

2018



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# 2018 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.



## 2018 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, university VI programs, and TSBVI to assess the characteristics of and need for VI professionals in Texas. “VI professionals” includes certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMS). The most striking findings of the September 2018 survey include:

- In 2018, the **total number of VI professionals**, including leadership positions, **increased** from 934 to 956 individuals. The increase was seen in the total number of COMSs across the state, surpassing the last increase of 21 in 2015.
  - The number of part-time TVIs providing direct service grew by 10, from 144 to 154.
  - Full-time TVIs fell by 10 individuals, from 537 to 527.
  - There are 288 COMS providing direct service, an increase of 23 individuals. The part-time category increased by 10 and 13 were added to the full-time category.
  - No change was seen this year in dually certified individuals; 66 VI professionals are providing both TVI and O&M services.
- Reports of **increased caseloads** continue.
  - For the ninth year in a row, the majority of the 20 regional VI consultants reported increasing caseloads for TVIs.
    - Fifteen education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs
    - Eleven ESCs saw an increase in caseloads for COMS
- **Attrition in the previous year decreased** from 41 to 39 individuals.
  - After declining significantly in 2016 and climbing to 41 in 2017, this year’s attrition total of 39 matches the 10-year average. ESC consultants anticipate 11% of existing VI professionals to retire or otherwise leave the field over the next 3 years.
- **Cultural diversity** of VI professionals showed signs of growth in 2018.
  - The number of VI professionals who are Hispanic increased by 13 percent.
  - The number of VI professionals who are African-American increased by 11 percent.
  - Eleven percent of the VI professionals statewide are fluent in Spanish.
  - Although the increases in cultural diversity are encouraging, the large majority of VI professionals in Texas are Caucasian while the student population grows more diverse.
- Texas universities continue to see **above average totals** in student enrollment and in the number of graduates completing training programs.
  - There are a total of 164 future VI professionals in a program leading to certification as either a TVI or COMS. One hundred-five are working toward their TVI certification and

59 are enrolled in an orientation and mobility program.

- Eighty-one individuals received a TVI or O&M certification. Forty-nine TVIs and 32 COMS completed their certification program in 2018.
- Seventy-nine percent of students enrolled are receiving financial support through Texas stipends for their training.
- If tuition continues to rise, existing funding will provide less support to students than in previous years. This will create an even greater challenge in meeting the need for an adequate number of VI professionals.
- **The number of students with visual impairments continues to grow.** In 2018, the number of students reported to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* increased by 347 students, or approximately 3.4%, bringing the total number of students to 10,421. This is significant growth, well over the 2.5% average increase typically seen from year to year. The increase in caseloads reported by the majority of VI consultants could be seen as a direct effect of this student growth, however, no change was seen in the number of TVIs available in 2018 to support them.

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## 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 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 2018.

Data were collected from the 20 regional education service centers (ESCs), the two Texas university personnel preparation programs that prepare VI professionals, 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 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 on the functional impact of a specific visual impairment on a student in a range of 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 impairment (Correa-Torres & Johnson Howell, 2004).

## Number of VI professionals in Texas

This information has been gathered annually for 23 years. Over that time the number of VI professionals has risen with an occasional drop in numbers. The 2018 number of VI professionals in Texas is 956 individuals, or 878.6 full-time equivalents (FTEs). Although the number of VI professionals increased by almost 2.5 percent in the Fall of 2018, a significant increase for the state, it is important to consider that the *Annual Registration of Students with*

*Visual Impairments* from Spring 2018 identified 347 additional students, a 3.4% increase in the student population. (TSBVI, 2018). This is much higher than the average student increase of 2.5% seen in years passed.

Below is a graph that displays the changes in the number of VI professionals over a 10-year span, from 2008-2018.

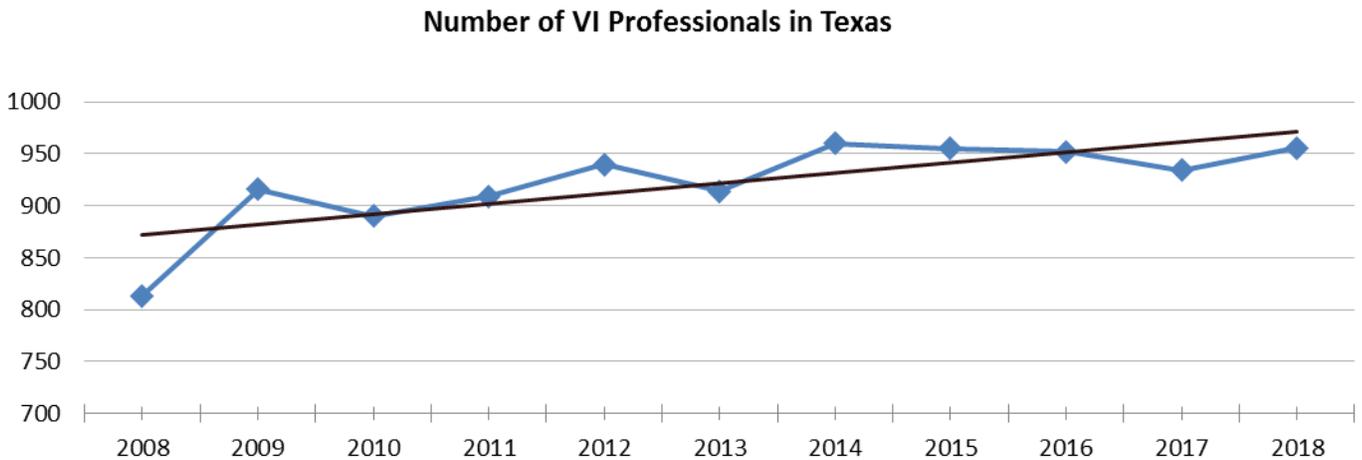


Table 1 that follows provides further details about VI professionals in Texas within the last 3 years. The term “individuals” includes both full- and part-time VI professionals. The full-time equivalent (FTE) data adjusts for the part-time VI professionals, including those who are dually certified.

**Table 1: Total VI Professionals Statewide**

	2016		2017		2018	
	Individuals	FTE <sup>2</sup>	Individuals	FTE <sup>2</sup>	Individuals	FTE <sup>2</sup>
ESC leadership <sup>1</sup>	25	18.8	25	19	24	19.3
TSBVI statewide <sup>1</sup>	28	26.5	29	26	29	24.8
VI and O&M service providers (adjusted for dually certified professionals)	899	824	880	821.5	903	834.5
<b>Total VI professionals</b>	<b>952</b>	<b>889.3</b>	<b>934</b>	<b>866.5</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>878.6</b>

<sup>1</sup> 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."

<sup>2</sup> FTE = (part time x .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 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.

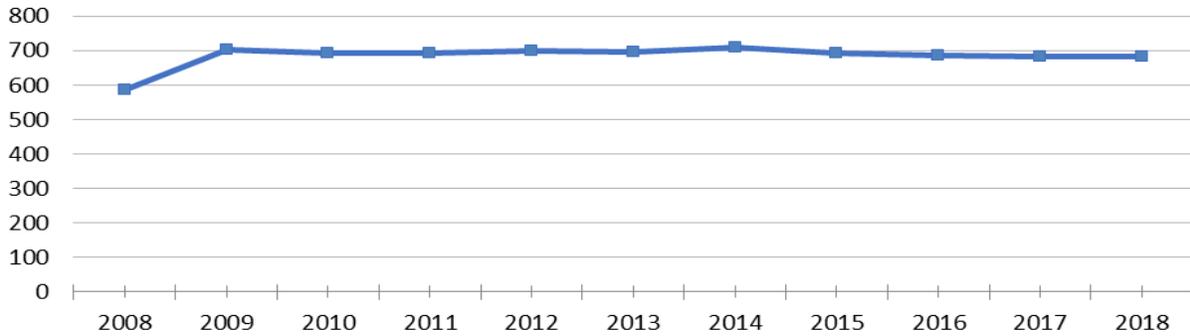
**Table 2: Direct-Service Providers: Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs)**

	2016		2017		2018	
	Individuals	FTE <sup>1</sup>	Individuals	FTE <sup>1</sup>	Individuals	FTE <sup>1</sup>
<b>Full-time TVIs</b>	529		537		527	
<b>Part-time TVIs</b>	158		144		154	
<b>Total VI staff</b>	<b>687</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>681</b>	<b>609</b>	<b>681</b>	<b>604</b>

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

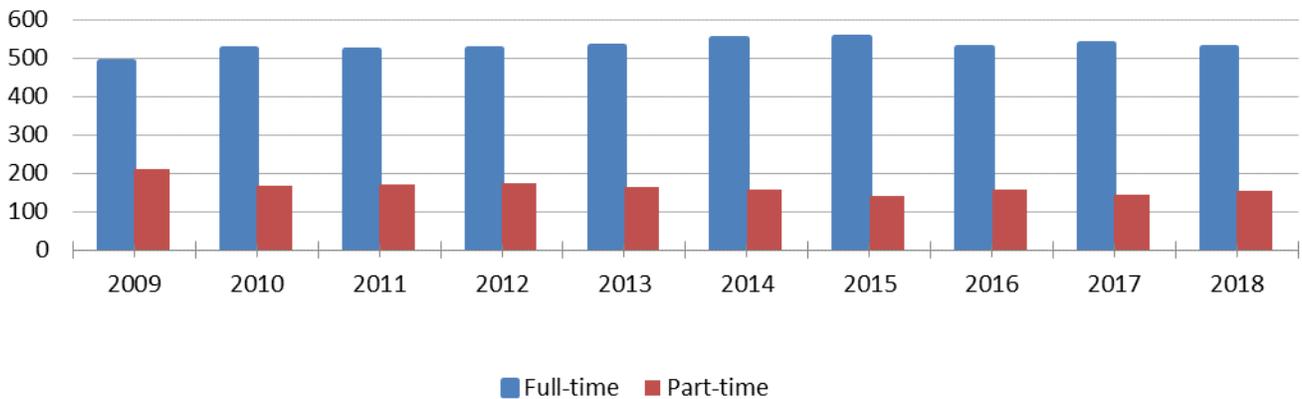
There was no change in the total number of *individuals* (full and part time) who work as a TVI in 2018. Although there was an increase of ten TVIs in the part-time category, the full-time individuals dropped by ten and the field saw a decrease of twelve TVI FTEs.

### 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 and the graph below shows the full - and part-time TVI totals over recent years. This lack of change along with a minimal increase in the availability of TVIs in 2018 is a concern given that 1,294 additional students have been added to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* since the number of TVIs peaked for the second time on record at 708 in 2014.

### Full- and Part-time TVIs



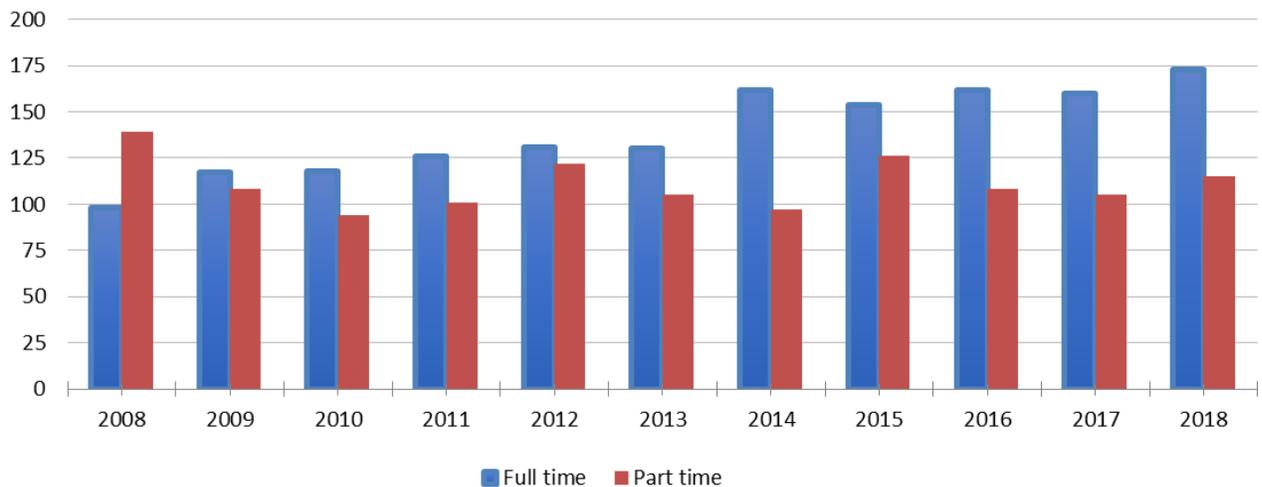
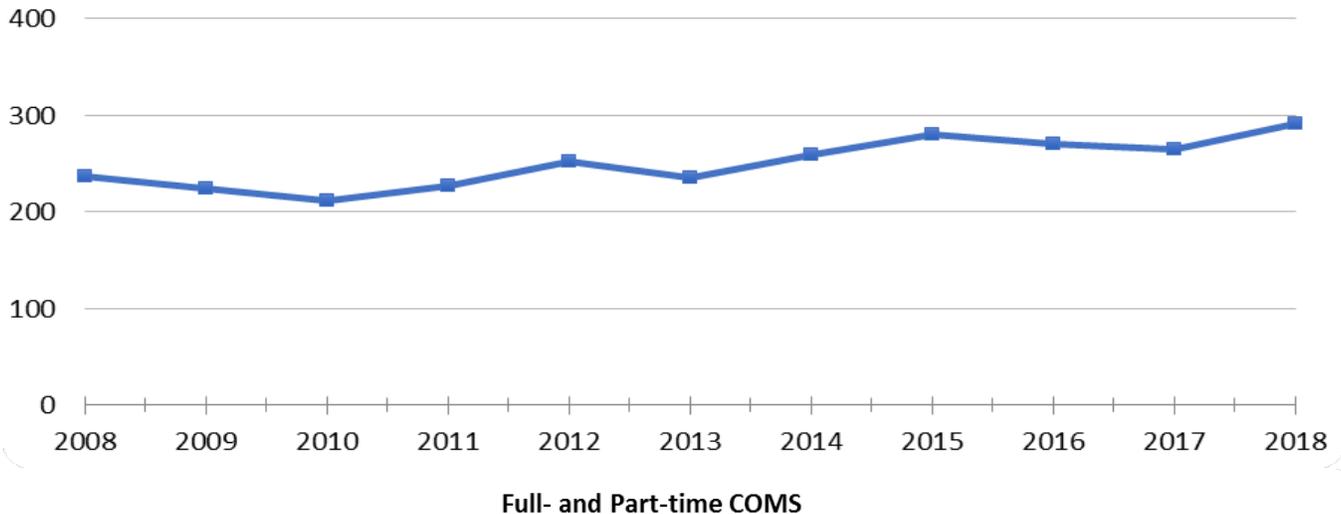
**Table 3: Direct-Service Providers: Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMSs)**

	2016		2017		2018	
	Individuals	FTE <sup>1</sup>	Individuals	FTE <sup>1</sup>	Individuals	FTE <sup>1</sup>
<b>Full-time COMSs</b>	162		160		173	
<b>Part-time COMSs</b>	108		105		115	
<b>Total O&amp;M staff</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>212.5</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>230.5</b>

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 almost 10%, a total of 26 individuals. The growth was evenly seen in both the part-time and full-time categories. This is the first reported increase in the number of COMS in 3 years.

**Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists in Texas**



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. The Texas law could also explain why 383 students were evaluated by a COMS and 195 additional students were identified in 2018 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 143.5%, from 1,684 to

4,102. The rate of growth in O&M services over the past 18 years exceeds that of VI services overall (55%) during that same period. Considering the rising number of students receiving O&M services and the drop in individual COMS two years in a row, the increase in 2018 was essential in order to meet the needs of students eligible for orientation and mobility services throughout the state.

Data continues to indicate that access to evaluations is affected by availability of adequate staff. The increase of 52 COMS serving students in Texas over the last 5 years has led to an increase in the number of students who have been evaluated and, consequently, the number of students who are receiving needed services from an O&M Specialist.

### **Part-time service providers**

As seen in Table 2 and Table 3 and the graphs above, both the number of part-time TVIs and part-time COMS increased in 2018. 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 are not part of the collaborative educational team if their service hours are limited to direct hours only by the hiring district or co-op. It may be hard to carry out collaborative consultation to the degree needed as a full-time employee would be able to do. 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**

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, 183 VI professionals serve in this manner, a 24.5% increase from last year. This category of service provider makes up approximately 19% of the total number of individual VI professionals in Texas.

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 total. It should be noted that full, part-time and dually certified 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

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. Last year this total rose beyond the average to 66 and remained the same in 2018.

Considering the increase of 10 part-time TVIs and 10 part-time COMS this year along with the drop in the same number of full-time TVIs, it's possible that many full-time TVIs transitioned to serving in a dual role in 2018.

**Table 4: Dually Certified Professionals**

	2016	2017	2018
<b>Dually certified</b>	58	66	66

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

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. The increase in COMS seen this year and the increase of full-time TVIs in 2017 may be a reason ESCs are serving fewer students. Therefore, the data continues to reflect a relationship between the number of VI professionals available at the local level and increases/decreases in services from the ESC.

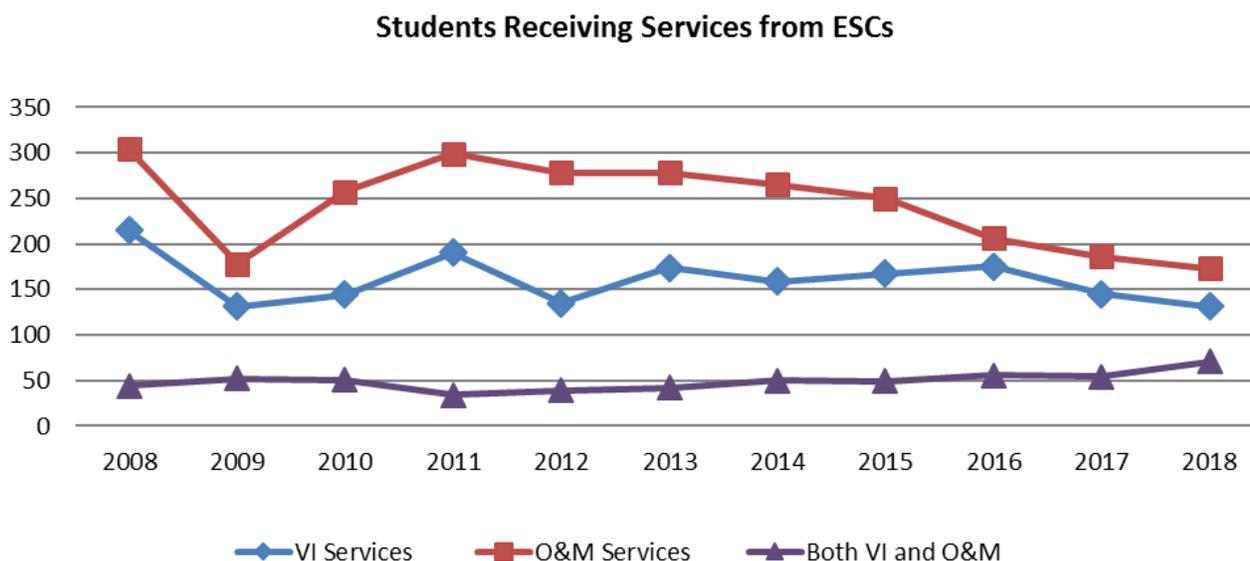
Each regional education service center (ESC) provides an array of services to districts. ESCs are a *major* part of the state's infrastructure that ensures access to high quality VI services. Regional specialists in visual impairments are critical players in the provision of technical assistance, leadership, workshops, and materials for VI professionals, families, and students. They also assist TVIs and 116 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.

Some ESCs provide direct services to students with visual impairments. In these regions, the ESC staff members are listed on the student's individualized education program (IEP). Currently, nine ESCs provide O&M services, 4 provide VI services, and 3 provide both. Table 5 reflects the number of students receiving direct services from the ESCs. ESCs are providing less direct services overall, however, the number of students receiving both VI and O&M services increased this year.

**Table 5: Students Receiving Services from ESCs**

	2016	2017	2018
<b>VI-only services (3 regions)</b>	175	145	131
<b>O&amp;M-only services (9 regions)</b>	206	186	173
<b>Both VI and O&amp;M services (3 regions)</b>	56	54	71
<b>Total</b>	<b>437</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>375</b>



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

	<b>TVIs</b>	<b>COMS</b>
Increases 2018	15	11
Decreases	0	0
No significant change	4	7
Unknown	1	2

For the ninth year in a row, the majority of regional VI consultants reported increasing caseloads for TVIs and COMS overall. Specifically, 15 of 20 education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs and 11 saw an increase in caseload size for COMS. Others noted caseloads remained the same. None of the ESCs reported that TVI and O&M caseloads had experienced a decrease in their region.

**Cultural 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 VI professionals fluent in Spanish. The results from the survey follow.

**Table 7: Culturally Diverse VI Professionals**

**Hispanic VI Professionals**

	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
<b>TVIs</b>	73	69	82
<b>COMSs</b>	18	18	18
<b>Dually certified</b>	4	6	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>105</b>

**Spanish-Speaking VI Professionals**

	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
<b>TVIs</b>	67	74	77
<b>COMSs</b>	12	26	20
<b>Dually certified</b>	5	8	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>106</b>

## African-American VI Professionals

	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs</b>	21	28	34
<b>COMSs</b>	15	16	15
<b>Dually certified</b>	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>50</b>

## Asian VI Professionals

	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs</b>	11	6	6
<b>COMSs</b>	8	4	3
<b>Dually certified</b>	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>

This was another year of varied results in the diversity of VI professionals in Texas. Looking at specific categories, the number of VI professionals who are Asian decreased by 1 individual. African-American and Hispanic VI professionals increased in 2018, however, those fluent in Spanish decreased slightly this year. 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

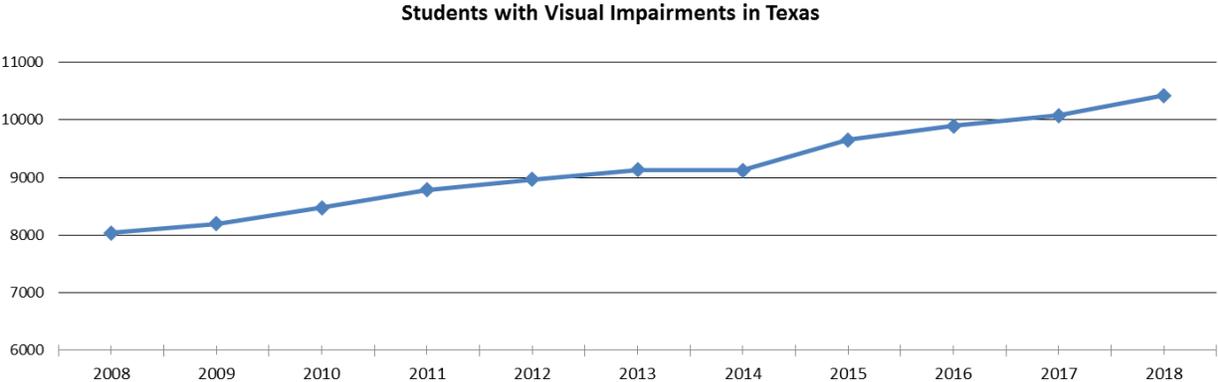
The ESCs were asked how many VI professionals serving in districts within their regions are visually impaired. The ESCs reported that a total of 24 VI professionals in Texas are blind or have a visual impairment, an increase of 4 individuals. This includes direct service providers, ESC leadership, and TSBVI statewide consultants.

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

In January, 2018 there were 10,421 students with visual impairments in Texas, an increase of 3.4% in just one year. 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 831 students) for a total of 11,252 students by 2021. Three-year projections of student growth in 2015 came very close to the actual total number of students with visual impairments in 2018. Texas gained 9 additional students more than projected three years ago.

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 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 3 years.

**Graph 5: Students with Visual Impairments in Texas**



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 55 additional FTEs by 2021 to accommodate student growth alone. However, given that only 77% of TVIs are full time, it will take more individuals to meet the expected need of 55 FTEs. If the current average ratio of full-to part-time teachers continues, the number of TVIs needed to total 55 FTEs will be closer to 68 individuals.

**Impact on O&M specialists**

Information about students with visual impairments is collected each January. The 2018 *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* indicated that the percentage of students who were receiving O&M services is almost 39.5%, an increase of 1.5%, from last year. The number of O&M service providers increased significantly this year as an additional 383 students were evaluated for services and 195 students were added to caseloads. It is anticipated that by 2021, 4,721 students will be receiving O&M services, an additional 619 students.

Statewide, the average student-to-COMS caseload fell from just over 18 to just under 18 students per FTE. Approximately sixteen and a half students per COMS is the average ratio

seen over a 10-year period. Using this year’s data to predict need, by 2021 Texas will need an additional 34 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 2018, 60% 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 34 FTEs is likely to be closer to 48 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 higher total number of students who have been evaluated by a COMS and the 36% additional students now receiving O&M services is likely due in part to the new language in TEC 30.002.

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

An additional concern seen from year to year is the gap in the average growth rate of students (2.6% per yr.) and the average increase in the percentage of students receiving O&M services (just under 1% per yr.) Although the number of students receiving O&M services in 2018 increased slightly above the 10-year average, it is unknown how many of the projected 11,252 students with visual impairments may need O&M services by 2021, since the level of evaluation in the past has not kept pace with the student population increase. As of January 2018, 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 fell slightly in 2018 for VI professionals as a whole, by a total of 2 individuals. Specifically, attrition decreased by 1 for COMS and by 5 for TVIs and the ESCs reported that 4 dually certified VI professionals have left the field. This year's attrition total of 39 is very close to the 5-year average of 40 individuals.

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

	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs</b>	26	38	33
<b>COMSs</b>	2	3	2
<b>Dually certified</b>	1	0	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>39</b>

## Attrition factors

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. To that point, consider the population of students with visual impairments as noted in the *2017 Guidelines and Standards for Educating Students with Visual Impairments in Texas*:

- May be totally blind or have varying degrees of low vision
- Range from birth to 22 years of age
- May have been born with a visual impairment or may have acquired a visual impairment at a later time in their life
- May or may not be learners on the academic level of their age peers
- May also have hearing impairments (DeafBlindness)
- May also have any number of other disabilities (mild to severe intellectual disability, physical disability, other sensory loss, emotional or behavioral problems, autism and/or specific learning disabilities)
- May have vision impairment related to ocular disorders or due to neurological causes (such as cerebral or cortical visual impairment) or both
- May have additional medical needs and considerations
- May be receiving instruction in a variety of instructional settings, including the home, school and community

As reflected above, 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.

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 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 0.25% 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.

The current attrition rate for VI professionals is 4%. This might sound small, however, the loss of “just” 39 individuals can have a critical impact on students with visual impairments and the VI field if 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. People must be cognizant 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

Projected attrition data is valuable for predicting and preparing for the VI professionals needed in the near future. 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.

VI consultants at the ESCs are the best and only source for information on future attrition for VI professionals and 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, projections are below actual attrition, however, over the last several years the actual attrition has been exceedingly close to the projected total.

It is important to mention again 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:	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs<sup>1</sup></b>	92	92	91
<b>COMSs<sup>1</sup></b>	32	27	28
<b>Overall<sup>1</sup></b>	105	105	109

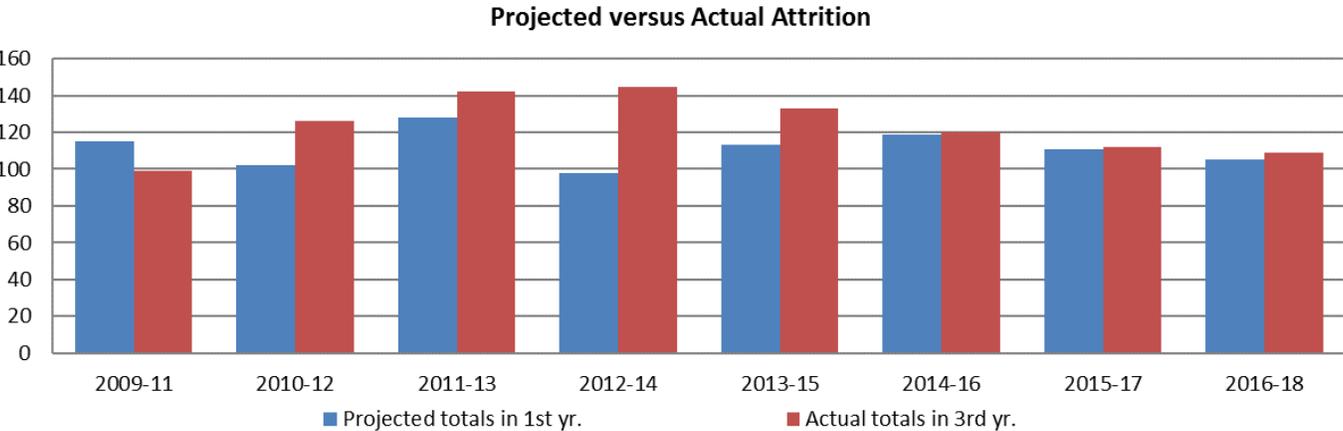
<sup>1</sup>Projections by ESC consultants reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, TVIs and COMSs include data for dually certified staff and cannot be totaled. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

In 2018, the VI consultants at the ESCs projected that, overall, 109 VI professionals will leave the field within the next 3 years. This is a slight increase in the number projected in 2016 and

again in 2017. If the 109 projection is accurate, we can expect that 11% of *existing* VI professionals will retire or otherwise leave the field prior to 2021.

**Projected vs. actual attrition**

Looking at the most recent 3-year time frame, 2016 to 2018, in 2016 it was projected that 105 people would leave the field by 2018. During that same period, the field lost 109 VI professionals, a difference of four individuals. Looking at projections made in 2014 and 2015, ESC estimated three-year attrition totals were just under the actual number of VI professionals who left the field, off by only one individual. ESC consultants appear to be closing the projected vs. actual attrition discrepancy considering their projections for 2018 were once again only slightly over the actual number projected to leave the field.



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. 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 and continued through 2015. Data received over the last three years indicates a new trend. ESCs appear to be closing the gap between projected and actual 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 831 students should be kept in mind when considering the anticipated need of the VI professionals who will serve them.

**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 2018. 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.

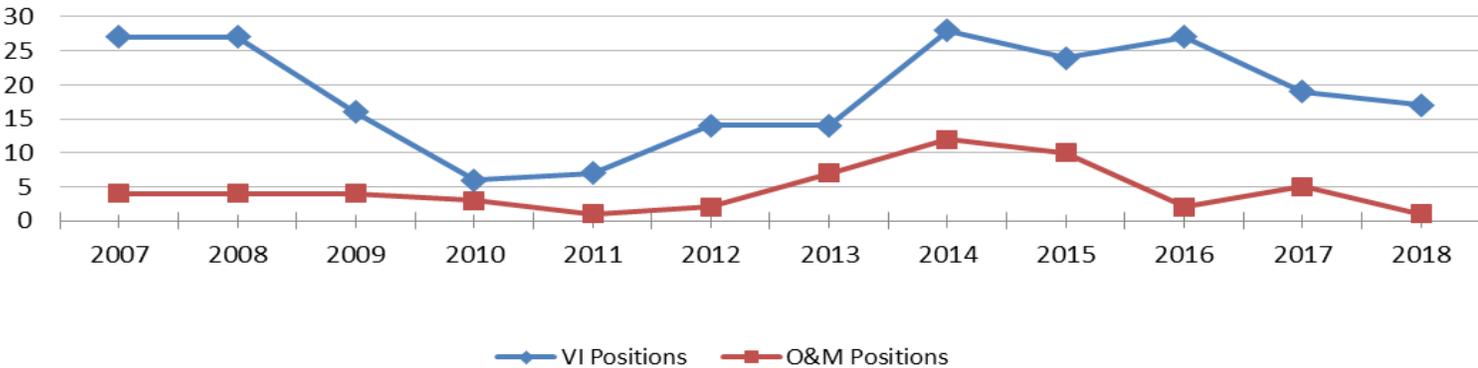
**Table 10: Posted Positions**

	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs</b>	27	19	17
<b>COMSs</b>	2	5	1
<b>Dually certified</b>	0	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>18</b>

This year the number of existing vacancies, after all typical hiring had been completed, decreased from 27 to 18. The trend of having unfilled posted positions in September has continued to decrease over time.

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, with the exception of the 2016 numbers, data collected since 1996 indicates a poor correlation between vacancies in September and the need for VI professionals. In 2016, the number of posted positions matched the attrition number; however, this year, after all typical hiring had been completed, the total number of posted positions (18) is far less than the attrition total of 39.

**Posted Vacancies for VI Professionals**



## Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals

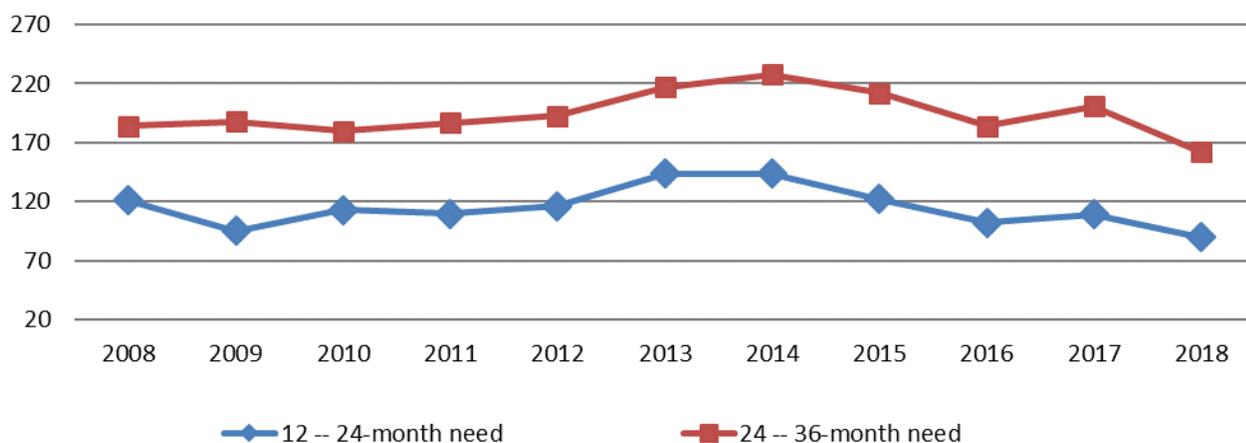
Regional VI consultants are the experts in visual impairments for their region. VI consultants and TSBVI staff were asked how many TVIs, O&M specialists, and dually certified personnel were needed in their area. The survey asked about projected need, not about positions available. However, historically,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

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.

The short and long-term need for VI professionals has steadily grown from 2009 and reached its peak in 2014 before falling in 2015. In 2017 the short-term need increased by 7 and the long-term need increased by 17. In 2018 short term need fell by 19 and long term need fell by 39 individuals.

**Projected Shorter- and Longer-Term Need for VI Professionals**



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). The results are indicated in the graph above and Tables 11 and 12 below.

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

	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs<sup>1</sup></b>	79	76	69
<b>COMSs<sup>1</sup></b>	31	46	33
<b>Overall<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>102</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>90</b>

<sup>1</sup> 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**

	2016	2017	2018
<b>TVIs<sup>1</sup></b>	141	149	125
<b>COMS<sup>1</sup></b>	61	73	57
<b>Overall<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>184</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>162</b>

<sup>1</sup> 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. This year, both totals saw a substantial decrease with ESCs projecting a need for 90 VI professionals within the next one to two years and 162 within the next three years.

Given the anticipated student growth, it remains to be seen if lowered projection by the ESCs continues and becomes a trend once again. The ESCs estimation of need peaked at 103 in 2013 for TVIs and hit a high of 94 COMS in 2014. Student growth, attrition, and the anticipation of updated orientation and mobility evaluation requirements in TEC 30.02 are all possible factors in the heightened 2013 and 2014 totals.

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

The projected need for certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) decreased in both the shorter- term and long-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 55 and 68 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 91 individuals with VI expertise (TVIs

and dually certified professionals) will leave the field prior to 2021. Although ESC consultants have projected closer to actual numbers in recent years, historically the 3-year attrition ratios for those with VI expertise exceed projections up to 15%. Therefore, it is possible that attrition could be closer to 105 full- and part-time individuals certified as teachers of students with visual impairments.

Combining projected growth and attrition, Texas will need between 146 and 159 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 projection of 125 TVIs needed in that time period falls well below this range. ESC consultants could not predict the above average student increase this year and it's possible that this growth is a factor in their lower anticipated need.

**Table 13: Projected Need and TVIs**

Number of TVIs needed to meet student growth	55 - 68
Number of TVIs needed due to attrition	91
<b>Total FTE needed by 2021</b>	<b>146 - 159</b>

In the Fall of 2018, 105 people were seeking VI certification through a university program in Texas. Thirty-four 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 total seen in 2018, the number of newly certified TVIs (144) will fall just 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**

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 14: Projected Need and COMSs**

Number of COMSs needed to meet student growth	34 - 48
Number of COMSs needed due to attrition	28
<b>Total FTE needed by 2021</b>	<b>62- 76</b>

As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (page 15), Texas will need between 34 and 48 O&M specialists to meet the anticipated growth in the number of students with visual impairments.

Regional VI consultants project that 28 people with O&M expertise (O&M specialists and dually certified professionals) will be leaving the field by 2021. 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 62 and 76 additional full- and part-time O&M specialists over the next 3 years. The projected longer-term need of 57 made by the ESC consultants, who know their regions best, is significantly below this figure. The variance is possibly due to the increase in the number of COMSs this 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.

Universities are maximizing their existing resources to produce COMS. An average of 32 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 62 new COMS by 2021 will not only be met but exceeded. Although this is encouraging, future attrition should be taken into consideration.

### **Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals**

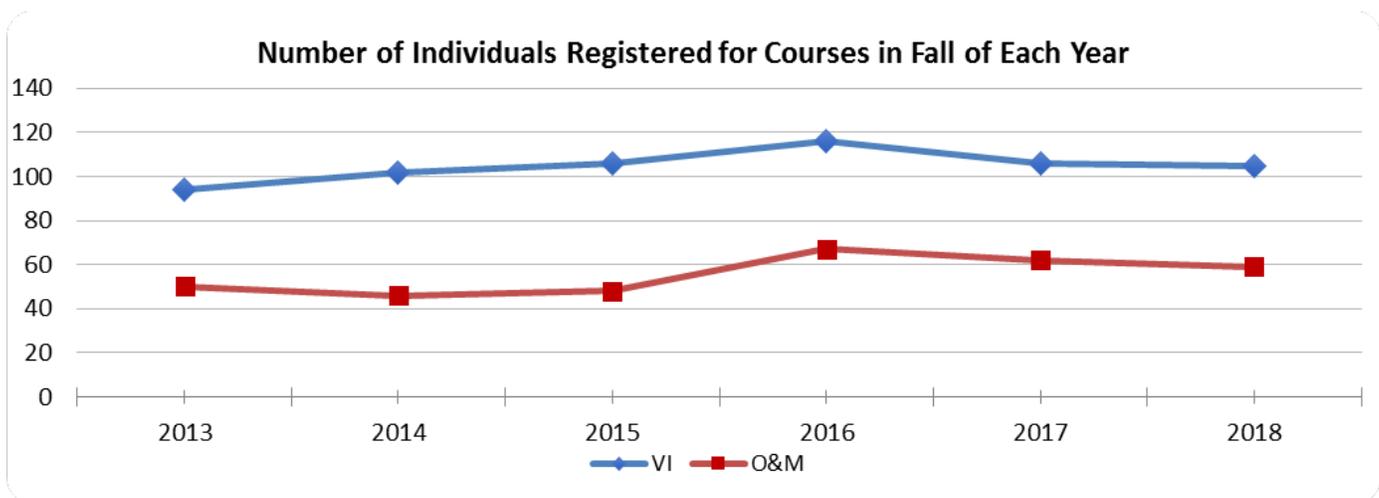
Texas is fortunate to have two collaborative partners who train VI professionals: Texas Tech University (TTU) and Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU). Both schools have graduate programs for TVIs and O&M specialists. SFASU also has an undergraduate program for orientation and mobility specialists (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, a significant factor affecting

enrollment and adding professionals to the VI field seems to be the availability of tuition support.

**Table 15: Number of Students in Training Programs**

	2016	2017	2018
<b>Visual impairments</b>	116	106	105
<b>Orientation and mobility (incl. undergraduates)</b>	67	62	59
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>164</b>



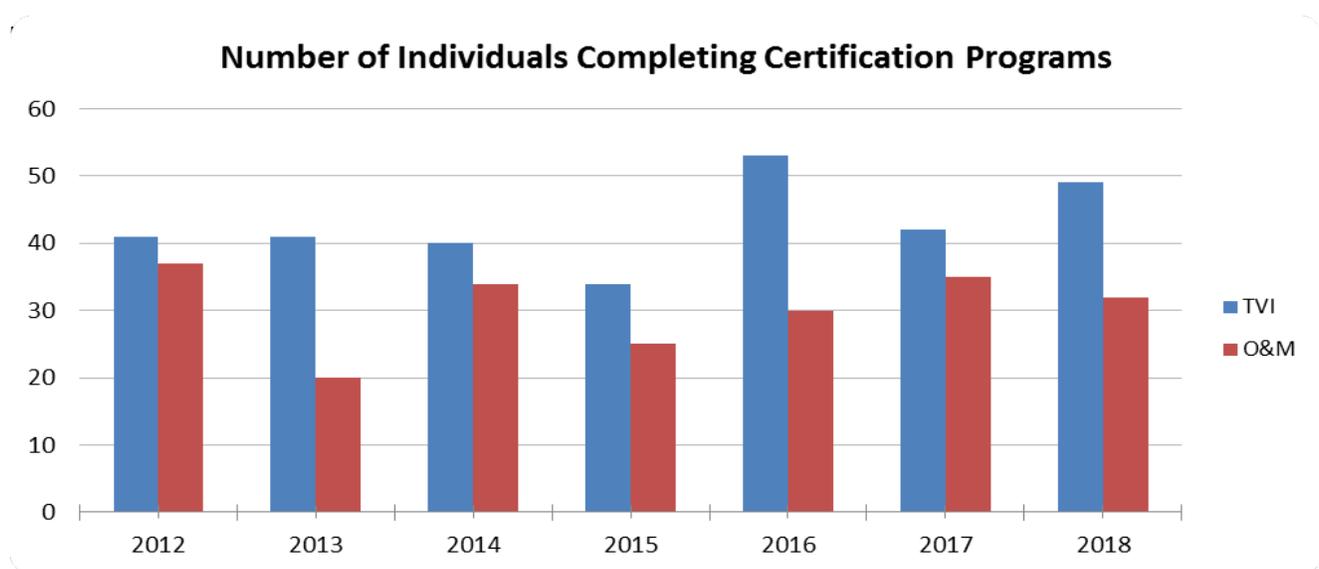
In the Fall of 2018, a total of 164 students were registered for courses leading to certification either as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) or an orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). 12 of the pre-service O&M specialists are undergraduates. One-hundred-and five individuals are seeking VI certification and 59 are en route to O&M certification. Although totals reflect a decrease from the number of students registered in the Fall of 2017, enrollment is right above that of the 5-year average (163).

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**

	2016	2017	2018
<b>Visual impairments</b>	53	42	49
<b>Orientation and mobility</b> (incl. undergraduates)	30	35	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>81</b>

As seen in Table 15 above and the graph below, over the past year, a total of 81 people completed their certification programs. Forty-nine individuals completed VI training and 32 completed their O&M program. These totals are above the 5-year averages of 43.5 for TVIs and the 31 for COMS and is certainly an encouraging trend toward meeting student growth.



In 2018, the percentage of students in personnel preparation programs (VI Certification and O&M) receiving financial assistance was 79%. Eighty-five percent of those in the TVI certification programs and 69.5% in the O&M programs received assistance. Tuition 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 16: Percentage of Students Receiving Support through Texas Grants**

	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>Percentage of students receiving TX stipends</b>	74%	83%	79%	79%

Tuition continues to increase at a steady rate. Tuition and fees rose an average of 112% in Texas between 2003 and 2016 or 67% when adjusting for inflation (Legislative Budget Board, 2016). In 2017, one Texas VI certification program saw an increase of 4.5% in tuition and all Texas universities were expected to raise rates up to 7% in 2018.

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 2018, Texas had 956 individuals (878.6 FTEs) providing vision-related services, either directly to students or in a leadership and/or technical-assistance capacity. After adjusting for dually certified professionals (66), there are 903 individuals providing direct service either on a full- or part-time basis. The total includes the following full- or part-time individuals:

- 681 teachers certified in visual impairments (TVIs) or 604 FTEs; a decrease of 5 FTEs since 2017.
- 288 certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) or 230.5 FTEs; an increase of 23 individuals and 18 FTEs since 2017.
- 66 dually certified professionals; the same seen in 2017.

In addition, there are:

- 53 regional or statewide leadership or technical-assistance specialists (45.1 FTEs)
  - 24 individuals or 19.3 FTEs are at the regional education service centers (ESC)
  - 29 individuals or 24.8 FTEs are at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired either in Outreach or Short-Term Programs

With a current total of 24, the number of individuals providing leadership and technical assistance at the ESCs decreased by one individual in 2018. The time available to assist districts and families went up slightly; ESCs reported 19.3 FTEs this year and 19 in 2017.

The total number of VI professionals (both TVIs and COMS) increased by 22 individuals in 2018 after falling by 18 in 2017. The number of individual TVIs remained the same, yet the number of students increased by 347 across the state.

The number of COMSs increased from 265 to 288 individuals, or by 8.5%. This is the first year an increase was seen in the number of COMSs since 2015. The additional staff will play a vital role as an additional 25% of the current number of students with a visual impairment are in need of an O&M evaluation.

In September 2018, ESCs reported that there are 34 TVIs, 15 O&M specialists and 1 dually certified VI professional who are African-American. The Hispanic VI professionals included 82 TVIs, 18 COMSs, and 5 dually certified professionals. Seventy-seven TVIs, 20 COMSs, and 9 dually certified professionals are fluent in Spanish. There are 6 TVIs and 3 O&M specialists who are Asian. Overall, the VI field saw an increase in African-American VI professionals (+5), Hispanic Vi professionals (+12) and in those who are fluent in Spanish (+24). Continued efforts to expand diversity to reflect the student demographic are indicated.

An examination of attrition, projected attrition, student population growth and need within the past year yielded mixed results. The attrition rate in 2018 decreased by 2 individuals and falls just above the 10-year average across all VI professionals. This year a total of 39 VI professionals left the VI field. Specifically, thirty-three TVIs, 2 O&M specialists and 4 dually certified individuals left the field.

The projected 3-year attrition rate was estimated at 109, or 11% 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 and the projected vs. actual attrition gap has been almost closed in recent years, even they have underestimated 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 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 2.6% each year, or by 831 additional students between 2018 and 2021. It is expected that Texas will have at least 11,252 students with visual impairments by 2021.

This report assessed need based on two methods:

- (a) considering 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 2018 was down. The total number of vacancies decreased from 27 in 2017 to 18 in 2018.

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 continue to indicate a steady but attainable need for VI professionals. If enrollment in university programs continues to exceed the 5-year average, the VI profession conceivably will not have the same level of difficulty in meeting the needs of students with visual impairments as in the past.

**Table 17: Summary of Need by Expertise 2018**

	<b>TVIs</b>	<b>O&amp;M specialists</b>	<b>Overall</b>
<b>12–24-month-need projections</b>	69	33	90
<b>24–36-month-need projections</b>	125	57	162

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 an ongoing 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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