

# TX SenseAbilities

A Bi-Annual Publication about Visual Impairments and Deafblindness for Families and Professionals

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# I Want You to Know: My Reflections on Publishing a Book

Amita Srinivasan, author and photographer, Dallas, Texas

*Amita Srinivasan's book, I Want You to Know... was published in May 2015. Amita, who is 16 years old and has CHARGE Syndrome, wrote the book with the aim of giving voice to what her teachers and parents should know and understand about a child with special needs.*

## **Tell me about yourself.**

Sixteen years ago a doctor told my parents I cannot hear or see or even have a voice (I had paralyzed vocal chords at birth). I was diagnosed with Charge Syndrome. I am profoundly deaf, blind in one eye with central vision in the other eye, was fed by a g-tube for 9 years, have no sense of smell and had so many surgeries that I got sensory aversion. When I was born I faced a very bleak future but many people came together to help me. I have never let my poor vision and hearing stop me. I've had many surgeries but I am a fighter. I want to be a teacher when I grow up!

## **Any particular reason you want to be a teacher?**

I am a rising junior today but so many teachers helped me reach here. From PE, mobility, vision, speech and communication to Stoichiometry, Conics and the French Revolution! All my teachers, my parents and others never gave up on me and helped me reach for the stars. I don't think I would be here if they hadn't helped me, taught me and encouraged me. I think it's kind of my turn now.

I want to give back to my community and society and help kids learn.

## **What inspires you?**

Nature, I love nature photography. I started photography when I was about five years old. My parents used the PECS (Picture Exchange System) to teach me communication when I was a baby. Later when I was about five years old, I would take a picture symbol and then enlarge it to see details and then glue it on the walls of my house. Now I focus on nature photography. I have a website "ami fine art photography" where I post my best pics.

My second passion is advocacy. I used to be really scared to speak up for myself and be worried that it would make me look different in class. But I kind of learned to speak up and ask my teacher or ask for help if I had trouble with something. Then my teachers in the ARD committee and my parents said I could lead my IEP. I slowly got the confidence to speak up in the meeting. I want to speak to all kids now and tell them, "Don't be scared; be yourself and speak up for yourself and others too".

**Tell me about your book.**

I like to combine my photography with some of the things that I read and also with what I have learned about myself. I published a photography e-book on Kindle. It has some of my best nature photographs with captions. It is called I Want You to Know. It's about things I want all parents and teachers to know.

**What made you write the book?**

Many people like my teachers and my aunt saw my photographs and my website. Everyone kept saying that I should publish my photographs or have an exhibition. Sometimes I write articles like the one I wrote for Charge Accounts in 2014 called "Accommodations and IEP Goals for the Multisensory Impaired Student." I thought I could combine both my passions. I thought about what I would want everyone who meets me to know. Things like why do I like structure and routine? I am blind and deaf, it is tiring and a lot of effort to listen and look all day long with what vision and hearing I have. I work really hard and it is not obvious. That is why I like structure and routine. I really don't like things to be moved around too much and I get nervous and tired in new environments. These are things my new teachers or new friends don't realize when they first meet me. I came up with a lot of

things that I would like people to know about me or any other special needs kid like me. Then I matched them to my best photographs.

**Tell me your favorite thing about the book.**

My favorite part was actually reading the reviews on Amazon and also when my teachers emailed my mom after reading the book. I felt very happy because I had dedicated the book to all my teachers. My favorite photograph from the book is the one with the duck digging in the mud. The caption says "See what I can do, not what I cannot." I think this is so important. Many times even my own parents forget this. They get really worried about the future and focus on what I cannot do. Then I get stressed too and don't feel like working or just feel like quitting. I hope parents and teachers always remember to focus on what a kid is really good at and then use that to teach other things. I took chemistry in 10th grade and I totally failed in the first six weeks. My parents were ready to quit but my teacher, Ms. Lee, encouraged and praised me and told me how I was really good in the free responses and the math part. She told me how I could use my skills to improve in other areas. I was encouraged and really worked hard in her class because I wanted to make her proud of me. I aced that class. I may do things slower and differently from others but I want to be appreciated and encouraged for who I am. I think this is true for anyone.

Editor's note: Amita has been selected to the District 67 Student Leadership Advisory Council by Texas Representative Jeff Leach. Here is the press release from the Texas House of Representatives.

<http://www.house.state.tx.us/news/press-releases/?id=5727>





### **Do you really see me?**

See, Hear, Smell and Taste

I don't do that

Fall leaves blowing in the wind

Airplanes piercing the clouds

Swirly Cinnabons baking in the oven

Rough barks of old gnarly trees

Caramel drenched apples sprinkled with nuts

Alien

Don't cry  
Sad eyes salty tears

See who I am  
Deaf Blind Anosmic  
No

Dandelion seedhead with seeds blowing in the  
wind

Accept me, see what I am

Cute, funny, quirky

HAPPY

Hold me

I feel your love

Hug me

I know your love

It makes me reach for stars

Amita's ebook can be purchased on Amazon.

## **NASA Camp Offers Visually Impaired Liberty Junior High Student Window into Spaceflight**

Daniel Houston, editor, Kye R. Lee, photographer, The Dallas Morning News

Reprinted with permission by The Dallas Morning News, originally published February 20, 2015

*The author shares one student's experience participating in the  
NASA Space Camp for students with visual impairment.*

Keywords: family wisdom, visually impaired, expanded core curriculum, camp, vocational development, leadership, peer connections.

For most kids, NASA Space Camp is an unforgettable experience. Abulusine Kamara

was afraid he wouldn't remember much of it at all. The Liberty Junior High School seventh-grader who goes by "Lee" is visually impaired. He said he has trouble remembering enough details to form lasting memories when he's nervous or frightened — as he was in

September, surrounded by strangers he could barely see at Space Camp for Interested Visually Impaired Students (SCIVIS) in Huntsville, Ala.

But Lee said he was able to settle his nerves through a daily calming exercise.

“I was just thinking about what we were going to do for the next day,” he said. “It helped me not be afraid of the kids downstairs, because there was a lot of them. So I was trying not to be so nervous of what we were going to do, and trying not to be so overcome that I [couldn’t] actually go back and remember the time I was there.”

As he recalls Space Camp now, Lee walks through an orderly mental list of details to help him reconstruct the experience. When asked the first thing he remembers about the camp, he starts from the beginning — getting off his first plane ride without his parents; picking up his luggage at baggage claim; riding over to orientation.

Through these details, Lee is able to reflect on the challenge of balancing the camp’s agenda, keeping up with schoolwork from back home, making new friends and overcoming that initial fear.

Mary Ann Siller, a Richardson ISD teacher for students with visual impairments, said hands-on experiences like this space camp can help students take a step forward in their learning. She said she has observed similar progress in Lee in the time since he attended the camp. “The impact of vision loss can be really profound [on learning],” Siller said. “It distorts what that child’s images of the world are, and perception.”

One of the camp missions, as Lee remembers, was to construct a cube-like object in an underwater environment. Crediting teamwork, Lee said he and his group of other children with visual impairments were able to successfully complete the mission. “It was quite an achievement,” Lee said. “We felt proud of ourselves — about [what] we did and the team that we had.”

In another key moment, Lee said he served as commander of a simulated landing mission. He had to learn a script of commands and buttons to press, and communicate it step by step to his crew. With a bump, the simulator informed the crew it had landed the craft successfully.

Although the number varies, about 20 kids from Texas attend the SCIVIS camp each year, said Jim Allan, accessibility coordinator for Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Austin. Allan said the experience can be a huge confidence booster for kids who are used to being treated according to their limitations.



*Photo of Lee Kamara*

"That's what makes Space Camp so cool, because there are no limitations," Allan said. "You can fly the shuttle. You don't have anybody telling you 'You can't do this,' or 'You can't do that.' ... It really affects them."

The camaraderie established in the missions carried over to the campers' free time, Lee said. "At first I didn't know who they [were], so they told me their names [and] I told them my name," he said. "Then we talked about what we like to do. We had some things in common, so I just got to know them for a short time."

This is an important process for kids, Siller said, and is particularly useful for children with a common obstacle like blindness or visual impairment. "Having a peer group that they could make connections with is so vital for any group of kids," Siller said. "He met kids with visual impairments and had a peer group that he could make friends with easily."

This type of connection is rare for visually impaired students, who are often the only ones in their classes and home environments dealing with their particular disability. "We're used to seeing people who look like us, no matter what shape we're in," Allan said. "But ... the population of blind people is not that big, so they may never come across another kid who's blind."

To help pay for the camp, Siller helped Lee apply for a grant from Northrop Grumman Corporation, which offers Space Camp scholarships for visually impaired students in the greater Dallas area and selected parts of the country.

At Liberty Junior High, Lee is enrolled in regular classes. He uses special telescopic magnification devices to hone his vision so he can see what's on the board. Siller also checks on him regularly.



*Lee Kamara using a video magnifier to read a textbook*

His main extracurricular activity is playing trumpet with the school band. His favorite way to spend time, he said, is playing outside with his brother when he gets home from school. Although Lee hasn't settled on a career down the road, he expressed serious interest in becoming an architect of devices that make people's lives better — possibly in health or another field.

No matter the path he chooses to take, he said his experience at Space Camp will help him moving forward. "It helped me the most [with] my schoolwork and what I would be doing next in my future if I wanted to do things by myself," Lee said.

Editor's note: for more information about SCIVIS Space Camp including 2015 photos and dates and prices for 2016 camps, go to the following link: <http://www.tsbvi.edu/space/>

# Charlotte Brown Wins Podium Finish in Pole Vaulting

Scott Bowman, Interim Assistant Commissioner, DARS Division for Blind Services

*The author shares his observations and the insights of a high school student with vision impairment competing in the 2015 UIL Track and Field State Championship.*

Keywords: family wisdom, sports, adaptations, confidence builders, self determination

In the process of compiling some information on Division for Blind Services (DBS) accomplishments and upcoming events, I learned from our Tyler field director, Donna Williams, that the University Interscholastic League (UIL) 2015 Track and Field State Championships were scheduled the weekend of May 14-16, 2015. I have to admit that track and field events are not something that I ordinarily pay attention to, except that she mentioned Charlotte Brown would be competing.

Charlotte, as some of you may recall, is a long-time DBS transition consumer from east Texas and a pole vaulter and track star. I have been in this business for a long time, but I have to admit that the list of successful blind pole vaulters that I have known is a very short list. The girl's 4A conference pole vaulting championship was going to be in Austin on May 16, so I got in touch with her transition counselor, Dan Chamness, from our Tyler office and got the details. I quickly cleared my Saturday morning schedule of other pressing engagements (such as mowing the lawn) and drove down to the University of Texas athletic fields. This event was in the Mike Meyers Track Complex. Dan was in Austin and met me at the field, oriented

me to the event and introduced me to Charlotte's family and friends. Her parents, Ian and Stori Brown, and several others were sporting custom printed t-shirts, promoting Charlotte's final UIL competition. I felt a little underdressed with my DARS DBS red polo shirt, but that was the best I could do on short notice.

The competition itself was intense and exciting to witness from the bleachers just a few feet away from the track area. The long, flexible poles that the young women manipulated seemed very unwieldy, but did the trick in helping with the 10 and 11 foot vaulting efforts. Charlotte used to lay out a contrasting strip of dark-colored turf along the edge of the runway to offer some contrast for her run up to the point where she has to plant her pole. These days, the only accommodation was an audible beeper that was strategically placed where the pole is planted for the jump. Sheer determination and endless hours of practice and discipline seemed to pay off for Charlotte. Her best vault at the 11'6" height was good enough to secure a third place podium finish for Charlotte (and her dog guide, Vador, who took over the actual podium at the critical time). After the medal presentations, the winner and the runner-up seemed to fade into the crowds, as ESPN and



several local news media personnel literally surrounded Charlotte. As always, Charlotte was very gracious and spoke about overcoming obstacles (not in the literal sense, but in terms of challenges that life can present). I managed to take a few more snapshots of Charlotte with one of her brothers and another with Dan Chamness before we left the complex. I wished

her well with her move to Purdue in June, where she will join her older brother in the track and field program there. My lawn work is still waiting, but what a wonderful opportunity it was to see one of the success stories that DARS has assisted over the years. Good luck, Charlotte!

## Where Campers Learn “I Can”: 20 Summers of Athletic Empowerment at Camp Abilities

Part I  
Anne Schultz

*Camp Abilities is an overnight, developmental sports camp for children and youth with visual impairments, blindness, or deafblindness. Their first goal is to empower blind, visually impaired, and deafblind children and youth to become active in sports.*

Keywords: camp abilities, blind, visually impaired, adapted physical education, adapted sports

On July 4, 2015, a unique set of athletes and coaches celebrated not only the birth of this country, but also a very special anniversary. During the week of June 28, campers and counselors at Camp Abilities commemorated the camp’s twentieth season, culminating with a reunion on July 2 for former campers, counselors, and staff. Camp Abilities has now helped an entire generation of children to discover just how much they are capable of.

### A Place to Play—and More

Each summer, campers—or “athletes” as they are called—at Camp Abilities’ 17 U.S. locations and six international locations learn to play adapted sports like goalball, beep baseball and beep kickball as well as more mainstream sports like tennis, archery, tandem biking, kayaking, swimming, and track events. Sport specialists lead the activities, and each athlete works with a counselor or “coach” who provides one-on-one instruction and mentoring throughout the day. For many of the athletes, their time at Camp Abilities marks the first time they have ever played sports. “Before camp,

many participants are unsure of their ability to participate in physical activities,” the camp’s founder, Dr. Lauren Lieberman, notes.

“Ultimately, the children learn that they are athletes.”

At Camp Abilities, they not only blossom into athletes, but they get to do so with peers like themselves. From this, lasting relationships are born. “It’s like a family,” says former camper and now coach David Briggs. “Every year is like a big reunion.” According to Dr. Lieberman, marriages have even resulted from bonds that were formed at Camp Abilities.

These bonds extend to the coaches as well. Each coach gets to know his/her assigned athlete so that s/he can tailor instruction specifically to that athlete’s unique needs. Beth Foster, a long-time coach and now assistant director at two Camp Abilities locations, described how she learned to communicate with a deafblind athlete by signing into his palm and even by making up her own signs. By the end of the camp session, the athlete had gained enough confidence to scale a challenging rock-climbing wall and to jump off a diving board. “I was pushing him to the limit that every athlete gets pushed to, and he just wouldn’t give up,” she says proudly. Foster has been so inspired by the experience that she is now a Certified Adapted Physical Educator (CAPE) and is working toward a doctorate in adapted physical education and kinesiology at Texas Woman’s University.

By the end of the camp session, athletes and coaches are all “crying with emotion,” according to Dr. Monica Lepore, who helped Dr. Lieberman found Camp Abilities Brockport and later founded a Camp Abilities in West Chester,

Pennsylvania. “The coaches are always overwhelmed by the transformation in their own lives and in the children,” she says.



*Photo of a student doing gymnastics*

## How It Works

It might be hard to imagine how children with visual impairments can play mainstream sports, but Camp Abilities has its techniques down to a science. Athletes start out by playing games that incorporate touch-based communication and auditory cues. They use a tactile map of the court to get an idea of its dimensions and positions.

Then, the athletes move on to playing modified versions of mainstream sports (including modified versions of Wii games in the evenings). For the 50- and 100-meter dashes, for example, some athletes hold onto a waist-high guide-wire that extends the length of the track, while others are able to see special high-contrast markings on the track. For longer races, athletes may use a shoelace or short rope called a tether with sighted guides who run alongside them. The athletes also learn strategies to modify sports and recreation activities for their specific visual needs, as well

as advocacy techniques to ensure that they are included in sports at their schools when they want to be. At the end of camp, each child receives an in-depth assessment of his or her performance, achievement, and abilities in the sports and recreational activities. This information can be shared with his/her parents and physical education instructors.



*Photo of a young student playing beep baseball*

To help the athletes get there, hundreds of students volunteer as coaches. These students are studying to be teachers of students with visual impairment or are enrolled in various relevant programs such as physical education, adapted physical activity/education, special education, orientation and mobility, and intervener training programs. Before camp starts they receive over 12 hours of training in specific techniques for teaching physical education, sports, and recreation skills to the athletes. The training benefits not only the athletes at camp but also thousands of other children, because the coaches continue to apply

what they learned at Camp Abilities throughout their teaching careers.

### **The Four-Fold Mission of Camp Abilities**

Camp Abilities' first goal is to empower blind, visually impaired, and deafblind children and youth to become active in sports. But the organization has other ambitious objectives, too. As its founders see it, Camp Abilities serves three additional purposes: 1) to educate undergraduate and graduate students and teachers about teaching children with visual impairments, 2) to conduct research on best practices in physical activity among children with visual impairments, and 3) to provide support to the families who care for children and youth with impairments.

With its in-depth training of coaches, Camp Abilities has become a world leader in providing field-based training for professionals working in this area. The training addresses eye conditions and their effect on participation and learning during physical activity, facilitation of orientation and mobility concepts, developmentally appropriate ways to interact with children, assessment and record-keeping, and the introduction of the sports themselves.

Camp Abilities wants to extend its influence beyond its coaches and athletes, and so several research projects are conducted each year at Camp Abilities Brockport to learn more about physical activities and intervention strategies that work for people with visual impairments. Many of these research projects have exposed athletes to state-of-the-art technology—such as talking pedometers—that can enhance their physical activity experience. Camp Abilities has also contributed numerous books, practical articles and research articles to the fields of

physical education, adapted physical education, and teaching for individuals with visual impairments. “Everything we produce helps kids who are not involved in our camps, so our camps have far-reaching effects on all children with visual impairments,” says Lieberman.

Last but certainly not least, the support Camp Abilities provides for the families of children with visual impairments means a great deal to these dedicated caregivers. This support can extend

beyond the camp session, because when the children return home, they are more able, independent, and confident in their abilities. At camp, they have learned to try new things and take risks; they are therefore more willing to do the same in “real life.” “We show the families what their child is capable of doing with just some small modifications,” Foster explains. “To hear that they can do (these things) must be empowering for the families as well.”

## Keys to the City

Salvador Villa, student at Memorial High School

*A high school blind student tells how he was awarded the keys to his city of McAllen.*

Keywords: blind student, mentoring, percussionist, JROTC, NFB



*Sal and his mother with the Key to the City of McAllen*

I am currently a junior at Memorial High School in McAllen, Texas and I participate in several extracurricular activities in my school and community. Currently I am a percussionist in the high school band and a sergeant in JROTC program. I have been blind since birth but I have not let my disability stop me from achieving my goals. In the future I'm planning to become a lawyer and a leader of the state affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). Also I plan to help other blind children like my mom and my mentor Daniel Martinez have done in the last few years. Helping others became one of my goals when I started to volunteer in the NFB BELL (see Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning) program that comes to the Rio Grande Valley every year. What motivates me to do this is seeing how the young students improve in school and in their lives. I



enjoy showing others that being blind does not and should not mean anything to anyone.

In May, I had the honor and privilege of receiving the keys to the City of McAllen. I received this award in recognition of my perseverance, dedication, and accomplishments and for inspiring others to perform beyond their expectations. What really means a lot to me is how the plaque is made. On top, it has a key that says City of McAllen, on the bottom the reason I received the award is engraved in

Braille and print. It was a memorable day and I am glad I was able to share this moment with my family, teachers, and some of the members of my NFB chapter.

Editor's Note: Watch the news video of Sal performing in the band and presenting the JROTC color guard along with him mentoring a young blind student.

[http://youtu.be/Zx\\_JRPmJ5ls](http://youtu.be/Zx_JRPmJ5ls)

## NAPVI 2015 National Family Conference Reflection

Crystal Johnson, TAPVI Secretary

*A parent of three teens with Retinitis Pigmentosa shares her thoughts about the NAPVI 2015 National Family Conference.*

Keywords: blind, visual impairment, parenting, families

The NAPVI 2015 Conference in Chicago was a very informative and touching experience for me and my husband, Jason. We have three boys affected by retinitis pigmentosa (RP) and have been learning about the disease for the past six years while trying to keep up with our kids and decide exactly what they need, why they need it, and how they need for it to get done.

We listened to doctors that are dedicated to finding ways to prevent and treat different eye diseases. We heard about stem cell research, gene therapy, neuro-protective factors and

photoreceptor transplantation. It was refreshing to learn about the progress that has been made in research. The doctors shared the outcomes of several case studies. Parents were warned to choose wisely before including their own child in a research study. Being in a research study in the early stages may prevent your child from participating in future more promising studies. Surgical studies particularly are concerning because they could cause irreversible damage.

We received information about the transition to college and scholarship opportunities. We learned how important it is for students to be connected to school and the community, to be

prepared to learn and participate and to be ready for all opportunities.

Matt Simpson from USABA (United States Association of Blind Athletes) was one of the keynote speakers. He spoke about growing up blind and wanting to play sports. He was extremely inspiring. Our kids are very athletic and involved in school sports and we worry about what will happen when that is no longer available to them. With USABA there is an answer and we are excited to follow up and get our sons involved in this organization at the local level.

We attended a FamilyConnect session that showed how the website links families to information, help and support. They asked for feedback from parents so they can be sure the website is relevant. We met Emily Coleman who is a parent of a child with a visual impairment and a teacher of the visually impaired. Emily

responds to questions and comments posted on FamilyConnect and has her own blog. Everyone at the conference was so welcoming. I plan to keep in contact with some of the wonderful families we met from a variety of states. The information was overwhelming and I'm trying to sort through all of it. The most inspiring were the other families. I'm learning to be more patient with my children.

It's not easy to understand what our children are going through on a daily basis. I don't know what to expect in the future but that will not stop me from learning. I realized that a truly special child is one that overcomes anything that tries to stop them no matter the disability. When the child acts like it's no big deal on top of it...that's inspirational. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to attend this conference and I encourage others to join the NAPVI families.

Go to "Faces of TAPVI" on Facebook for more information.

## Low Vision Services: Working with Your Child's School

Anne Corn, Ed.D., Research Professor, volunteer, Dept. of Ophthalmology, University of Cincinnati Professor Emerita, Departments of Special Education, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Vanderbilt University

### *Low vision evaluations, optical devices and technology for student in school*

Your child's optometrist has recommended that he or she receive special services for children with low vision. This information is for you to use as you prepare to speak with your child's teachers and school administrators.

If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (ages 3 - 21), his or her school will provide:

- Access to the general education curriculum
- Accommodations

- Special education and related services
- Assistive technology services

Low vision services apply to these provisions. They should be, but are not always, available through IDEA. They include:

- A clinical low vision evaluation
- The purchase of optical and/or electronic devices, and
- Instruction in the use of the devices

### **Clinical Low Vision Evaluations**

These evaluations are conducted by ophthalmologists or optometrists with a low vision specialty and are considered a “related service.” Under IDEA, there are two related service provisions that apply to this evaluation. 1) a medical evaluation to improve a child’s functioning within special education, and 2) an assistive technology evaluation. For a child with low vision, one part of a clinical low vision evaluation is to determine if optical and/or electronic devices will assist your child.

### **Assistive Technology**

Under IDEA, schools purchase assistive technology devices that will improve your child’s functioning in school. Once a device is included on an IEP the school becomes responsible for purchase and maintenance of the device. If a child needs a device for homework, and it cannot be transported home, a duplicate device may be purchased by the school.

### **Instruction in the Use of Optical and Electronic Devices**

IDEA also provides for instruction in the use of assistive devices. For optical and/or electronic devices that will be used in classrooms and within your child’s school, your child’s TVI will provide this instruction. This instruction includes the use of handheld, spectacle mounted, and electronic devices for seeing near (e.g., books) and at a distance (e.g., whiteboard). A certified orientation and mobility specialist (COMS) will provide instruction for your child in the use of distance devices for such tasks as reading street signs and finding addresses. They are ready to help your child to use his or her functional vision.

I hope this information is helpful to you. Please contact your child’s school to request low vision services. For a copy of the IDEA law, go to: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-108publ446/html/PLAW-108publ446.htm>

# Vision Ergonomics: Designing Educational Environments to Optimize Vision

Chrissy Cowan, Mentor Coordinator, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach

*The author discusses factors that challenge and strategies that support students with low vision in the school environment.*

Keywords: vision impairment, optical devices, lighting modifications.

As you work with students with low vision, there are general adjustments that can be made to classroom environments that will enhance visual functioning. The following should be considered for each individual student, based on information from a functional vision evaluation.

### Consider the Etiology

Familiarize yourself with the characteristics of the most predominant visual conditions resulting in low vision and their effects, such as retinitis pigmentosa, ocular albinism, retinopathy of prematurity, optic nerve hypoplasia, cortical visual impairment, cataracts, coloboma, nystagmus, central scotoma, glaucoma (this list is not complete). A current (October 2015) web resource for this is <http://www.svrc.vic.edu.au/AV.shtml>. For each etiology, look for such things as:

- **Effects of Light:** cataracts cause light to be scattered over the retina meaning that bright light and glare will usually cause problems for the student, whereas the student with retinitis pigmentosa (RP) will require high illumination. Glare for some would be disastrous. Overhead lighting might be too low/high, depending on the

etiology. Illuminated screens (any type of lighted display) would be difficult for some, necessary for others.

- **Field Deficits:** students with Stargardt's Disease can have a central acuity loss, making staying on a line of print difficult without specific training. Students with retinitis pigmentosa tend to lose the peripheral field, thus making large print and/or enlarged maps/charts/graphs/photos difficult to scan.
- **Eye Motor:** students with nystagmus tend to have problems shifting gaze from one target to another (typical of copying assignments).

### Posture

A work surface and/or computer work station that is poorly arranged in regard to lighting would reduce visual efficiency. Whereas marketed reading stands straighten the student's posture and elevate the reading material, students typically need to write on the same (slanted) surface. Look on occupational therapy websites, such as <http://www.therapro.com/>, for a writing stand that does not have the ridge at the bottom, which makes writing uncomfortable. Or, use a 3 inch 3-ring binder turned sideways to slant work at an angle.



## Organization

It takes the student with low vision longer to find things. Students need to access their materials quickly, so storing for quick retrieval is necessary. Consider a small, stick-on battery operated closet light that you press for inside desks and other darker spaces. Backpacks will need folders and other organizational containers to keep papers organized, and smaller objects in desks should have dedicated containers. The TVI will need to check and reinforce that an established system is used consistently.

## Lighting

- **Work Surfaces:** with some eye conditions, a lamp might be necessary to put light precisely where it is needed. If an outlet is nearby, the APH lamp is wonderful. Another option is a battery powered OttLight that can be moved from room to room. When positioning the light, make sure the student's head or hand does not occlude the light, or that the light is shining on the student's face. Students with albinism or cataracts might have difficulty with too much ambient light and/or glare, which can cause headaches and have a "wash-out" effect on certain materials. Tinted lenses might be beneficial for some, or a light blue filter placed over the reading surface could change the contrast (watch for glare off of shiny surfaces). Avoid seating that is directly under harsh overhead lighting or near a large window.
- **Overhead Projector Screens and Interactive White Boards:** when the target surface is lighted or bright, students with lighting issues may have difficulties. The classroom lighting can be adjusted to accommodate, or in extreme cases, the student may need to have a desk (print) copy if significant copy work is required. There are apps available that connect the student's

tablet with the teacher's computer or the interactive white board that would provide a clearer copy for the student.

## Writing Tools and Materials

Provide adapted paper and writing tools, and adjust lighting and positioning of materials (see writing slant board above) if needed. Examples of writing tools include drafting pencils (or #1 soft lead, available in art/craft stores) and fine point felt tip pens, such as a Flare® pen. Students may perform better with bold line paper, or commercially available wide ruled notebook paper with darker lines (compare these at the grocery store—some are darker than others). Gradually move toward fewer adaptations as the student becomes more proficient.

## Optical Devices

If the student has been seen by a low vision specialist, start by making sure the prescribed optical devices are on hand and the student has learned how to use them correctly. Devices that tend to be handed to students by well-intentioned people should be avoided (for example: full page magnifier, bar magnifier). Electronic near vision devices are best used for "spot" viewing, and will slow the student down when reading longer passages. If a video magnifier is in the room, find out if it is being used consistently. If it is not (perhaps due to portability, placement, too much enlargement) consider retraining the student on a handheld or stand magnifier. There are now products available from APH and Region 4 Education Service Center, designed for teaching optical device use. Refer to *Looking to Learn: Promoting Literacy for Students with Low Vision*, D'Andrea and Farrenkopf, Eds., AFB Press.

# Teacher of the Deafblind Pilot Program in Texas: Part I

Chris Montgomery, Deafblind Education Specialist, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

*The author describes information on the Texas Teacher of Students with Deafblindness Pilot Project and efforts to provide training for professionals who serve students with deafblindness.*

## Unique Needs of the Deafblind Student Population

Students with deafblindness (DB) are considered a low-incidence population nationally. These students require specialized support to access environmental information, to develop communication, and to develop concepts about the world around them due to the significant impact caused by the combined loss of vision and hearing. Although local districts may provide vision and hearing services, there is often a gap in specific planning and programming to address their educational service needs due to the lack of available professionals with training specific to deafblindness at the local level. Many districts struggle to find the internal resources to accommodate the educational needs of these students and their families (Blaha, Cooper, Irby, Montgomery, & Parker, 2009).

The creation of regional centers for children with deafblindness began in the 1970s. These centers provided a national network for pilot program development, and sharing of information, and tended to be staffed by people with specialized training. The regional centers had the responsibility to develop direct service for children with deafblindness, prior to

the enactment of mandatory educational legislation. While acknowledging the shortcomings of this time period — notably, the segregation of the deafblind student population — there were two significant characteristics that should be mentioned: the proliferation of college programs dedicated to personnel preparation in deafblindness, and stable federal funding. These programs were able to ensure a steady supply of trained teachers and specific teaching practices designed to serve these students to develop within the field. (Collins, 1993).

Following the 1970s, educational philosophy shifted away from centralized programming and toward local inclusive settings. As the population of students with deafblindness moved to local communities it has presented some challenges for students with low-incidence disabilities as well as some benefits. With students who are deafblind being served at the local level, they have greater access to the standard curriculum. Recent national child count data shows over 60% of students who are deafblind are attending local schools and 26% are participating in standard instruction (Schalock & Bull, 2013). In addition, students who attend local schools are able to live at

home and participate in their family's daily routines.

The picture, however, of access and support for students is a complex one.

Many local school districts have difficulty providing appropriate instruction in the classroom. They may be unable to provide dedicated personnel to a position focused on such a low incidence population. In some districts in Texas, The Texas Deafblind Project has seen an increase in hiring interveners (trained paraprofessionals) to provide students with access to information, communication and social support. Although the role of the intervener is designed to provide direct support to students, it is not meant to replace the role of teacher, who is charged with designing instruction and providing guidance to the student's entire educational team. When a student does have access to an intervener, our outreach staff members have observed challenges when that intervener does not have access to support from qualified professionals. Such challenges include the student not having access to appropriate assessment, lacking deafblind specific IEP goals, and family members lacking information about the intervener's role on the team. Our team's collective experiences with these challenges caused us to examine both the need for teacher training and the role of the teacher in serving students who are deafblind.

Recently, the Office of Special Education requested the National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB) to engage in a national assessment of the needs for improving intervener services in the United States. This survey included consultation with parents,

technical assistance providers, administrators, higher education faculty members, interveners, and teachers. NCDB found a need for more teachers of students with deafblindness to support the intervener practice. NCDB specifically recommended that interveners have "knowledgeable supervisors and access to experts in deafblindness that may provide consulting and coaching," thereby bolstering the intervener's role and providing more comprehensive educational planning for students who are deafblind (NCDB, 2012).

A few university personnel preparation programs provide designated coursework for professional service students who are deafblind; currently only two states, Utah and Illinois, recognize specific certification for a teacher of students with deafblindness. Nationally, teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and teachers of students who are deaf and hard of hearing (TDHH) are providing much of the support for IEP development and classroom instruction. In many cases, these two teaching disciplines lack the expertise specific to teaching children with deafblindness, and local and regional support is provided by state deafblind technical assistance projects.

The field of deafblindness is currently supported, in large part, by federal grant funding to the state deafblind projects. Without recognized state or national certification and dedicated money for well-established personnel preparation programs for teachers of students with deafblindness, our field is in a precarious place.

## **The Beginning: Mentor Program Teachers of Deafblind Help Define and Explore the Practice**

In an effort to develop and enhance educational services to students in Texas who are deafblind, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) mentor program initiated a pilot project in 2009. Five teachers were selected in three education service center regions to take part in this Deafblind (DB) Mentor Project based on their dedication to deafblind students. For the first three years of this pilot, each teacher participated in training provided by Robbie Blaha, who is a certified teacher of students with visual impairments, as well as a certified teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing. Ms. Blaha is currently a consultant with the Texas Deafblind Project with the TSBVI Outreach program. Over a three-year span, the five teachers participated in training on topics such as assessment, communication for deafblind (DB) students, strategies and issues related to behavior, and sensory accommodations for the IEP. As a group, these mentors in training made inroads into the field of deafblindness by developing and reviewing materials specific to students with deafblindness.

One of the documents developed by the mentor pilot participants and the Texas Deafblind Project was the “Roles and Responsibilities of the Itinerant Teacher of Deafblindness.” This document outlined eight points specific to the job of the itinerant teacher of students with deafblindness (TDB) and was used to determine training topics for the TDB Pilot Program. Further refinement, discussion, and field trials of the “Roles” document were included in the TDB Pilot with

later drafts being developed to include self-contained models.

## **Partnership with local districts to address the challenge**

In 2010, our project began looking again at how we might address this need for a recognized teacher of deafblindness role. Through conversations with two administrators in the Houston area, we discovered commonalities when comparing deafblind student populations and goals for each of their districts. Both administrators were invested in the idea of the best possible programming for their students with deafblindness, and were looking for innovative models to train staff.

In each district there were high numbers of students with deafblindness, which allowed for the identification of an area of need within the district. Training topics were selected through a combination of needs assessments and pre-established roles of the TDB. This ability to channel our efforts was vital as it allowed administrators to designate and assign staff time dedicated to deafblind student caseloads. We then worked with administrators to select personnel based on the staff’s own histories of interest and dedication to working with students with deafblindness. Out of this mutual desire to explore and define this specific role, the “Teacher of Deafblind” pilot was born.

Teachers in the districts identified as TDBs for the pilot had either (or both) endorsement in auditory impairment or visual impairment. Complementary to the TDBs, teams were formed around them that included either a TVI or TDHH (depending on the TDB’s background — TDHH or TVI), and orientation and mobility specialists (O & Ms). Other team members



were included in the training sessions as appropriate.

In addition to the two districts in the Houston area, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI), also participated in the pilot. The deafblind student population at TSBVI typically fluctuates between 15-20 students annually. The role of the TDB is different than that of most local districts, with self-contained, deafblind specific classrooms, low teacher to student ratios, and residential programming. It was felt that TSBVI's "center-based" model would be complementary to the local district model and could function as a resource of practice for other pilot participants.

From June 2011 through May 2013, seven TDBs and their administrators met with our project staff to define the unique skills and practices for serving students who are deafblind. Our model for training was made up of a series of seven training workshops. The workshops were then immediately followed by direct one-to-one consultations between the TDBs, Regional Service Center 4 consultants, and Outreach staff. The follow-up consultations were meant as a way to more directly apply the ideas and concepts of our training sessions to the TDB's deafblind student caseload. During our workshop meetings, we often split the administrators into a separate group in order to focus on larger systems change topics.

## Conclusion

Stay tuned for part II of this article in the Spring & Summer issue of Texas SenseAbilities in which we describe how the

Teacher of Deafblind pilot was expanded to include a new cohort of teachers to help test the model. Information about the technical assistance provided, student, TDB, and systems outcomes will be included, along with further thoughts on how TSBVI's Deafblind Project Outreach continued development of the Teacher of the Deafblind Pilot Program.

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Portions of this article were previously published in Visual Impairment and Deafblind Education Quarterly (VIDBEQ). Part II of this article will appear in a future issue of TX SenseAbilities.

# Informal Functional Hearing Evaluation (IFHE)

Adam Graves, Education Consultant, Deafblind Outreach Program, TSBVI

*This article provides information on the development and implementation of an evaluation tool for conducting informal functional hearing evaluations for students with deafblindness and/or multiple disabilities.*

Keywords: deafblindness, deafblind, deaf, hard of hearing, evaluation, functional hearing

Over the course of the past year, the Texas Deafblind Project of the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) has been developing a tool to help teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing (TDHH) describe how students who have difficulty responding to formal diagnostic hearing tests, such as those with deafblindness and/or multiple disabilities, use their hearing in a functional way. The assessment (which has been titled the Informal Functional Hearing Evaluation or IFHE) is designed to help record information about the behavioral responses of students with deafblindness to a variety of sounds in multiple settings. The information obtained from the IFHE can guide the development of accommodations and instructional strategies for the IEP team, as well as provide valuable information for educational audiologists as they perform subsequent diagnostic testing.

## Origins

In the fall of 2014, Chris Montgomery, Adam Graves and Kate Hurst from the Deafblind Outreach Program at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired began a five-part

webinar series describing and explaining hearing issues for students with deafblindness. During the course of these webinars, the team conducted interviews with educational audiologist Lisa Sutherland and with Susie Tiggs, the educational lead for the Texas network for low-functioning deaf students. Much of the conversation with these hearing specialists centered on the fact that most audiologists and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing (TDHH) do not have experience in working with students who are deafblind. As a result, many hearing professionals typically require additional information about how to identify the ways in which a child with a combined vision and hearing loss is using their hearing. In addition, the need for students who are deafblind to be able to hear, identify and listen for environmental sounds for the purposes of orientation was also discussed. The team realized that the need for assistive listening devices to help provide access to environmental sounds makes a comprehensive functional hearing assessment especially important for a child who is deafblind and lacks formal language. This is because sighted children with a hearing loss are often provided with assistive listening devices that are programmed to block out environmental sounds

in order to help eliminate auditory distractions and allow the child to focus on speech. As the team began to explore the differences between the hearing needs of sighted children and those with a visual impairment, they discovered the difficulties that arise when conducting standard audiometric testing for students with deafblindness and multiple disabilities. The importance of a comprehensive informal hearing evaluation that would be applicable for students with vision loss became very apparent.

Susie Tiggs provided the team with a number of resources and evaluation tools that provided functional hearing information for deaf or hard of hearing students who had typical vision but were unable to use formal language to answer questions or offer descriptions of what they were able to hear. The evaluations that the team encountered when researching evaluation tools that are currently available relied heavily on observing changes in the student's eye gaze and visual attention as indicators of the child's responses to specific sounds. Despite the emphasis on visual response in these assessments, Chris and Adam worked with a team from TSBVI to try to adapt the most comprehensive of the evaluations to collect hearing information on a student who seemed to be using his hearing in a manner that did not appear to be consistent with some of his audiological information.

After talking about the adaptation of this existing evaluation tool with the TSBVI team, it became apparent that the evaluation they were attempting to use did not adequately describe how the student was using his hearing in a functional way. More importantly, the evaluation did not provide any guidance on how to create a list of recommendations that could be included in the student's communication report or list of

accommodations. The team then reached out to the Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) and the Perkins School for the Blind to discover if those institutions were currently using or were aware of a functional evaluation that was specifically designed to provide information and recommendations on hearing needs of this low incidence population. When both TSD and Perkins indicated that they were interested in using a functional hearing evaluation specifically designed for these students, the team set about to develop just such a tool.

### **The Deafblind Difference**

The most significant difference between the IFHE and similar functional hearing inventories is that unlike other functional hearing tools, the IFHE is specifically designed to account for the difficulties that students with deafblindness and multiple disabilities have in localizing and identifying sound sources due to their loss of vision. More emphasis is placed on encouraging the teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing to observe and document the child's specific bodily behavioral responses to sounds. The IFHE places an increased emphasis on observing behaviors other than visual attention to help confirm that a student has heard, recognized, or understood a specific sound, even for students with some vision.

One example of the way in which the IFHE attempts to address hearing issues that are unique to deafblindness can be found in its description of some of the difficulties that a student with a hearing and visual loss may have in localizing sound sources. It includes an explanation of some of the subtle ways that a child might indicate that he has heard a sound when he cannot orient toward it, such as small

arm or leg movements, changes in vocalizations, or changes in head position. The IFHE also contains an extensive interview section so that parents and caregivers can help provide an inventory of non-visual responsive behaviors that the TDHH should be aware of when completing the evaluation. In addition, there is a section for Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to include recommendations based on the observations recorded in the assessment tool. Recommendations that are made in the IFHE can then be incorporated into the student's communication report and Learning Media Assessment. By including a section for recommendations on instructional delivery, based on the student's deafblindness and other impairments, the IFHE should help teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing and teachers of students with visual impairment collaborate to create a more detailed description of the child's multisensory needs. Improved collaboration can then inform the team on how to best address the child's sensory needs through a variety of instructional strategies across multiple settings and environments.

The IFHE is currently undergoing a review process during which a select group of experts in the field of deafblindness will provide comments, corrections, and suggestions to prepare for the distribution of the evaluation. At the conclusion of the review, the IFHE will undergo a period of field-testing with the collaboration of the National Center on Deafblindness (NCDB) before it is made available to the public. During the field testing process, teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing will be asked to conduct an Informal Functional Hearing Evaluation on a deafblind student for whom they are currently providing services. Teachers will then be asked to complete a survey to measure the effectiveness of the IFHE as an evaluation tool and to provide feedback on how this evaluation may be implemented or improved.

The TSBVI team hopes to have a version of the IFHE available for field-testing beginning in January 2016. If you or one of your team members is interested in participating in the IFHE field test, please email Adam Graves at [gravesa@tsbvi.edu](mailto:gravesa@tsbvi.edu) to obtain a copy of the evaluation and discuss the field-testing protocol.

## 10 Tips to Introduce Reading to a Young Child Who Is Blind or Visually Impaired

By Charlotte Cushman, Manager of Paths to Literacy

*Suggestions for introducing literacy awareness and love of stories to children with visual impairment or deafblindness who are not yet able to read*

Keywords: early literacy, reading aloud, story boxes

One of the first and most important things to remember when introducing books and literacy experiences to a young child with a visual impairment is that the child is a child first. While there are certain tips and techniques that will make reading more meaningful and pleasurable for children who are blind or visually impaired, many of the same principles apply to ALL children. Sharing quiet time together with a family member, teacher or other special person and enjoying stories that are funny or interesting is something that all of us love, regardless of our age or the amount of vision we have.

### **1. Share your love of reading by reading aloud with your child every day.**

It is important to set aside time each day to read with your child. This does not mean that you have to read a book from cover to cover or make the child listen to each and every page. This means that you show your child that books are something special to be enjoyed and that they can make life more interesting and fun.

### **2. Choose times and places that are quiet, comfortable and free from distractions.**

Life is often busy and can be chaotic, especially when juggling schedules and other children. Turn off your cell phone and the TV, sit close to the child, and really focus on exploring books and literacy materials together. Be sure that the child is comfortable, with proper positioning, so that she can focus on you and the story rather than on trying to sit up. This simple act of sharing focused time together will help to create a routine that is special and enjoyable for both you and the child.

### **3. Choose books that relate to the child's own experience.**

Many young children who are blind or visually impaired have limited experience with the world, and if they have additional disabilities or are deafblind, this is even more true. Books about rocket ships or monsters will have limited meaning to children who don't know these concepts, and it is best to begin with simple books that relate directly to a child's own experience. One favorite that many children enjoy from a young age is Little Rabbit's Bedtime. It includes familiar routines, such as taking a bath and brushing teeth, and real objects can be shown to the child while reading the book (i.e. a real toothbrush and washcloth).

For older children or children with multiple disabilities, Lunch Crunch offers a simple story line where you can use real carrots, crackers, etc. to accompany the story.

### **4. Use objects to support the story, in place of illustrations.**

As with the examples above, real objects can be used to illustrate and expand the story. These can help children to identify objects mentioned in the story (e.g. a pair of shoes) or to encourage them to act something out (e.g. brushing hair). Story boxes are collections of items from a given book that are stored together with the book in a convenient way. There are many examples of story boxes on Paths to Literacy.

### **5. Add textures or bright colors to call attention to important parts of the page.**

The type of adaptation used will depend on the individual child, including the amount of vision they have and the specific vision condition. CVI or Cortical Visual Impairment, for example, often



calls for different types of adaptations. In general, textures or bright colors can be used to call the child's attention to a certain part of the page or to make the meaning clearer.

### **6. Use interactive language to make the story more engaging and meaningful.**

Stories can be a wonderful way to help children to draw the connection to their own experience. For example, "José went to the grocery store in this book. Do you remember when we went to the grocery store yesterday?"

### **7. Provide books in braille and/or large print.**

Braille labels or sheets can be created as overlays that can be added to individual pages. There are also many sources of braille books, some of which are free. Work with your child's teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) to identify sources of books or to find help creating braille books. One parent had the idea of hosting a book making party!

### **8. Encourage the child to be actively engaged in the handling of the book.**

Invite the child to:

- Find the cover
- Open the book
- Turn the page
- Find the "top of the page"

### **9. Create tactile books with the child, based on their experiences.**

Experience books are created by collecting real objects associated with a given experience and making them into a book. When possible, include the child in collecting and saving the materials and helping to make them into a book. For example, when going out to eat, get an

extra straw and bring it home to glue onto a page in a book telling about the experience.

### **10. Store the books and other literacy materials in an accessible place that the child can find.**

Designate a shelf or cabinet that the child can locate and reach. Label it with braille or a tactile symbol or picture to indicate that this is where books are kept. Encourage the child to find the shelf and choose a book to look at. Invite her to return the books to the shelf after reading time, so that she will learn about where things are stored and can thereby take a more active role in selecting books and making literacy an active choice in her life.

Most important of all — Enjoy!

### **Resources**

To read more about literacy for young children who are blind or visually impaired, please see: <http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/blog/10-tips-introduce-reading-young-child-who-blind-or-visually-impaired>

We invite you to register for Paths to Literacy, which is a collaboration between Perkins School for the Blind and Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. To register for this free site, visit <http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/user/register>. You will receive weekly email notification of new blog posts on various topics related to literacy and children with visual impairment.

Paths to Literacy is also present in many social media platforms. See the following links:

<https://www.facebook.com/ptliteracy>

<https://twitter.com/PathstoLiteracy>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pathstoliteracy>

# Children with Visual Impairments: Do Them a Favor and Give Them Chores!

By Petra Hubbard

*The author discusses teaching daily living skills, responsibility and self determination to children with visual impairment at a variety of ages as their skills develop*

Keywords: daily living skills, responsibility, independence, chores

Ensuring that each child with a visual impairment has age-appropriate daily living skills and is responsible for chores has benefits, both for the present and the future of the child. Parents often do not make their child with a visual impairment responsible for chores for a variety of reasons, but parents are not doing themselves or their children any favors by not allowing them to be equal contributors to their families. Not having chores will put the child at a disadvantage compared with his or her siblings who may feel the division of labor is unfair. More importantly, the message that the child with a visual impairment receives is that they are less capable, and not an equal contributor to the family. This will impact their feelings of self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-worth. Having regular chores builds a child's sense of self-esteem and will encourage a good work ethic and a can-do attitude as they become accustomed to completing a job under the supervision of their first "bosses," their parents. Regular chores give the child consistent practice with many skills so that these skills become second nature. The individual with a visual impairment will become accustomed to

what it takes to run a household so when the day comes to live independently, they will have the experience and confidence to be successful. Having a visual impairment does not mean never having to do dishes!

So, what are the various types of daily living skills? The areas include eating skills, personal hygiene and grooming, clothing management, food preparation, household duties and maintenance, communication, organization, personal record-keeping, and financial concerns.

Assigning chores should start before kindergarten, such as putting toys and clothes away, helping to set the table, clearing and wiping the table, helping with simple food preparation, making their bed, and putting trash in a waste basket. As the child grows, the complexity of the chores can increase, but remember that they will have to be taught. People with visual impairments do not have the same opportunity for learning through casual observation the way people with full sight can, so they must be directly taught how to perform skills safely and effectively. Parents may need to learn some of the special techniques that can be helpful because essential skills can be

practiced and refined in the natural context of home. Also, the child's teacher of students with visual impairment (TVI) can facilitate informal assessment of the student's current skills and may teach daily living skills. There are several instructional arrangement options: pull-out of class for instructional time, consult with the classroom teacher about modifications they can naturally incorporate into their regular programming (especially in the upper grades where Home Economics classes might be chosen), provide direct instruction before or after school, or have a special summer IEP. Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Service/Division for Blind Services (DARS/DBS) has Rehabilitation Teachers who can provide instruction in the home, and in some areas, DBS offers special programs and events that incorporate daily living skills. The DBS Transition program will help families learn about options for continuing to build and practice skills after the child becomes an adult. Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) in Austin offers short-term and summer programs that teach daily living skills. Region 10 ESC offers technical assistance to teachers of students with visual impairment within the region on how to address activities of daily living, and the Region 10 ESC Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) Planning Committee offers events every year, some of which address daily living skills.

The ultimate goal for anyone is a happy, productive life including full independence and employment, full involvement in the community, and a wide network of friends and loved ones. Acquiring the skills to pursue these dreams has to start early. It will take a village to get there.

## Resources

There are many additional resources for learning about special techniques, equipment, and environmental modifications for daily living.

TSBVI has an extensive website, [www.tsbvi.edu](http://www.tsbvi.edu) and a search for "daily living skills" will yield many links to websites, curriculum, and free articles.

The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) at [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org) also has many resources. In addition to what is available on their website, AFB has a branch office in Dallas with a model apartment that demonstrates many useful pieces of equipment for daily living skills.

American Printing House for the Blind at [www.aph.org](http://www.aph.org) has many articles and information.

Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services/Division of Blind Services (DARS/DBS) at [www.dars.state.tx.us/db/resources](http://www.dars.state.tx.us/db/resources) offers articles and links to more resources.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) at [www.nfb.org](http://www.nfb.org) has articles and additional resources.

The Hadley School for the Blind at [www.hadley-school.com](http://www.hadley-school.com) has free correspondence courses available to visually impaired persons, and some, including the course on Independent Living Skills, are also available to the parents and teachers of students with visual impairment.

A search for "daily living skills for the blind" on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) will yield many instructional videos.

# GPS and Map Skills for Any Age

Chris Tabb, Statewide Orientation and Mobility Consultant, TSBVI Outreach Program

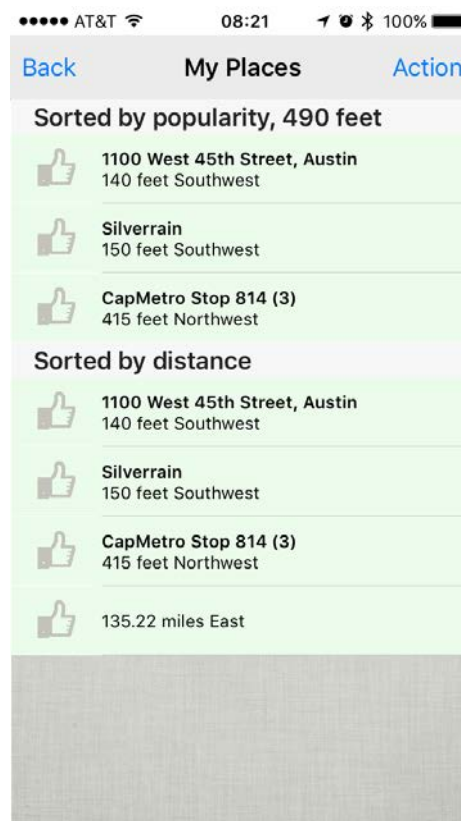
*This article offers suggestions on ways teachers and parents can help students with visual impairments use smart devices to develop skills for orientation and mobility, independence, and self-determination.*

Keywords: orientation and mobility, map skills, GPS, travel, smart devices, smart phones, independence, self-determination, ECC

Learning usually happens most efficiently when a student is doing something they enjoy, and many young people today are quite taken with smart devices. Why not combine learning some foundational skills with the tools they enjoy using? In Orientation and Mobility, we utilize many skills in accessing public transportation, traveling independently in light business and downtown environments, maintaining orientation in unfamiliar urban areas, etc. While these activities may not be age-appropriate for all students, the foundation skills for these activities are always age appropriate. Here are a few examples of ways to use a smart phone or tablet to develop those skills in ways that are meaningful for the student.

While driving home from school in the car or on the bus, have the student use a GPS app such as Blindsquare, Seeing Eye GPS, or Nearby Explorer to name cross streets that they pass along the way. This will give them an idea of the layout of their community and which streets will be near their house so they can anticipate arriving at home. This skill can later generalize to anticipating when to request a stop from the city bus as they near their bus stop at college or

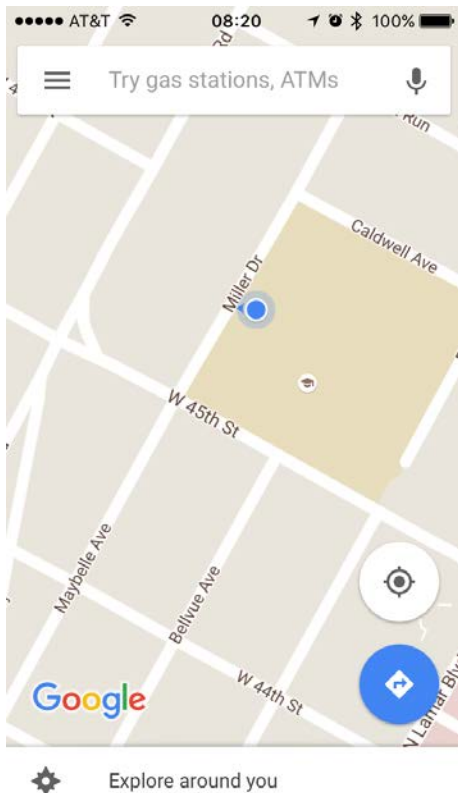
their workplace. It can also help them to provide directions to friends who may be coming to visit or even for someone giving them a ride home who has not been to their house before.



*Screenshot of Blind Square My Places*

Using Apple Maps or Google Maps, students can get walking or driving directions to places they might travel to with friends or family, such as a park in their neighborhood, church, or the grocery store. The more they become active

participants in their travel, the more practice they have at being connected with their travel environment and monitoring their location through spatial updating. Both of those skills are necessary for independent travel and become increasingly important as a young person begins to broaden their horizons in life.



*Screenshot of Google Maps*

During the weekend or on school breaks, plan some activities that involve public transportation. This might be something close like a city in Texas with a bus and rail system, or even something further away like traveling to New York City and taking the subway and bus to Central Park. Most metropolitan transit authorities have their own apps that can be downloaded for free or your child can use another free app such as Transit App, Ride Scout, or even Google Maps to get transit

information for most cities. Even just playing with these apps will build their comfort level and familiarity with the features so when they are ready to begin traveling using public transportation independently they will already have practiced the planning skills.

Take a taxi cab ride with your child or student and see if they can keep track of where the taxi is going, using either spoken street names from one of the GPS maps mentioned above or by monitoring the "moving blue dot" on Google Maps, if the student uses their device visually. When a student uses Google Maps on his smart phone or tablet, the "moving blue dot" moves wherever he travels, helping him learn more about his location and movements.

There are so many ways that students can use a smart device nowadays that learning areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) does not have to be limited to the school day!

Happy Travels!



*Photo of Talking Compass*



# Wearable Technology: A Motivator for Fitness?

William Daugherty, Superintendent, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

*In this article, Superintendent Daugherty shares information about the agreement between TSBVI and the United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA) to implement a National Fitness Challenge on the TSBVI campus.*

Keywords: TSBVI, Blind, Visually Impaired, United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA), Fitbit

The Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired recently signed an agreement with the United States Association of Blind Athletes (USABA) to implement a National Fitness Challenge program at TSBVI. With funding from USABA and the Anthem Foundation, approximately 25 students will be wearing Fitbit devices on their wrists to monitor physical activity for the next 9 months. One of the strategies being used by USABA to promote fitness is to connect these Fitbit users with other participants locally and around the country in order to develop a social network of people striving to reach fitness goals. Along with some sports tournaments such as goalball and a Paralympic/Olympic Day, TSBVI and USABA aim to use the wearable technology and social networking so popular among young people to influence students towards an interest in life-long fitness.



*Photo of FitBit showing mileage*

USABA is housed at the Olympic training facilities in Colorado Springs. It is an organization for serious athletes who want to compete at the highest level in paralympic sports. It is a testament to their commitment to fitness for all that they have reached out to 9 organizations such as TSBVI without any requirements on the athleticism of the participants. It is my assumption that USABA

realizes that increased fitness among all students will lead to a larger pool of developing athletes who might one day decide that they want to be involved at a higher level.

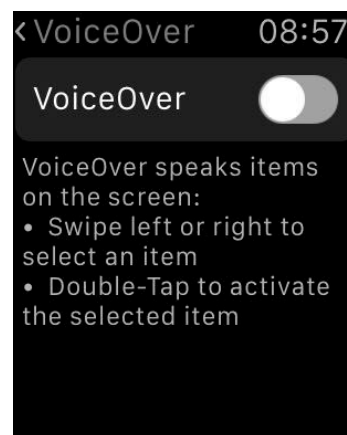


*iPhone Health app*

TSBVI offers many opportunities for students to participate in physical fitness and sports activities during the day, in the evenings, and on weekend competitions with other schools. Students coming to TSBVI often say that the opportunity to be on a sports team is something they highly value. Still, there are many students at the school who are way less active than is desired by those of us who worry about the long-term impact of a sedentary lifestyle. Perhaps this snazzy looking, wearable technology found in the Fitbit will be a motivator that gets traction and kid-to-kid buzz about fitness.

Students with more significant disabilities can be at even higher risk for insufficient physical activity as part of their daily routine. Some may not personally connect with sports or the pursuit of fitness goals in the same way promoted by USABA, but everyone is going to have a higher quality of life if fitness is part of their routine. It's encouraging to read that walking 30 minutes a day at a comfortably brisk pace delivers about 90% of the benefit of more strenuous exercise. If walking is not an option, then a stationary or tandem bike might be a good fit.

One of the better resources on fitness for students with visual impairments of all ability levels is Dr. Lauren Lieberman, the founder of Camp Abilities ([www.campabilities.org](http://www.campabilities.org)). USABA can be reached at [www.usaba.org](http://www.usaba.org). At TSBVI, Kristine Seljenes is at [seljenesk@tsbvi.edu](mailto:seljenesk@tsbvi.edu) for information about the school's Fitbit program. In Texas, the regional Education Service Centers are generally aware of sports and fitness activities available within their regions. The Sports Extravaganza held annually in the DFW area draws a big turnout and is a great place to introduce a young person to fitness and the fun of competition.



*Screenshot of VoiceOver on the Apple Watch*

# 84th Legislative Session Means Many Changes for DARS Programs

Scott Bowman, Interim Assistant Commissioner,  
Department of Assistive and Rehabilitation Services – Division for Blind Services

*Mr. Bowman reviews the legislative changes for the programs in the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services and discusses plans underway to make a successful transition.*

Keywords: Department of Assistive and Rehabilitation Services (DARS), Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Transition Services, Blind Children's Program

As the 84th Legislative session adjourned on June 1 "Sine Die," otherwise known as the last day of session, a new course was set for the programs administered by the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS). On September 1, 2016:

- The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) will operate all of the Vocational Rehabilitation programs (including General, Blind, transition services, and the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center), the Business Enterprises of Texas program, and the Independent Living services (IL) for Older Individuals who are Blind.
- The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) will operate the Blind Children's Program (BCP), Blindness, Education, Screening and Treatment (BEST), IL- Part B, Autism, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, Comprehensive Rehabilitation Services and Disability Determination Services.

As a part of transition, the affected agencies are required to submit a plan to the Health and Human Services Legislative Oversight Committee, which will review the plan and hold public meetings. All of the members of the Oversight Committee have been named and will be co-chaired by Senator Jane Nelson and Representative Four Price. A list of all the members can be found at the following link (<http://www.senate.state.tx.us/75r/senate/members/dist12/pr15/p091815b.htm>). The Oversight Committee was created by the Legislature to allow for a more public and thoughtful vetting of the transition process.

There is much to do in order to make this transition a success and to ensure that quality services are continued throughout this process. To this end, DARS, HHSC and TWC have begun working diligently to map the processes that must occur. DARS and TWC have held seven public meetings across the state to allow the public to address the transition of programs to TWC. These were important meetings and we appreciate everyone who took time to attend. Your participation makes these meetings worthwhile.

TWC and DARS have recently completed a draft of their transition plan. This has been presented to the TWC Commissioners and will be sent to the Oversight Committee in the near future. HHSC's version of this plan will be submitted to the Oversight Committee in March.

DARS, HHSC and TWC are committed to making this transition a success; however, we cannot do this without your support. Your thoughts about these programs are important to ensure we continue to serve consumers in the manner best for each consumer.

## The Braille Challenge

Excerpts from the Braille Challenge website

*The Braille Challenge is an academic competition designed to encourage students who are blind to emphasize their study of braille. This article provides information on the Braille Challenge and highlights Texas winners for the 2015 competition.*

Keywords: Braille Challenge, braille

Congratulations to Harley Fetterman and Summer Johnson from Austin, Texas for being among the 15 students from across the nation that won honors at the 2015 Braille Challenge Finals!

Harley Fetterman, (Varsity) From Austin, TX. This entrepreneurial 11th grader hopes to one day develop a 2 ½ dimensional, refreshable, tactile screen that he can distribute through a company that he owns and manages himself! He is a board member of the Texas Association of Blind Students, is part of his school's "All A" Honor Roll and was named "Camper of the Year" while attending Camp Discovery. He plays several musical instruments including the French horn, guitar, ukulele, mandolin and the saw. He and his family have traveled to all 50 states and together they choose to look at every situation in the most positive light and with humor. This is Harley's 8th year attending The Braille Challenge and he has been reading braille for 11 years. We invite you to read an

article written by Harley's mom, Beth Freeborn, from the Fall 2012 Texas SenseAbilities newsletter highlighting his experience when he competed in the 2012 Braille Challenge. <http://www.tsbvi.edu/attachments/newsletter/fall12.pdf>

Summer Johnson, (Apprentice) From Austin, TX. Summer was a 1st place winner in the regional Braille Challenge in 2015. She wants to be a teacher when she grows up, so that she can teach people different things such as science, math, and Braille. Summer has participated in The Braille Challenge for 2 years.

### Get Ready for the 2016 Braille Challenge!

The Braille Challenge is an academic competition unlike any other. This two-stage contest is designed to motivate blind students to emphasize their study of braille, while rewarding their success with fun-filled, but challenging, local and national events. Any visually impaired student who reads braille is eligible to

participate in the preliminary Challenge contest events, which are held from January through the end of March throughout the U.S. and Canada. Contests are proctored by volunteer teachers for students with visual impairment and scored locally according to our national guidelines by volunteer transcribers. Each contestant receives a braille certificate of appreciation and general feedback on their performance, which will be sent to families and educators in May.

This year The Braille Challenge will be held at 46 different sites and will be proctored by up to 80 individual teachers of visually impaired students from throughout the United States and Canada. The preliminary round is open to students of all skills levels, but the top-scoring 60 contestants nationally will be invited to Los Angeles in June for a Final Round—two days of competition, camaraderie and fun! Braille Challenge contest categories include reading comprehension, braille speed and accuracy, proofreading, spelling and reading tactile charts and graphs.

The Braille Institute is gearing up for another exciting season of The Braille Challenge! Here's

where you'll find all the latest news for teachers, finalists, parents, and Regional Coordinators. They also invite you to visit their Facebook page to get updates, engage with other contestants and their families, and share your #BrailleChallenge experience!

For 2016 contracted apprentice contests will be in Unified English Braille (UEB), freshman contests will be UEB Optional. As of January 2016, UEB will be the official braille code for the United States. Based on a review of state implementation plans and feedback from our Regional Coordinators, teachers and National Advisory Committee, most younger students will be transitioning to UEB in September 2015, but the transition from EBAE to UEB is less defined and not as consistent for older students. The goal of The Braille Challenge is to support the timely transition to UEB.

To learn more about The Braille Challenge, please visit The Braille Institute website. <http://www.brailleinstitute.org/braille-challenge-homepage.html>

## Conferences and Events

### **Northeast Texas Low Vision Conference: Filling in the Gaps**

January 22, 2016

Location: Region 8 Education Service Center, Pittsburg, TX

This one-day event is co-sponsored by TSBVI Outreach Programs and Region 8 Education Service Center with support from Region 8

ESC, Region 10 ESC, East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind, Stephen F. Austin State University and DARS-Division of Blind Services.

What's my next lesson with my student with low vision? What is my role and how can I support the needs of academic students with low vision? Join us at this event to learn more about issues and answers for this unique group of students with visual impairments.



Highlights include:

- interactive learning stations with ideas for instruction in the Expanded Core Curriculum
- tips for access to the general curriculum
- effective models for itinerant service and collaboration

Presenters: Our presenters include Dr. Cindy Bachofer, Chrissy Cowan, Dr. Kitra Gray, and Dawn Adams, among others.

Audience: The conference is geared for professionals. Parents, administrators, and others are always welcome and are encouraged to attend and share in the learning.

<http://www.tsbvi.edu/filling-in-the-gaps>

## **Active Learning Conference**

February 26-27, 2016

Location: James C. Durkel Conference Center at Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired, Austin, TX

Presenter: Patty Obrzut, Director, Penrickton Center for the Blind, Michigan

This conference will provide strategies and resources for teachers and paraprofessionals who serve students with low incidence disabilities (i.e. severely cognitively disabled, medically fragile, and/or deafblind). Motivating and inspiring an individual with special needs to engage in their environment can be challenging. Delve deeper into Active Learning theory and ways to implement this approach. Content will include the following topics:

General overview of Active Learning and the dynamic learning circle:

- Understanding and implementing

- The Five Phases of Educational Treatment
- The Functional Scheme
- Assessing the Developmental Level of special needs students
- Identifying the developmental progression that occurs when using Active Learning equipment
- The FIELA curriculum and meeting the needs of the special needs student
- Adapting the daily curriculum to reflect Active Learning Techniques
- Daily living skills and Active Learning
- Training vs. Learning; Planning for the future — identifying the needs of your program and creating inspiration for change.

### **Registration Fee**

\$100 for Professionals and Family Members through January 15th; \$125 after that date.

\$75 for Paraprofessionals and University Students through January 15th; \$100 after that date.

Assistance is available for Texas family members of students with visual impairments or deafblindness on a limited basis.

## **Low Vision Conference: Building on Low Vision for Students at the Practical Academic Level**

May 20, 2016

Location: James C. Durkel Conference Center, Austin, TX

How can your programming enhance the quality of life for students with low vision who are academically 2-3 grades below grade level yet can learn many practical skills? These students may have mild-moderate cognitive impairments, may be in academic classes with modifications, and can actively participate in non-academic

situations. They can be expected to achieve vocational independence in adulthood with ongoing support. This interactive day will highlight potential goals and lesson plan ideas, add resources to your toolbox and inspire success!

Audience: The conference is geared for professionals. Parents, administrators, and

others are always welcome and are encouraged to attend and share in the learning.

Registration fee: \$35 until May 1st; \$45 beginning May 1st.

CEUs: ACVREP and SBEC continuing education units for 5.25 hours

## Active Learning Space, an Active Collaboration

Keywords: active learning, interaction, resources

[www.activelearningspace.org](http://www.activelearningspace.org) is the web address for the new, dynamic website on Active Learning. This highly informative tool is being developed through a collaboration with Penrickton Center for the Blind in Taylor, Michigan; Perkins School for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts and Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Programs in Austin, Texas. January 2016 will be the debut of this critical resource for practitioners and parents of children and adults with multiple special needs.

Information will include the principles of Active Learning such as:

- How to encourage independent exploration by a child or adult with multiple special needs
- Developing adult-child interactions
- The proper use of Active Learning equipment and perceptualizing aids
- Appropriate selection of materials to use with Active Learning techniques

- Podcasts and videos
- Training opportunities available on Active Learning
- Interactive features to allow visitors to ask questions and receive answers from experts in the use of Active Learning and for sharing ideas about Active Learning

You will find accurate and useful information about the benefits and practice of Active Learning as developed by Dr. Lilli Nielsen.



*Photo of an active learning position board*

# National Leadership Consortium in Sensory Disabilities Seeks Applicants for Doctoral Degree Program

*The National Leadership Consortium in Sensory Disabilities (NLCSD) is offering scholarships to selected degree programs for doctoral degrees leading to leadership positions in sensory disabilities. Application deadline is March 1, 2016.*

Keywords: doctoral degree, scholarship

The National Leadership Consortium in Sensory Disabilities (NLCSD) is a Collaborative Agreement funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs and awarded to Salus University. NLCSD's primary purpose is to increase the number of highly skilled doctoral scholars who will become leaders in administration, higher education, policy and education in order to significantly improve the interventions, services, and outcomes for children with sensory disabilities (deafness/hard of hearing, deafblindness, blindness/visual impairment), ages birth to 21. Applications for the second of two cohorts of the National Leadership Consortium in Sensory Disabilities (NLCSD) are due by March 1, 2016 for scholars to begin their studies in Fall 2016. (For attendance at Texas Tech University (TTU), applicants must also apply and be accepted into TTU prior to March 1.) The consortium consists of multiple universities with doctoral programs that have an emphasis in one or more sensory impairment

areas: blind/visually impaired, deaf/hard of hearing, and deafblindness.

Benefits of being an NLCSD Scholar:

- Full support (tuition and fees) at a Consortium university, for up to 4 years
- Annual stipend award \$24,000 while matriculated
- Participation in an Enrichment Program that includes a course that runs through the academic year and is delivered via distance technology and face-to-face meetings
- Mentorship by Consortium faculty from universities across the country and across disability areas
- Travel to and attendance at 1 – 2 required NLCSD meetings per year
- Up to \$1,000 materials stipend.

NLCSD Scholars will be required to:

- Be admitted to a Consortium university as well as NLCSD
- Be first-time doctoral students

- Be enrolled as a full-time student at their Consortium (home) university
- Maintain an on-campus presence
- Work no more than 20 hours/week in a position that is directly related to individual programs of study
- Upon program completion, fulfill the service obligation requirement as outlined by OSEP.

More information can be found at [www.nlcspdproject.org](http://www.nlcspdproject.org)



## Useful Websites

*The following websites are full of great information and resources. If you are not familiar with these websites, we would like to encourage you to check them out.*

Keywords: ARD Process, blind, visually impaired, deafblind, parent organizations

### TSBVI Outreach

<https://www.facebook.com/OutreachTSBVI>

Did you know that TSBVI Outreach is on Facebook?? It is the perfect way to keep up with the news and happenings at TSBVI Outreach; Like it and become a friend!

### Navigate Life Texas

[www.navigatelifetexas.org](http://www.navigatelifetexas.org)

This is a comprehensive website created especially for families and parents of children with disabilities or special health-care needs and is designed to offer support, inspiration, resources, and links to available services. Texas families and parents can find the resources and services they need to support children with disabilities or health-care needs under their care. This website provides information on the following topics: Diagnosis &

Healthcare; Insurance & Financial Help; Family Support; Education & School; Transition to Adulthood, and it can help you locate services, groups and events.

### Parent Guide to the ARD Process

ESC Region 13 has revised their Parent Guide to the ARD Process, March 2015. A copy of the new Parent Guide can be downloaded.

[http://www4.esc13.net/uploads/facilitatingIEPs/docs/SPED\\_ParentHandbook.pdf](http://www4.esc13.net/uploads/facilitatingIEPs/docs/SPED_ParentHandbook.pdf)

### FamiliesLead.org

<http://familieslead.org/>

FamiliesLead.org's purpose is to bring a network of people and organizations together to share ideas, resources and support for leadership training for parents and other family members of individuals with disabilities. Check out their Great website!



## **Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired**

### **Outreach Programs**

[www.tsbvi.edu](http://www.tsbvi.edu) | 512-454-8631 | 1100 W. 45<sup>th</sup> St. | Austin, TX 78756



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