

2015



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Texas School for the
Blind and Visually
Impaired

Based on Previous
Analysis
Model by KC Dignan,
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Updated 2015 SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONALS IN VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS 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. Updated to corrected numbers of students receiving orientation and mobility services (see pages 8, 13 & 20).



2015 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 VI consultants at the Education Service Centers, university VI programs and TSBVI to assess the characteristics of and need for VI professionals in Texas. “VI professionals” includes teachers certified in visual impairments (TVIs) and certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMS). The most striking findings of the September 2015 survey include:

- In 2015, the **total number** of VI professionals, including leadership positions, decreased to 955 individuals. The number of direct service providers in 2015 reflects two trends - continuing growth in the number of COMS (plus 21) and a decline over time in the number of part time TVIs (16 fewer).
 - The number of COMS providing direct service rose to 280 (217 FTEs). This was a 19% increase from 2013.
 - The number of full- and part-time TVIs providing direct service dropped by 16, from 708 to 692.
- Reports of **increased caseloads** continue.
- For the sixth year in a row, the majority of regional VI consultants reported increasing caseloads for TVIs and COMS overall. Specifically, 14 of 20 education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs and 15 saw an increase in caseloads for COMS. Others noted caseloads remained the same. There were no reports of O&M caseloads decreasing across the state.
- **The attrition from the previous year** decreased slightly in 2015, although it was still higher than projected.
- In 2015, 42 VI professionals were reported to have left the field in the previous year. This is a decrease from the 49 VI professionals reported in 2014 and identical to attrition reported in 2013.
- In 2013 it was projected that 113 VI professionals would leave the field by 2015. In fact, 133 left, 18% more than projected.
- **The cultural diversity of VI professionals continues to be a challenge.**
- The number of Hispanic VI professionals decreased in 2015, from 98 to 97.
- In 2015, there were 37 African-American VI professionals, a decrease of 3.
- **Universities are training as many VI professionals as funds allow.** There are a total of 154 future VI professionals in a program leading to certification as either TVIs or COMS. Seventy four percent of these students are receiving financial support through Texas stipends for their training.

- **The number of students with visual impairments continues to grow.** In 2015 the number of students reported to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* increased by 531, or 6%.

Contents

- Contents 3
- Introduction..... 4
- Characteristics of VI Professionals in Texas..... 4
 - Number of VI professionals in Texas 4
 - Dually certified VI professionals 8
 - Direct services provided by ESCs 9
 - Overall perceptions of caseloads 10
 - Ethnic diversity 11
- Growth in Population of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals ... 12
- Attrition 13
 - Critical factors related to attrition of VI professionals 14
 - Projected 3-year attrition 15
 - Projected vs. actual attrition 16
- Anticipated Need 16
 - Posted positions..... 17
 - Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals 18
 - Discussion of projected need and VI teachers (TVIs) 19
 - Discussion of projected need and O&M specialists 20
- Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals..... 21
- Summary 23
- Appendix..... 26
 - Methodology 26
- References 28

Introduction

Since 1996, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has conducted an annual survey to assess supply and demand for VI professionals in Texas. The term “VI professionals” includes teachers certified in 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 2015.

Data were collected from the 20 regional education service centers (ESCs) and the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (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 certified in visual impairment (TVI or VI teacher) 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.

Number of VI professionals in Texas

This information has been gathered annually for 20 years. Over that time the number of VI professionals has risen with only the occasional drop in numbers as reflected in data collected this year. The number of VI professionals in Texas is 955 individuals, or 885 full-time equivalents (FTEs). While the number of VI professionals decreased by 0.5% in 2015, the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* from Spring 2015 identified 531 additional students, a 5.8% increase in the student population. (TSBVI, 2015).

Below is a graph that displays the changes in the number of VI professionals over a 20-year span, from 1996-2015.

Number of VI Professionals in Texas

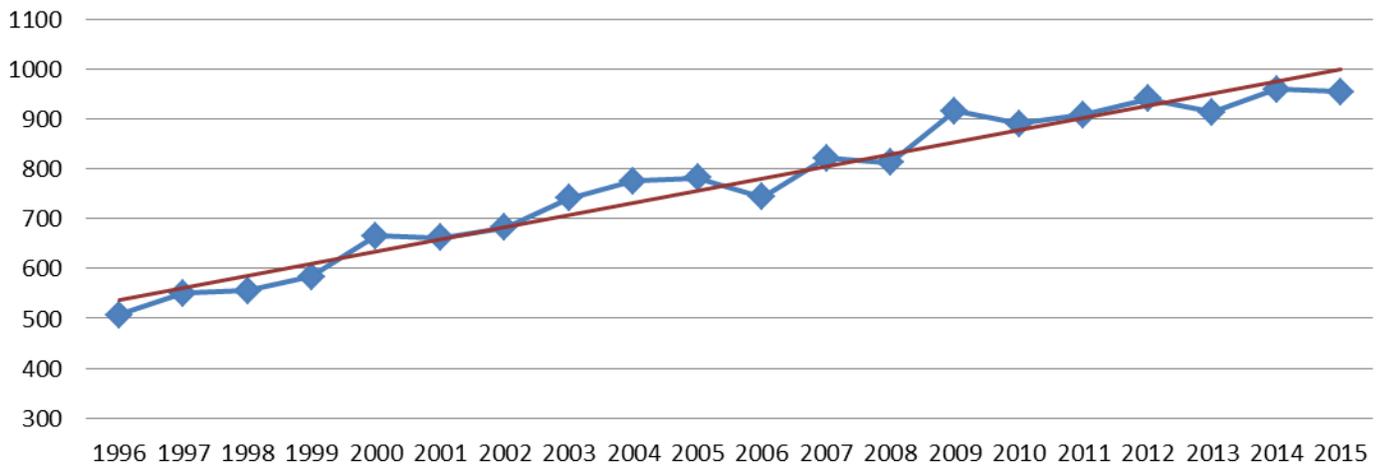


Table 1 that follows provides further details about VI professionals in Texas within the last 3 years. The term “individuals” includes both full- and part-time VI professionals. The full-time equivalent (FTE) data adjusts for the part-time VI professionals, including those who are dually certified.

Table 1: Total VI Professionals Statewide

	2013		2014		2015	
	Individuals	FTE ²	Individuals	FTE ²	Individuals	FTE ²
ESC leadership¹	28	20.7	29	18.4	26	18.7
TSBVI statewide¹	28	25.6	29	26.15	28	26.9
VI and O&M service providers (adjusted for dually certified professionals)	858	799	902	840	901	840
Total VI professionals	914	845.3	960	884.55	955	885.6

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 0.5) + full time for all charts

Direct-service providers

Below are data regarding full and part time direct service providers. The term “direct-service providers” includes teachers certified in 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 does not include those who provide vision-related leadership, technical assistance, or statewide services at the regional education service centers (ESCs) or the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) through the Short-Term Programs or 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 but 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.

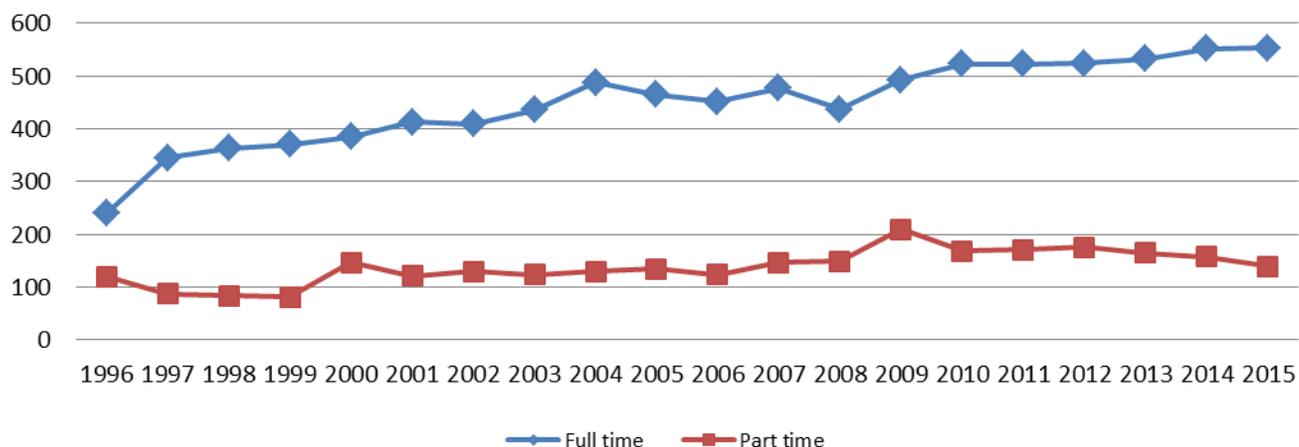
For the purposes of this survey, professionals who are certified *and* employed in both visual impairments and orientation and mobility (dually certified) are counted as a part-time teacher certified in visual impairments (TVI) and a part-time orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). These specialists 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 Certified in Visual Impairments (TVIs)

	2013		2014		2015	
	Individuals	FTE	Individuals	FTE	Individuals	FTE
Full-time TVIs	532		551		553	
Part-time TVIs	165		157		139	
Total VI staff	697	614.5	708	629.5	692	622.5

FTE = part time x 0.5 + full time for all charts

Full- and Part-time TVIs



The total number of *individuals* (full and part time) who work as a TVI decreased in the year 2015 by 16 individuals, or by 2%. The decrease was seen in part-time individuals; the number of full-time VI teachers grew slightly.

This decrease in the availability of TVIs is of concern given that 1,994 additional students have been added to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* since the number of TVIs peaked at 701 in 2009.

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

	2013		2014		2015	
	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹
Full-time COMS	130		162		154	
Part-time COMS	106		97		126	
Total O&M staff	236	182.5	259	210.5	280	217

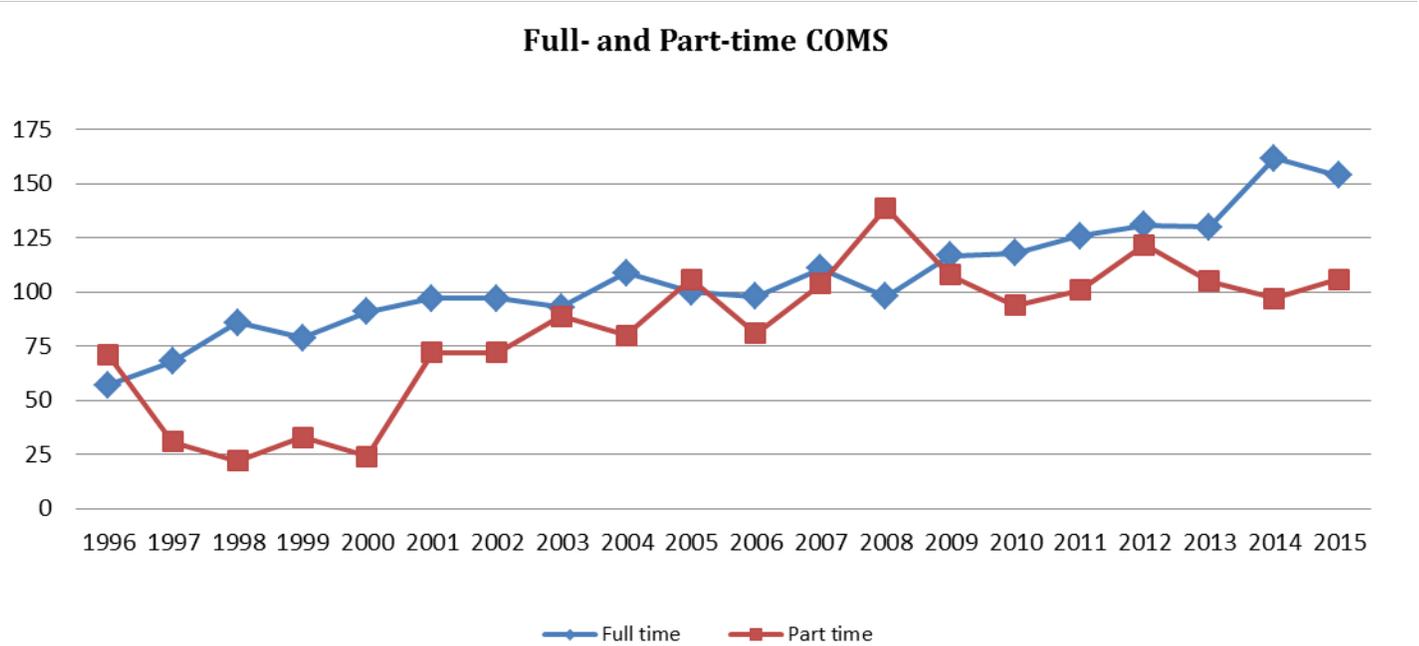
1. FTE = part time x 0.5 + full time for all charts

The number of O&M specialists increased by 8% in 2015 adding 21 individuals to the field. This is an 18% increase in 3 years. Specifically, the number of part-time orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) increased by 29 individuals with the number of full-time COMS decreasing by 5%.

The rise in the number of part-time COMS is likely a result of the 2013 changes to TEC 30.002. All initial evaluations of students with visual impairments must now include an O&M evaluation by a certified O&M specialist in the home, school and community setting. This impact was clearly seen as 241 additional students were identified in 2015 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, the number of students has increased by 109%, from 1,684 to 3,526. The rate of growth in O&M services (109% in the past 15 years) exceeds that of VI services overall (44%) during that same period.

There are indications that access to evaluations is also affected by availability of adequate staff. It would appear that the passage of the new TEC language and an increase in staff have helped increase the number of students who have been evaluated by an O&M specialist, and therefore the number of students who are receiving needed services.



As seen in the data above, the number of part-time TVIs decreased while the number of COMS increased. Part-time VI professionals have advantages and disadvantages. For example, they allow districts with a small number of students with visual impairments to meet their local needs and they 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 as a portion of their job responsibilities within the district. 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 necessary for even small caseloads.

Dually certified VI professionals

Dually certified VI professionals are those who are certified and function both as an O&M specialist (COMS) and as a VI teacher (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* both as a VI teacher and an O&M specialist. Since 2001, the number has fluctuated between 74 and 62, with an average of 67. This year’s 71 falls within that established pattern. Changes in dually certified personnel likely reflect a shift in staffing needs within districts.

Table 4: Dually Certified Professionals

	2013	2014	2015
Dually certified	74	65	71

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. It takes a skillful and knowledgeable administrator to understand the challenges faced by these professionals and to ensure that neither area is slighted.

Direct services provided by ESCs

Statewide, districts are expanding their ability to serve students locally, while still relying on ESCs when that service delivery system works best for that district. It seems likely that there is a relationship in the number of COMS available to districts and increases and decreases in services from the ESC.

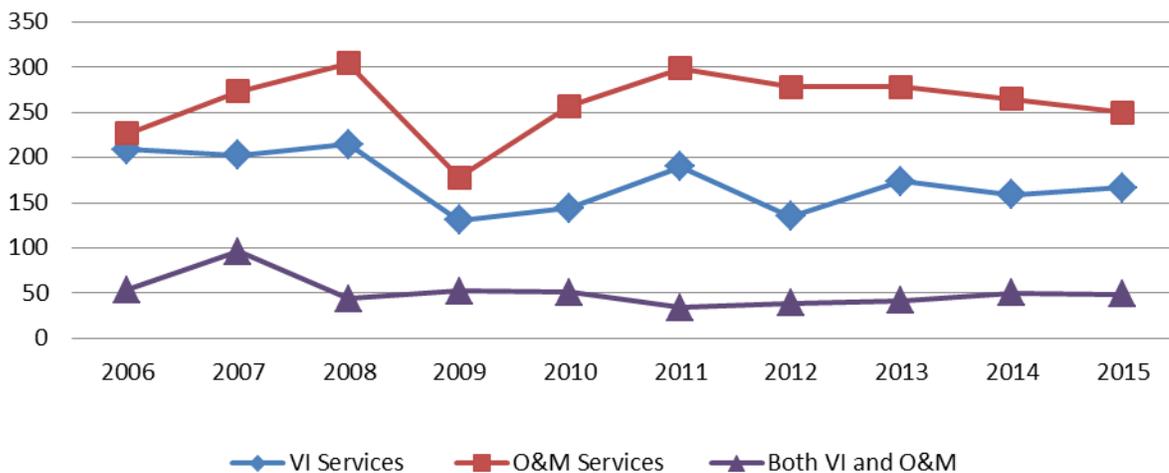
Each regional education service center (ESC) provides an array of services to districts. ESCs are a *major* part of the state’s infrastructure that ensures access to high quality VI services. Regional specialists in visual impairments are critical players in the provision of technical assistance, leadership, workshops, and materials for VI professionals, families, and students. They also assist in braille production and 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.

Some ESC services include direct services to students with visual impairments. In these regions, the ESC staff members are listed on the student’s individualized education plan (IEP). Table 5 reflects the number of students receiving direct services from the ESCs. This total decreased by 2% in 2015.

Table 5: Students Receiving Services from ESCs

	2013	2014	2015
VI-only services (4 regions)	173	159	167
O&M-only services (11 regions)	280	265	250
Both VI and O&M services (3 regions)	42	50	49
Total	495	474	466

Students Receiving Services from ESCs



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.

Overall perceptions of caseloads

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: Regional Overall Changes in Caseloads

	TVIs	COMS
Increases	14	15
Decreases	1	0
No significant change	5	3
Unknown	0	2

For the sixth year in a row, the majority of regional VI consultants reported increasing caseloads for TVIs and COMS overall. Specifically, 14 of 20 education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs and 15 saw an increase in caseload size for COMS. Others noted caseloads remained the same. There were no reports of O&M caseloads decreasing across the state.

Ethnic diversity

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

Table 7: Culturally Diverse VI Professionals

Hispanic VI Professionals

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	68	75	74
COMSs	7	13	15
Dually certified	6	10	8
Total	81	98	97

African-American VI Professionals

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	25	25	22
COMSs	19	15	15
Dually certified	1	0	0
Total	45	40	37

Spanish-Speaking VI Professionals

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	76	73	68
COMSs	10	14	10
Dually certified	4	14	9
Total	90	101	87

Asian VI Professionals

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	5	10	7
COMSs	2	3	4
Dually certified	0	0	0
Total	7	13	11

This was a year with varied results in assessing diversity of VI professionals in Texas. Looking at specific categories, the number of VI professionals who are Asian decreased. African-American, Hispanic, and Spanish-speaking VI professionals decreased in 2015. Recruiting and retaining ethnically and culturally diverse educators remains a serious issue in Texas.

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

In January, 2015 there were 9658 students with visual impairments in Texas. 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 772 students) for a total of 10,430 students by 2018.

Impact on VI teachers

Statewide, the average student-to-teacher ratio is 16 students per TVI full-time equivalent (FTE) position. If this ratio is applied to the number of expected new students, it is projected that Texas will need 48 FTEs to accommodate student growth. However, given that 80% of TVIs are full time, it will take more individuals to meet the goal of 48 FTEs to meet growth demand. If the current ratio of full- to part-time teachers continues, the number of TVIs needed to total 48 FTEs will be closer to 58 individuals.

Impact on O&M specialists

Information about students with visual impairments is collected each January. The 2015 *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* indicated that the percentage of students who were receiving O&M services increased from 36% to 36.5%.

This year there was a sizable increase in the number of students who receive O&M services. This number rose by 241 students, a 7% increase. It is anticipated that by 2018, 4,058 students will be receiving O&M services, an additional 532 students.

Statewide, the average student-to-COMS caseload is up in 2015, from 16 to 18 students per FTE. Using this as a means to predict need, Texas will need an additional 29 full-time equivalent (FTE) orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) to meet expected student growth by 2018.

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 2015, 55% 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 29 FTEs is likely to be closer to 43 individuals.

Texas Education Code (TEC) 30.002 requires that all *initial* evaluations of students with visual impairments include an O&M evaluation by a certified O&M specialist. This language was amended in 2013 and became effective immediately. The increase in O&M specialists and students receiving O&M services in 2014 and 2015 is likely due in part to the new language in TEC 30.002. Certainly the new legislative language has increased awareness of O&M issues. It is impossible to estimate accurately the future growth of students receiving O&M evaluations and services until all students have had a COMS helping determine their need for an O&M evaluation.

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

An additional concern is the gap in the growth rate of students (2.6% per yr.), and the increase in students receiving O&M services (approximately 1% per yr.). It is unknown how many of the projected 10,430 students with visual impairments may actually need O&M services, since the level of evaluation in the past has not kept pace with the student population increase. As of January 2015, 37% of current students had not been evaluated by an O&M specialist.

Attrition

Attrition decreased for all VI professionals in 2015, returning to the 2013 total. It decreased by 1 for both TVIs and those who are dually certified. O&M Specialists had the biggest change, decreasing from eight to three.

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

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	36	36	35
COMSs	1	8	3
Dually certified	5	5	4
Total	42	49	42

Critical factors related to attrition of VI professionals

VI professionals are rare and difficult to find. Therefore, retention is of critical concern. Unlike other disciplines, even other high-need areas like math, when a VI professional is unavailable, typically 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.

As a result, students' functional and academic progress may suffer when there is substandard access to critical services from a highly qualified professional. Several factors affect recruiting and attrition (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) of VI professionals:

- Most educators and other likely candidates are unaware that the field exists. Students with visual impairments are a low-prevalence and extremely diverse population. Therefore, special recruitment challenges exist. People must be aware of the field and its possibilities before they can become a VI professional.
- Most VI professionals are mid-career professionals with an average of 7 years of professional experience in other careers, and are likely to have shorter careers in this second field.
- Because VI professionals are so critical to student learning, a change of even one VI professional, in any single district, can have dramatic effects on the annual yearly progress of students.
- As a profession, education is an aging field. A recent study by Ingersoll and Merrill (2010) indicated that in the late 1980s, the age of teachers was in a typical distribution pattern with the peak at 41 years old. The most recent review of that same data showed that the peak is now 55 years old, and that the distribution is no longer in the typical bell pattern; it is flatter.
- In addition to age and economic factors, attrition is affected by factors commonly cited as important for retention. For VI professionals, among the most important retention factors are administrative support and caseload size. As reported previously, there has been a trend for the past 6 years indicating that caseloads are increasing.

Using data from the past 15 years to project growth, in the next 3 years, Texas will need 42 additional TVIs solely for new students.

Projected 3-year attrition

Projected attrition data is valuable for predicting and preparing for the VI professionals needed in the near future. Two reporting options exist: reporting based on job assignment (TVI, O&M, or dually certified) or based on professional expertise (visual impairments or orientation and mobility). 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.

This report focuses on data based on expertise. Historically, projections based on expertise, not job assignment, are more accurate and valuable for planning future training and hiring needs. As a result, 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.

Gathering accurate data regarding retirement plans is 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, expertise-based projections are below actual attrition by a noteworthy margin, particularly for TVIs. Nonetheless, VI consultants at the ESCs are the best and only source for information on attrition for VI professionals.

The data specifically address those 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 by Expertise

Projections made in:	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	103	98	95
COMSs	23	34	32
Overall	113	119	111

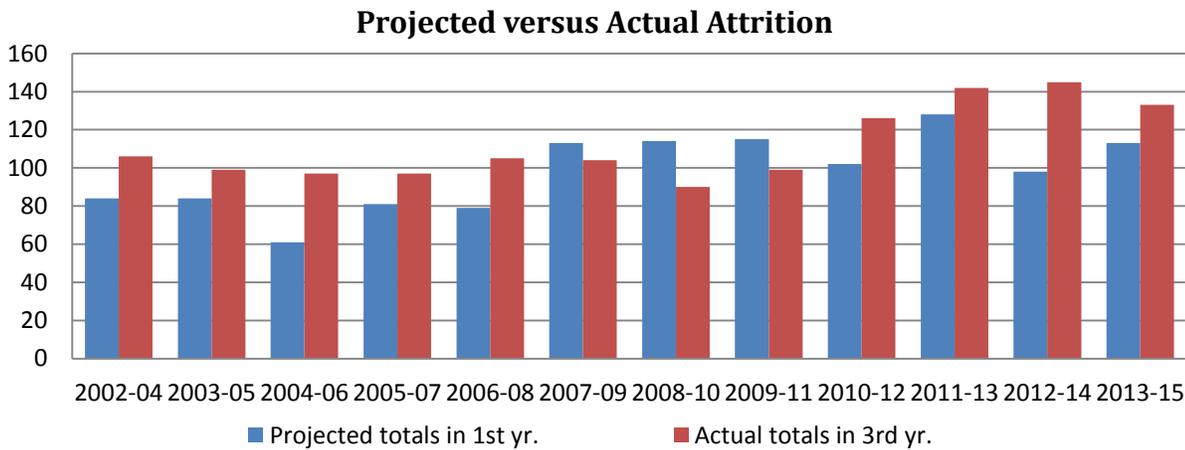
Projections by ESC consultants reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, TVIs and COMSs include data for dually certified staff and **cannot be totaled**. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

In 2015, the VI consultants at the ESCs projected that, overall, 115 VI professionals will leave the field within the next 3 years. This is a 3% decrease from 2014. Historically, the projections

are more conservative, with more people leaving than projected. Yet, if this projection is accurate, at least 12% of *existing* VI professionals will retire or otherwise leave the field prior to 2018.

Projected vs. actual attrition

The most recent 3-year time frame is 2013 to 2015. In 2013, it was projected that 113 people would leave the field by 2015. For that same 2013–2015 time period, the field actually lost 134 VI professionals. This loss of 21 additional individuals is 19% more than projected.



* 2013–2015 is the last time frame for which a complete set of data is available.

In summary, VI professionals at the ESCs are the best and only source for statewide information on attrition over the past year and projected attrition. Even so, projection remains a challenging task. During the economic downturn, the projections exceeded the actual attrition. However, this trend has been reversed. In 2014, 48% more VI professionals left the field than were projected in 2012 and 19% more VI professionals left the field in 2015 than were projected in 2013.

Anticipated Need

A basic principle in assessing need is to realize that most VI professionals are not classroom teachers; they are primarily itinerant specialists in visual impairments who work in a variety of schools, community settings, and homes. In addition to direct services, they also provide critical consultations on the functional impact of a specific visual impairment on a student in specific settings and ensure that appropriately modified materials are available. Additionally, they must travel to the student 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 impairments (Correa-Torres & Johnson Howell, 2004).

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.

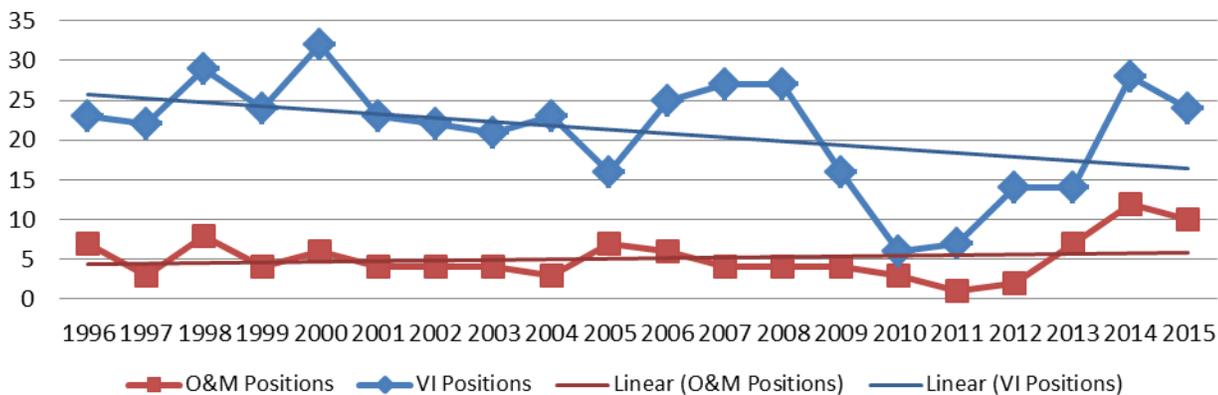
Posted positions

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 2015. 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

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	14	28	24
COMSs	7	12	10
Dually certified	0	3	3
Total	21	43	37

Posted Vacancies for VI Professionals



The graph above shows the posted level of need between 1996 and 2015. This year the number of existing vacancies, after all typical hiring has been completed, decreased from 43 to 37. Statistically, the trend of having unfilled posted positions in September is decreasing over time.

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

get VI certification rather than post a vacancy. Regardless of the reason, data collected since 1996 indicates a very poor correlation between vacancies in September and the need for VI professionals.

Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals

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. The survey asked about projected need, not about positions available. However, historically, positions follow the availability of VI professionals. The results are indicated in the Tables 11 and 12 below.

When considering the needs, VI consultants are advised to reflect on real attrition over the past year and anticipated or projected growth and attrition (those who are expected to permanently leave the field).

In the past 5 years, the projected need for VI professionals has remained fairly stable, at an average of 195 VI professionals. This is the third year that the longer-term need has risen above 200.

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. Understanding need by expertise informs the future training and funding needs. For the purposes of this section of the report, the data reported will be by professional expertise, not by job assignment. 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

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	100	95	92
COMSs	61	66	44
Overall¹	144	144	122

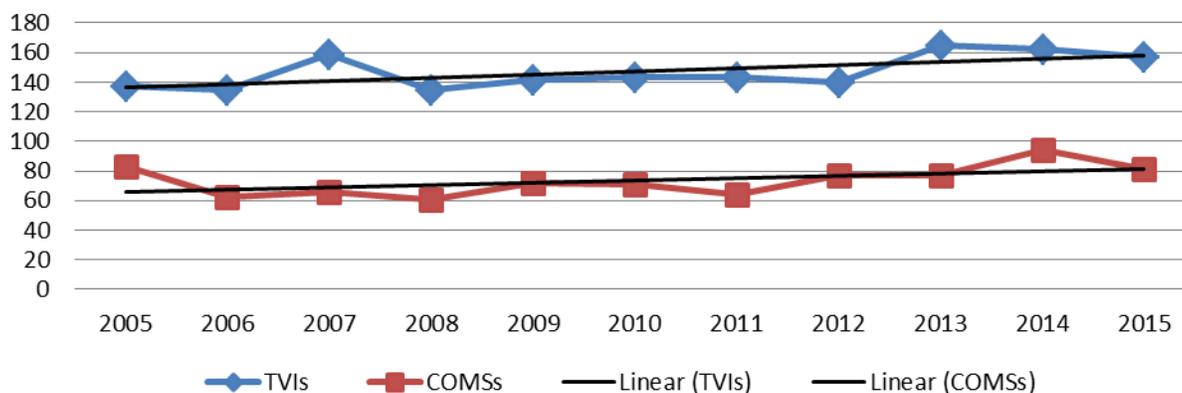
Projections reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, “TVIs” and “COMSs” include data for dually certified staff in both categories and **cannot be totaled**. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

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

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	165	162	157
COMS	77	94	81
Overall¹	217	228	212

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.

Longer Term Need by Professional Expertise



Given the updated requirements for initial O&M evaluations in TEC 30.002, it appears that ESCs continue to anticipate long-term growth and need for additional O&M Specialists.

Discussion of projected need and VI teachers (TVIs)

The projected need for teachers certified in visual impairments (TVIs) decreased in both the shorter- and longer-term categories. As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (page 9), Texas will need between 48 and 58 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, mostly for retirement. It is projected that 113 individuals with VI expertise (TVIs and dually certified professionals) will leave the field prior to 2018. As documented previously, this is likely a low projection. Historically, the 3-year attrition ratios for those with VI expertise exceed projections by 15%. The attrition could be closer to 130 full- and part-time individuals certified in visual impairments.

Combining projected growth and attrition, Texas will need approximately 168 individuals with certification in visual impairments in the next 3 years to replace those who are likely to leave

and respond to anticipated growth. The ESCs' projection of 157 new TVIs falls within that range.

Universities are maximizing their existing resources to produce TVIs. In 2015, 106 people were seeking VI certification. Fifty-one are working under an emergency permit. These TVIs are already working with students and included in this count as TVIs. They will not contribute to closing the gap.

The ability to hire these needed VI professionals will depend on the availability of eligible candidates for the job and the administrator's confidence in his or her ability to hire VI professionals.

Discussion of projected need and O&M specialists

The projected need for orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) also decreased 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 are at risk for needing O&M services *at any given* time.
- Further, 37% 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. This legislation took effect in the 2014-15 school year.

As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (page 15), Texas will need between 29 and 43 O&M specialists to meet the anticipated growth in the number of students with visual impairments.

Regional VI consultants project that 32 people with O&M expertise (O&M specialists and dually certified professionals) will be leaving the field by 2018. 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 approximately 68 additional full- and part-time O&M specialists over the next 3 years. The projection made by the ESC consultants, who know their regions best, is slightly above this figure. The variance is likely due to the increases in services anticipated with additional evaluations.

Universities are maximizing their existing resources to produce COMS. An average of 28 individuals complete the certification process each year. The next step is for districts to ensure that all students with visual impairments receive consideration by an O&M specialist of their need for an orientation and mobility evaluation. Only then can the educational team members be assured that those who need O&M instruction are receiving it.

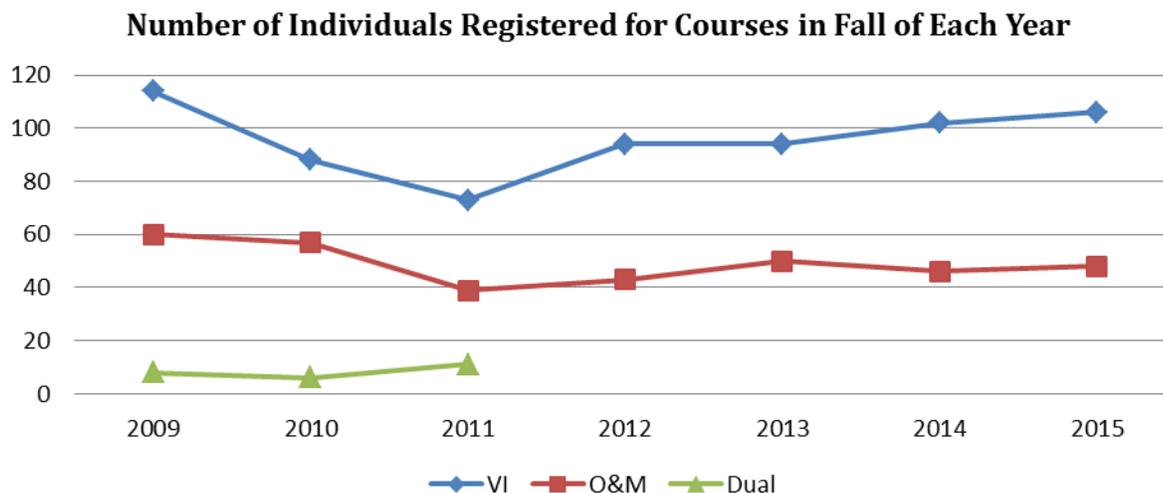
Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals

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 (COMSs) funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Both schools serve students throughout the state with a combination of face-to-face, voice-over-the-internet, and Internet 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, the biggest factor affecting enrollment seems to be the availability of tuition support. Increases in the number of VI professionals appear to be directly affected by tuition support.

Table 13: Number of Students in Training Programs

	2013	2014	2015
Visual impairments	94	102	106
Orientation and mobility (incl. undergraduates)	50	46	48
Total	144	148	154



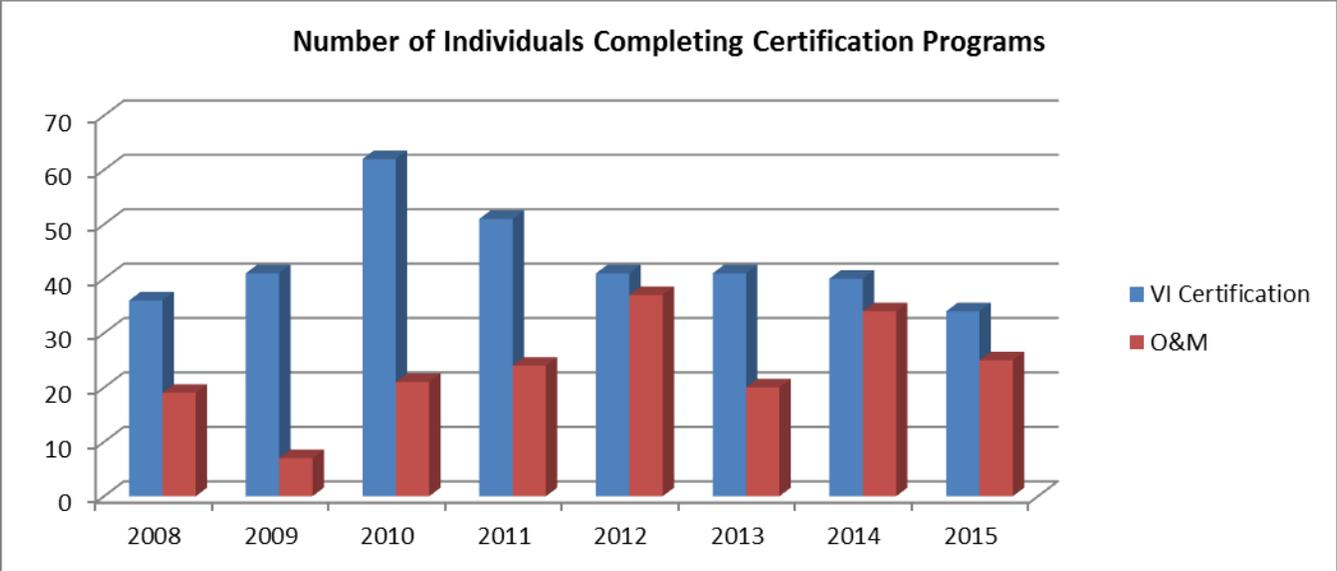
The data collection definitions changed in 2012. Since students must complete one certification before the other, they are now counted in either the VI **or** O&M category.

In October 2015, a total of 154 students were registered for courses leading to certification either as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) or an orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). Twelve of the pre-service O&M specialists are undergraduates. One-

hundred-six individuals were seeking VI certification and 48 are en route to O&M certification. This is a 4% improvement over the 2014 totals. In 2015, the 5-year average for program completion increased by 4% as well.

Candidates must complete their entire program before they can start working as an O&M. 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 are able to hire an adequate amount of O&M specialists, many new O&M specialists may take positions in adult agencies, not schools. It is hoped that over the next 3 years, most new O&M specialists will find jobs in education.

In the past year, a total of 59 people completed their certification programs. Thirty-four individuals completed VI training and 25 completed O&M training. This is 17% below the 5-year average of 41 for TVIs and 11% below the average 28 for COMSs. It should be noted that in both 2012 and 2014 there was a significant increase in individuals completing an O&M program. The number of individuals receiving O&M certification this year reflects a total that is characteristic of completion numbers seen over the past 8 years (see graph below).



In 2015, the total number of people (VI Certification and O&M) receiving financial assistance, a strong incentive for enrollment, increased slightly from 73% to 74%. Fifty-four percent of those in the TVI certification programs and 65% in the O&M programs received assistance.

Table 14: Percentage of Students Receiving Support through Texas Grants

	2013	2014	2015
TVIs	51%	55%	54%
COMSs	46%	57%	65%

Tuition continues to increase at a steady rate. Tuition and fees have risen as much as 31% since 2009. As a result, existing funds are not having the same impact that they had in previous years.

Summary

This report reviewed characteristics of and indicators of need for VI professionals. In September 2015, Texas had 955 individuals (885 FTEs) providing vision-related services, either directly to students or in a leadership and/or technical-assistance capacity. After adjusting for dually certified professionals (71), there are 901 individuals providing direct service either on a full- or part-time basis. The total includes the following full- or part-time individuals:

- 692 teachers certified in visual impairments (TVIs) or 622.5 FTEs
- 280 orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) or 217 FTEs
- 71 dually certified professionals

In addition, there are:

- 54 regional or statewide leadership or technical-assistance specialists (45.6 FTEs)
 - 26 individuals or 18.7 FTEs are at the regional education service centers (ESC)
 - 28 individuals or 26.9 FTEs are at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired either in Outreach or Short-Term Programs

The number of individuals providing leadership and technical assistance at the ESCs showed a decrease in 2015. However, the actual amount of time available to assist districts and families remained about the same. ESCs reported 18.7 FTEs this year and 18.4 in 2014.

The total number of VI professionals decreased by 0.5% in 2015. The TVI category showed a decrease of 16 individuals. The 2015 total number of TVIs (692) reflects a 2% decrease from 2014.

The COMSs increased from 259 to 280 individuals, or an 8% increase. New legislation in 2014 required that a student suspected of having a visual impairment be evaluated by a certified orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). This language in addition to university O&M program completers in the past year, are likely contributors to the growth that continues to be seen in 2015.

In September 2015, there were 22 TVIs and 15 O&M specialists who are African-American. The Hispanic VI professionals included 74 TVIs, 15 COMSs, and 8 dually certified professionals. Sixty-eight TVIs, 10 COMSs, and 9 dually certified professionals speak Spanish.

There are 5 TVIs and two COMSs who are Asian. Overall, this reflects a decrease in the African-American and Asian VI professionals. More efforts to expand diversity to reflect the student demographic are clearly indicated.

An examination of the attrition, projected attrition, student population growth, and need indicates there are challenges ahead. Although the attrition rate decreased from 49 to 42 VI professionals in the past year, this number is above the 10-year average across all VI professionals.

The projected 3-year attrition rate was estimated at 111, or 12% of all VI professionals. Further analysis of the data over the past decade indicates that although the regional VI consultants are the best predictors for attrition, even they underestimate attrition for TVIs and COMS. Therefore, it is likely that as retirements are realized, attrition over the next 3 years will continue to be a substantial factor in planning for an adequate supply of VI professionals.

A long-term examination of growth patterns predicts that the number of students with visual impairments needing services will increase by 2.6% each year, or by 772 additional students from 2015 to 2018. It is expected that Texas will have at least 10,430 students with visual impairments by 2018.

This report assessed need based on two methods:

- (a) counting the number of posted available positions in September, and
- (b) taking recommendations from VI consultants at the ESCs.

Job-vacancy-posting data gathered since 1996 have proven to be a poor predictor of need. Even so, the number of vacancies in September 2015 was down. The total numbers of vacancies decreased from 43 in 2014 to 37 in 2015 after more than doubling from 2013-2014.

This report uses a knowledgeable informant model to project need. 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. Their estimates indicate a growing shortage of VI professionals. Without significant increases in enrollment in university programs, the difficulty in meeting the needs of students with visual impairments will increase.

Table 15: Summary of Need by Expertise

	TVIs	O&M specialists	Overall
12–24-month-need projections	92	44	122
24–36-month-need projections	157	81	212

Both types of indicators of need were reviewed in this document: posted vacancies and recommendations by regional consultants. While each source revealed a different set of numbers, what is clear is that regardless of the method used, Texas has a clear and ongoing need for VI professionals.

Regardless of the strategy used to measure need, it is apparent that Texas has a clear and significant need for new and additional VI professionals, and that the need will continue to grow. These positions must be filled to ensure that students with visual impairments have the skills needed to succeed.

Appendix

Methodology

The 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 0.5 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 (25% of the TVIs and 48% 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 0.5 and adding the result to the number of people employed as full-time VI professionals (part time X 0.5 + 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 certified in visual impairments (TVI) and a part-time orientation and mobility specialist (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.

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