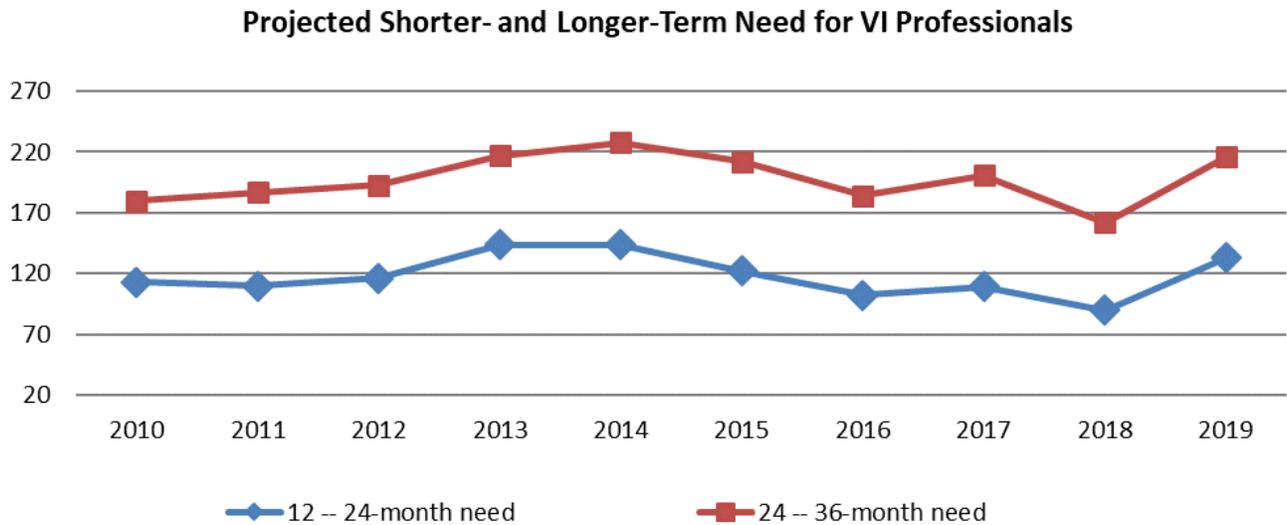


Table 11: Projected Short-Term Need: 12–24 Months

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs₁	76	69	103
COMSs₁	46	33	52
Overall₁	109	90	133

¹ Projections reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, “TVIs” and “COMSs” include data for dually certified staff in both categories and cannot be totaled. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

Table 12: Projected Longer-Term Need: 24–36 Months

	2017	2018	2019
TVIs₁	149	125	168
COMS₁	73	57	81
Overall₁	201	162	216

¹ Projections reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, “TVIs” and “COMSs” include data for dually certified staff in both categories and cannot be totaled. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

Both the projected short-term and longer-term need peaked in 2014, falling two years in a row before increasing in both the TVI and COMS categories in 2017. Both totals saw a substantial

decrease in 2018. This year, totals have risen once again with ESCs projecting a need for 133 VI professionals within the next one to two years and 216 within the next three years.

Given the anticipated student growth, it is good to see that lowered projections by the ESCs did not become a trend once again and that anticipated totals for both TVIs and COMS over the next 1- 3 years increased significantly. The ESCs’ long-term need estimation peaked this year for TVIs at 168, an increase of 34% from 2018 and the highest on record. ESCs anticipate needing 42% more COMS across the state than estimated last year.

Discussion of projected need and teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs)

Texas is projected to need between 150 and 164 TVIs in the next 3 years to accommodate both attrition and student growth.

The projected need for certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) increased significantly in both the shorter-term and longer-term need category. As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (pages 14-15), Texas will need between 58 and 72 TVIs to meet the anticipated growth in the number of students with visual impairments.

In addition to meeting the needs related to expected demographic increases, Texas will need to replace TVIs who leave the field. It is projected that 92 individuals with VI expertise (TVIs and dually certified professionals) will leave the field prior to 2022. Although ESC consultants have projected closer to actual numbers in recent years, historically the 3-year attrition ratios for those with VI expertise have exceeded projections up to 15%. Therefore, it is possible that attrition could be closer to 106 full- and part-time individuals certified as teachers of students with visual impairments.

Combining projected growth and attrition, Texas will need between 150 and 164 teachers of students with visual impairments in the next 3 years to replace those who are likely to leave and respond to anticipated growth. The ESC projection of 168 TVIs needed in that time period falls just above this range, a difference of 2.4%.

Table 13: Projected Need and TVIs

Number of TVIs needed to meet student growth	58 - 72
Number of TVIs needed due to attrition	92
Total FTE needed by 2022	150 - 164

In the Fall of 2019, 96 people were seeking VI certification through a university program in Texas. Forty-seven were working under an emergency permit. Consequently, these TVIs are

already working with students and included in this count as TVIs. If the university TVI program completion rates continue to reflect the 3-year average (2017-2019) of 42 completers, the number of newly certified TVIs (126) will fall well below the range of anticipated need. Given that university enrollment closely reflects the amount of stipends available and assuming tuition costs continue to increase at a steady rate, funding will remain an essential factor in the training of new TVIs.

Discussion of projected need and O&M specialists

Texas is projected to need 88 additional O&M specialists over the next three years to accommodate both attrition and student growth.

The projected need for orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) increased significantly in both the shorter- and longer-term categories. Projecting need for O&M specialists included consideration of the following additional factors:

- * At this point, there are no reliable statistical projections on the percentage of students with visual impairments who will need O&M services *at any given time*.
- * Further, approximately 25% of current students with visual impairments have not had an O&M evaluation to determine whether they need O&M services.
- * TEC 30.002 requires that *initial* evaluations of students with visual impairments include an O&M evaluation.

Table 13: Projected Need and COMSs

Number of COMSs needed to meet student growth	40 - 57
Number of COMSs needed due to attrition	40
Total FTE needed by 2022	80-97

As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (pages 14-15), Texas will need between 40 and 57 O&M specialists to meet the anticipated growth in the number of students with visual impairments.

Regional VI consultants project that 40 people with O&M expertise (O&M specialists and dually certified professionals) will be leaving the field by 2022. If the expected student growth is combined with the 3-year projected attrition and based on statewide average student-to-teacher ratios, it is likely that Texas will need between 80 and 97 additional full- and part-time O&M specialists over the next 3 years. The projected longer-term need of 81 made by the ESC consultants, who know their regions best, falls within this range. The statewide projected need for COMS has not been this high since 2015 when ESCs projected the same total. The next

step is for districts to ensure that all students with visual impairments receive an initial orientation and mobility evaluation and consideration by an O&M specialist of their need for an evaluation every three years. Only then can the educational team members be assured that those who need O&M instruction are receiving it.

Universities are maximizing their existing resources to produce COMS. An average of 29 individuals completed the orientation and mobility certification process over the last three years. Presuming that the number of completers continues at the same rate, and that districts will hire the O&M specialists, the need for 80 new COMS by 2022 will not only be met but exceeded. Although this is encouraging, future attrition should be taken into consideration.

Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals

Texas is fortunate to have two collaborative partners who train VI professionals: Texas Tech University (TTU) and Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU). Both schools have graduate programs for TVIs and O&M specialists. SFASU also has an undergraduate program for orientation and mobility specialists. In fact, SFASU’s undergraduate O&M program is the only one of its kind in the country. Both schools serve students throughout the state with a combination of distance-learning and face-to-face courses.

The combination of distance-learning options and supportive funding has had a major impact on the number of VI professionals in Texas. Enrollments increased substantially with the development of distance-learning options in 1998. Since then, another significant factor affecting enrollment and adding professionals to the VI field seems to be the availability of tuition support.

Students registered in Texas programs

The total number of students registered for courses leading to certification fell this year in both the VI and O&M programs, to approximately 7% lower than that of the 5-year average.

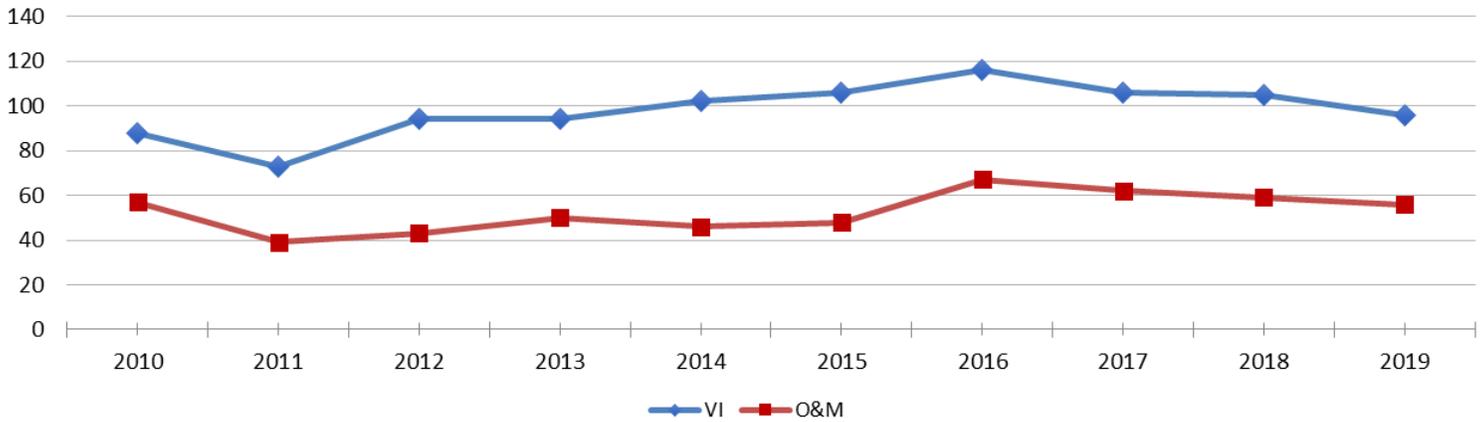
As noted in the chart below and graph that follows, a total of 152 students were registered for courses leading to certification, including ninety-six individuals who are seeking VI certification and 56 who are en route to O&M certification. The total number of students fell this year in both the VI and O&M programs, approximately 7% lower than that of the 5-year average (164).

Table 14: Number of Students in Training Programs

	2017	2018	2019
Visual impairments	106	105	96
Orientation and mobility (incl. undergraduates)	62	59	56

Total	168	164	152
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Number of Individuals Registered for Courses in Fall of Each Year



Students completing Texas certification programs

Thirty-six individuals completed VI training and 21 completed their O&M program in 2019, preparing 30% fewer new VI professionals than the year before.

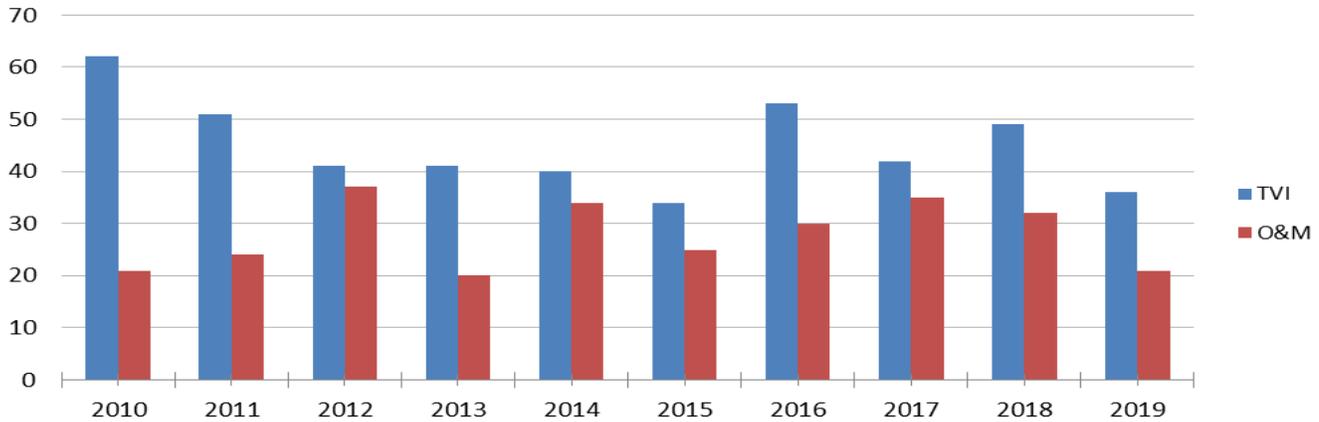
As can be seen in Table 15 and the graph below, over the past year, a total of 57 Texas residents completed their certification programs. This is a significant drop from the prior year, despite rising student numbers in the public schools.

It should be noted that unlike students seeking VI certification who may be eligible to work as a TVI under an emergency permit before completing their program, COMS candidates must complete their entire program before they can start working as an O&M specialist. O&M certification is a national certification and valid in any state. It is also applicable for all age groups, not just for school-age students. Unless school districts hire graduating O&M specialists, many new O&M specialists may take positions elsewhere. It is hoped that most new O&M specialists will find jobs in Texas in education.

Table 15: Number of Individuals Completing Certification Programs

	2017	2018	2019
Visual impairments	42	49	36
Orientation and mobility (incl. undergraduates)	35	32	21
Total	77	81	57

Number of Individuals Completing Certification Programs



Students receiving financial assistance in Texas certification programs

Over two-thirds of students enrolled in the SFASU and TTU VI and O&M training programs receive financial support through Texas grants.

In 2019, the percentage of students in personnel preparation programs (VI Certification and O&M) receiving financial assistance was 76%. Eighty percent of those in the TVI certification programs and 68% in the O&M programs received assistance. Tuition support is a strong incentive for enrollment especially considering that gaining a certification to work with students with visual impairments does not typically lead to an increase in salary.

Table 14: Percentage of Students Receiving Support through Texas Grants

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Percentage of students receiving TX stipends	83%	79%	79%	76%

Increases in the number of VI professionals appear to be directly affected by tuition. Therefore, with the expectation that tuition will continue to rise, existing funding will provide less support to students than in previous years. This creates a greater challenge in meeting the need for an adequate number of VI professionals. In addition to the need for more funding for student tuition going forward, as the university programs continue to grow to meet statewide shortages, there is also a need for increased program operation funding, particularly funds to hire additional full-time faculty to improve program quality and meet teacher candidate needs.

Summary

This report reviewed characteristics of and indicators of need for VI professionals. In September 2019, Texas had 992 individuals (898.2 FTEs) providing vision-related services,

either directly to students or in a leadership and/or technical-assistance capacity. After adjusting for dually certified professionals (63), there are 937 individuals providing direct service either on a full- or part-time basis. The total includes the following full- or part-time individuals:

- 694 teachers certified in visual impairments (TVIs) or 610 FTEs; an increase of only 6 FTEs over a 2-year period.
- 306 certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) or 241 FTEs; an increase of 18 individuals and 10.5 FTEs from 2018.
- 63 dually certified professionals; a slight decrease from 66 in 2018.

In addition, there are:

- 55 regional or statewide leadership or technical-assistance specialists (45.1 FTEs)
 - 27 individuals or 23.5 FTEs are at the regional education service centers (ESC)
 - 28 individuals or 23.8 FTEs are at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired either in Outreach or Short-Term Programs

With a current total of 27, the number of individuals providing leadership and technical assistance at the ESCs increased by three individuals in 2019. The time available to assist districts and families went up; ESCs reported 23.5 FTEs this year and 19.3 in 2018.

The total number of VI providers (both TVIs and COMS) increased to 937 individuals (adjusted for dual certified professionals), from 903 in 2018. The number of individual TVIs increased by 13 (6FTEs), while the number of students increased by 347 across the state. The number of COMSs increased from 288 to 306 individuals, or by 6.25%. The additional staff will play a vital role as 25% of the current number of students with a visual impairment are still in need of an O&M evaluation.

Overall, the VI field saw an increase in African-American VI professionals (+5), Hispanic VI professionals (+11) and Asian-American VI professionals (+4). Although there were increases in totals in 2019, continued efforts to expand diversity to reflect the student demographic are still indicated.

This report uses a knowledgeable informant model to project need, as using posted vacancies has not been a reliable method. It considers the recommendations of the VI specialists at the regional education service centers to be the best indicators of real need in Texas. These professionals have extensive knowledge of their districts and region. ESC estimates indicate a growing need for additional VI professionals over the next three years. Specifically, their

projected long-term need overall for VI professionals is among the highest on record at 216 (adjusted for dually certified professionals).

An examination of attrition, projected attrition, student population growth and need within the past year yielded mixed results. The attrition rate in 2019 increased by 5 individuals and falls above the 5-year average of 39 across all VI professionals. This year a total of 44 VI professionals left the VI field.

The projected 3-year attrition rate was estimated at 120, or 12% of all VI professionals. This is a much higher number than seen over the last two years, with the majority of the increase projected for COMS. Although the regional VI consultants are the best predictors for attrition and the projected vs. actual attrition gap has been almost closed in recent years, even they have underestimated attrition for TVIs and COMS in the past. Therefore, it is likely that as retirements are realized, attrition over the next 3 years will continue to be a pertinent factor in planning for an adequate number of VI professionals.

A long-term examination of growth patterns predicts that the number of students with visual impairments needing services will increase by at least 2.6% each year, or by 868 additional students over the next three years. It is expected that Texas will have at least 11,621 students with visual impairments by 2022. Therefore, Texas could see a need for 72 additional full-time equivalent TVIs and 57 full-time equivalent COMS by 2022 to accommodate student growth alone.

Considering the average projected increase in the statewide student population each year in addition to anticipated attrition, Texas could see a need for 150-164 additional full-time equivalent TVIs and 80-97 full-time equivalent COMS by 2022. The long-term need estimated by the ESCs closely parallels this projection.

It is of concern that the number of enrolled university certification participants and completers both dropped this year. University programs will need to increase or at the very least maintain their average number of completers in order to meet the expanding need for additional VI professionals statewide.

Clearly, based on student growth and projected attrition, Texas has a growing need for VI professionals. Although an increase in university enrollment and in the number of completers are both attainable goals, tuition support is imperative in sustaining an adequate number of newly certified TVIs and O&M specialists needed to serve the growing number of children with visual impairments across the state.

Appendix

Methodology

The ESC consultant and TSBVI survey asked about the number of people *functioning* as VI professionals. These individuals may be TVIs, O&M specialists, or both. Those *functioning* in both roles are referred to as being dually certified. The VI professionals provide instruction to students in a direct or consultative capacity and/or provide leadership or technical assistance from regional education service centers (ESCs) or Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). Those who provide leadership or technical assistance may have full- or part-time positions.

Texas employs both full- and part-time VI professionals. Full-time professionals are those who work at least .6 FTE or more. Part-time professionals are those who work .5 FTE or less. This method has been used by TEA and is considered to be an adequate estimate of the number of full-time equivalent VI professionals. Part-time VI professionals are a significant proportion of the Texas VI workforce (23% of the TVIs and 40% of the O&M specialists).

When relevant, information about full-time equivalent (FTE) positions is also presented. The number of FTE staff was determined by multiplying the number of people employed in part-time positions by .5 and adding the result to the number of people employed as full-time VI professionals (part-time X .5 + full-time = FTE).

The descriptive and need data reflect statewide totals of a combination of TVIs and O&M professionals. Data on each profession are also included separately. When appropriate, data on dually certified VI professionals are also presented.

People who provide both O&M and VI services (dually certified) are counted as part-time TVI and part-time O&M. Although they may be full-time employees of a district or cooperative, dually certified professionals are considered part-time TVIs and part-time O&M specialists. As a result, dually certified individuals appear on both the TVI and O&M tables as part-time professionals. This results in a variance between the data listed in the Statewide Totals table (Table 1) and the combined totals of the Direct-Service Provider tables (Tables 2 and 3). Simply adding together the discipline-specific totals would result in double-counting some individuals. Statewide totals are adjusted for dually certified professionals.

This survey captures information about the number of individuals working with students with visual impairments in the state of Texas in either a full- or part-time capacity. It does not gather information on the number of districts that employ full- and/or part-time VI professionals. Full- and part-time status is broadly defined. Individuals who work part-time but in multiple districts are considered “full-time VI professionals.” The reference to “full-time” or “part-time” refers to

the total employment of the VI professional, not to how long a specific district employs a VI professional.

For the purposes of this survey, professionals who are certified *and* employed in both visual impairments and orientation and mobility (dually certified) are counted as a part-time teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) and a part-time orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). These specialists are embedded in the TVI data and the COMS data. Specific information on dually certified VI professionals is listed in Table 4. Information about the number of combined direct-service providers has been adjusted for dually certified professionals.

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