

Winter 2026 Issue

Graduate Stories from Funded Vision Programs



Visual Impairment and Deafblind Education Quarterly

Volume 71, Issue 1

The Voice and Vision of Special Education

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 **Council for
Exceptional
Children**
The voice and vision of special education

Cover photo description: The cover photo is of graduates of Portland State University. Six adults are shown smiling and wearing a black cap and gown in a sports arena for graduation.

Photo submitted by Dr. Amy T. Parker, Associate Professor, Portland State University.

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The Division of Visual Impairment and DeafBlindness of the Council for Exceptional Children

Online Pre-Conference

February, 27, 2026
9:00AM-4:00PM ET

Join our pre-conference event to learn from our speakers about the use of AI in working with students who are Blind and Visually Impaired, the latest educational releases and new publications on the horizon from APH and tips and tricks on teaching STEM concepts from the new book Accessible Science Education for Students with Visual Impairments!

Register Now!

Earn up to 6 CEUs

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Contact
Karen Koehler
kkoehler@shawnee.edu

Morning Session

AI for Practitioners: Practical Tools for Visual Impairment Professionals

February, 27, 2026

9:00AM-12:00PM ET

3.0 CEUs

In this session you will learn how TSVIs are applying new AI technology in their lessons and their practice with ideas for how you can make AI tools more accessible for your students. This session will also provide information on new modules and training materials that are available from the APH Hive.

Speakers



Dr. Belinda Rudingger, PhD

Dr. Belinda Rudingger is an assistant professor of special education at East Texas A&M University, a teacher of students with visual impairments, and an assistive technology specialist. She is a board member of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) Division on Visual Impairments and Deafblindness (DVIDB), chair-elect for the Access and Technology division of the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AERBVI), and the Deputy Vice President of the USA for the North American-Caribbean Region of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI). Her work focuses on non-visual access to print and sustainability issues related to braille and assistive technology. She believes in the power of technology to promote empowerment and connection.

Dr. Donna Clemens, PhD

Dr. Donna Clemens is an educator and Assistive Technology Consultant in the Outreach Department at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). With almost three decades of experience as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) and Assistive Technology (AT) specialist, she has worked extensively in accessible technology, curriculum development, and professional learning for TSVIs in Texas. Dr. Clemens supports training related to braille technology and instructional strategies that help students access educational content and develop greater independence. She holds a Ph.D. in Special Education, a Master's degree in Dual Sensory impairments, and a Bachelor's Degree in Visual Disabilities.

Afternoon Session

Accessible Science Education & Engaging with APH Press

February 27, 2026

1:00PM-4:00PM ET

3.0 CEUs

In this session, attendees will be learning about the new book titled "Accessible Science Education for Students with Visual Impairments". An overview of the book will be covered as well as specific tips and tricks for both teachers of students with visual impairments and their science teachers with whom they collaborate. This session will also include a presentation with the APH Press team that dive into the latest educational releases and explore what new publications are on the horizon. Learn how you can contribute to our mission by submitting book proposals, becoming an author, editor, or peer reviewer, and much more.

Speakers



Heather Spence
Heather Spence is the Director of APH Press at American Printing House (APH). Prior to this role, Heather spent over ten years at the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), holding various positions, including Business Systems Manager and Product Fulfillment and Customer Service Manager. With over two decades of experience in the nonprofit sector, Heather has spent more than a decade focused specifically on the field of blindness and low vision.



Dr. Tiffany Wild, PhD
Dr. Tiffany Wild is an Associate Professor at The Ohio State University in the College of Education and Human Ecology, Department of Teaching and Learning. She began her career as a middle school science and math teacher and became a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) after working with students with visual impairments in the classroom. Since, Dr. Wild has been awarded prestigious awards including a doctoral fellowship with the National Center for Leadership in Visual Impairments and Dissertation of the Year award by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Visual impairment. Dr. Wild's research focuses on accessible science education for students with visual impairments.

Message from the Editor

Kathleen M. Farrand

Associate Professor, Arizona State University

Kathleen.Farrand@asu.edu



Happy 2026! Welcome to the Winter issue of the *Visual Impairment and Deafblind Education Quarterly*. This issue shares a collection of stories from graduates in the field of vision that received federal and/or state funding. Each author shares what led them to the field, the impact of receiving funding to support their academic and career goals, and their current impact in the field. This collection highlights some of the amazing professionals that currently work in the field of vision and is meant to remind you of your own story or inspire you to

begin your next chapter. These stories also highlight some of the amazing programs in higher education that provide degrees and certificates in the field of vision. There are countless more stories and universities across the country that highlight this amazing field and profession. I encourage everyone to continue to share your stories.

DVIDB has a lot of exciting events coming up. We encourage you to register for the upcoming 2026 Online Pre-Conference. DVIDB members are free. Sponsorship opportunities are available and include registration benefits. Please click on the [link](#) for more information to register. To become a sponsor please email Karen Koehler (kkoehler@shawnee.edu).

DVIDB is also preparing for the upcoming 2026 CEC Convention and EXPO in Salt Late City, Utah. If you are presenting at the convention on a topic in vision, please consider contributing an article about your presentation to the Spring 2026 convention issue. Please email me for more information (Kathleen.Farrand@asu.edu). Also, it isn't too late to register to attend the upcoming convention. Click on the [link](#) and register to attend this amazing convention. DVIDB will be holding their social on Thursday, March 12, 2026, from 6:30 to 8:30 PM at Salt & Olive (270 S 300 E, Salt Lake City, UT, 84111). I look forward to seeing many of you in Salt Lake City in March!



REGISTRATION OPTIONS

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Hall

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The voice and vision of special education

Council for Exceptional Children Conference Salt Lake City, Utah

**DVIDB Social
Thursday, March 12th
6:30 – 8:30 PM**

Salt & Olive

**270 S 300 E
Salt Lake City, UT 84111**

Please join us for the DVIDB social event on **Thursday, March 12th from 6:30 to 8:30 PM**. This event is a time to gather, mingle and celebrate with professionals in the fields of visual impairment and deafblindness from across the nation. Event sponsors are encouraged to share information about their projects, advertise their programs and connect with attendees in a relaxed and more intimate atmosphere.

New teachers and seasoned colleagues, alike, tell us that the DVIDB social is one place during the vast CEC convention where they engage with others in the field, despite our varied interests and responsibilities.

A formal DVIDB awards event will take place in a virtual format on March 2nd at 7:00 PM via zoom.

If you are coming to CEC for the in-person conference in Salt Lake City, join us for plenty of Italian fare, beverages and fun. See you there!

Thank you to our sponsors!



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President's Message

Beth A. Jones,

Professor, East Texas A&M University

beth.jones@etamu.edu



This issue is focused on stories from graduates of federally or state funded programs in the field of vision from across the United States. Included is a collection of stories from people working in the field that describe what brought them to the field, how the funding supported their academic and career goals, and current impact in the field. I hope this serves to be inspiring and highlight the need for funding of our important work.

On a personal note, I am honored to be rolling into the role of President of DVIDB, as I have served as a Director since 2021. In my role as a Director, I proposed edits to our mission, helped coordinate webinars (DCMP, April 2022), and served as a reviewer for grants and CEC presentation proposals (Summer 2021, 2022, and 2024). In addition, in fall 2021, I served as the guest editor for the Division's quarterly publication (<http://dvi.uberflip.com/i/1426082-vidbe-q-66-4-fall-2021/0>). For those of you I have not already met, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself.

I earned my doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction, with a concentration in special education, from Louisiana State University. I also hold a Master of Education in Educational Psychology, with specializations in special education and school counseling, and a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies, with a concentration in special education, both from Texas A&M University. I come to you with public school teaching experience, five years as the lead special education teacher and the experience of teaching both resource reading/language arts and mathematics (grades K-6).

I am currently a Professor of Special Education and Program Coordinator at East Texas A&M University (ETAMU). Appointed by Governor Abbott, I am serving in my second term as a Board Member at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). I am also a recipient of the TAER Texas Chapter

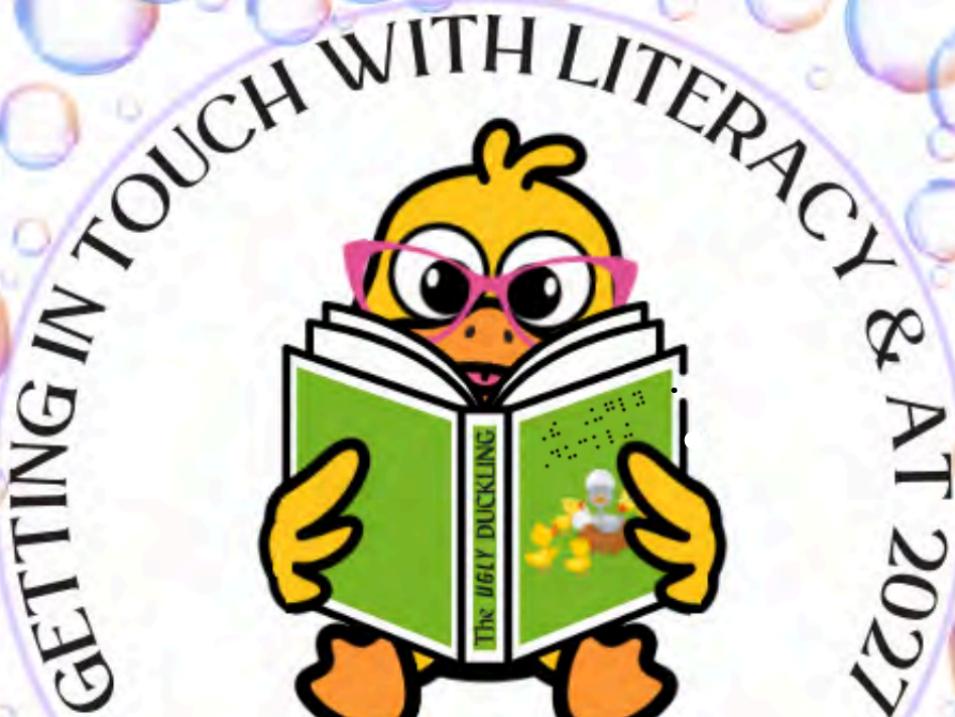
Award for Outstanding Contributor (2021). My research interests include collaboration with families, visual impairments, and assistive technology. I design and co-run an assistive technology lab at ETAMU, which ties heavily into my research and the training of pre-service teachers in assistive technology.

You may be wondering what drives my passion for DVIDB. The answer is my passion stems from the fact that my family (dad, son, daughter, and myself) have dominant optic nerve atrophy with best corrected acuities ranging from 20/200-20/3000, which has given me first-hand experience with the needs of individuals with visual impairments and deafblindness. It is my hope to capitalize on my unique position to be a bridge between service providers and families, as I live both roles.

I look forward to working with you and representing our organization to further our mission of improving the lives of children, students, and/or consumers with visual impairments and/or deafblindness. I am, and will continue to be, a champion of rigorous inclusion in academics when appropriate, high expectations, teaching self-advocacy at an early age, future planning, and fostering self-determination skills.

ATTENTION BLINDNESS AND LOW VISION PROFESSIONALS

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December 6-9, 2027
Long Beach, CA

Vision Rehab as Act II

Eric Boklage

eric.boklage@second-sense.org

Graduate of UMass Boston

Vision Rehab is my Act II. Act I involved four decades in a business career, during which I hadn't even remotely considered the possibility of being a vision rehab professional.

When the COVID pandemic virtually shut down most aspects of the business world, I found myself searching for another professional role like many other people. But this time, things were different. Deteriorating vision forced me to reconsider whether I could continue to do the same sort of work I'd done for so long in corporate America.

Despite very good clinical outcomes from five separate eye surgeries, optic nerve damage and progressive glaucoma left me with visual field loss and needing dark tinted prescription eyeglasses to help address a lack of contrast and increasing photophobia.

While the hearing aids I'd worn for many years were hardly ever noticed, those tinted lens eyeglasses were prominently sitting on my face – meaning that my vision issues were more noticeable. Acknowledging that there were some things I couldn't change, I began to think about a career pivot that would involve something which was agnostic to both my hearing loss and vision loss – a combination which I later learned is more appropriately called dual sensory loss.

After experiencing the benefits of vision rehab, it occurred to me that I should explore the field as a career option. This intrigued me because I realized that if I proceeded down that path, I'd have an opportunity to help others with vision loss - and - much of what I'd learn would also likely benefit me personally as my own vision journey unfolded. However, after some initial exploration, it appeared that to do this correctly would require additional education and credentials that I didn't have. It seemed rather late in life for me to consider going back to school, but I was still intrigued.

In performing my due diligence, I learned that there were a limited number of academic options, but the accredited online M.Ed. in Vision Studies program at UMass Boston clearly stood out in my mind. Among their Vision Studies program offerings, there were separate academic tracts available in both Vision Rehab and Assistive Technology – a combination that was of interest to me. Additionally, it

was a remote program - so I wouldn't have to relocate (which was completely out of the question at my age).

Finally, many of my concerns regarding the financial cost of another degree were addressed by the available grant programs (e.g., the RSA grants) that would reduce the tuition costs substantially. Since I wasn't working, this was an important consideration. If I completed the program and worked in the vision rehab field for a period of years post-graduation, the RSA grants would allow service-related forgiveness. If I didn't complete the program for some reason or didn't work in the field of vision rehab, the grants would come due. No pressure...

While enrolling in another graduate-level program after a nearly 40-year hiatus from academia seemed to fall somewhere between blind ambition (pun intended) and lunacy - it felt like the right thing to do.

After some soul-searching and discussions with my wife, I enrolled in the M.Ed. in Vision Studies in Vision Rehab at UMass Boston. In retrospect, I feel I was a bit clumsy at first – but I believe that was primarily because I hadn't been in a formal educational environment in nearly four decades. I quickly realized that I would need to apply some of my acquired organizational skills from the business world to perform well. My biggest challenges involved the significant amount of reading required, and in attempting to comply with academic style writing (e.g., APA) – which after spending four decades communicating successfully in the

business world seemed absurdly unnecessary. Luckily, most of the required textbooks were available through BookShare – but I had to quickly ramp up my fledgling audio reading skills.

After making a strong showing in the first few semesters in the MEd Program in Vision Rehab, I was allowed to simultaneously enroll in a parallel Master's Certificate program in Assistive Technology for the Visually Impaired. My combined course load was full, but many of the classes in the two different programs were rather complementary.

Completing these educational credentials is an essential requirement for obtaining certification from the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation Educational Professionals (ACVREP). However, these programs prepared me well for these two certification exams, and I'm now both a Certified Vision Rehab Therapist (CVRT) and a Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist (CATIS).

Each program required a unique and separate practicum, and I was able to complete both practicums sequentially over two semesters at Second Sense – a non-profit vision rehab agency located in downtown Chicago. Second Sense requires their program staff to be certified, and fortunately my dual certification credentials allowed me to meet a need at Second Sense for someone to be the primary technology instructor, who could also crossover as an independent living

skills instructor when necessary. There is an extensive amount of crossover between these two areas – especially with the ever-growing amount of assistive technology that is now available on mainstream devices such as cell phones, tablets and computers.

Today the focus of my role is teaching clients how to use assistive technology to live their lives just like everyone else. This often includes teaching them how to use their computers, cell phones and tablets – which are ubiquitous tools in our daily lives.

Author's note: Both I and my agency use the term "clients" and not "students" to identify those we teach. In the true sense of andragogy, we work with our clients to identify their goals and what they would like to learn.

I work with adult clients aged 18 and above, and while I have some younger clients, most of my clients are in their 50's, 60's or 70's. In many ways, I am their peer. While a few have been blind their entire life, the majority are individuals who have acquired their vision loss later in life. Coping with vision loss later in life involves learning a lot of coping mechanisms – identifying new ways to tackle typical everyday challenges and familiar situations (what I like to refer to as "life hacks"). Considering my own circumstances, I can readily relate. In short – I get it. I've often been there, done that, and didn't want the t-shirt.

I have also seemingly found a bit of a niche working with clients who are experiencing some degree of dual sensory loss, where both vision and hearing are compromised to some extent. Dual sensory loss can be particularly challenging as these two senses are both complementary and compensatory – where a loss associated with one sense can be compensated for by the other. When both senses are compromised, things can get dicey at times.

Clients with dual sensory loss have unique needs, and my lived experience allows me to better serve their needs through understanding and empathy. While some are aware of their dual losses and have sought treatment for both, others are either unaware of their hearing loss or are fiscally unable to address both issues. When appropriate or necessary, we refer them to the local agency that administers the iCanConnect program which provides federally funded financial assistance to individuals with dual sensory loss so that they can obtain hearing-related services and devices like hearing aids.

Virtually all our client training sessions are one-on-one – which allows us to tailor the content to meet their specific requests/needs and pace the instruction to match an individual client's learning style and speed of learning. We have many clients who return to us when aspects of their vision loss change, or when they acquire a new piece of technology, or simply when they want to learn something new.

Here are a few examples of how I've been able to impact my clients' lives:

- Three college bound students who had only ever used Chromebooks in high school, were able to prepare for college over the Summer by learning how to use screen reader software on their Windows PCs to work with Microsoft Office products and explore the internet.
- A woman in her 30's with progressive vision loss associated with a genetic vision condition, realized that her increasing need for greater magnification meant that she needed to learn how to use screen reading software to complement the display magnification/augmentation software she had been using.
- A man in his 50's learned how to use VoiceOver on his iPhone and Fusion on his computer to extend his career despite advancing RP.
- A woman in her 50's learned know how to adjust her computer displays at work and home to more comfortably cope with the effects of optic nerve damage due to NAION.
- A man in his early 60's recovering from a stroke that left him blind and needing a cochlear implant and a hearing aid to hear, has now learned to use VoiceOver on his iPhone with a Bluetooth connection to his hearing aids to listen to music and electronic books with BARD.

- A man in his late 60's who has been blind his entire life and uses a screen reader with a braille display with his computer was so frustrated with his iPhone that he was "ready to throw it out the window". He has now learned how to use VoiceOver and listen to music and electronic books on BARD, and he has enhanced his computer skills such that he successfully acquired a new job.
- A woman in her 70s, who had dealt with dyslexia and hearing loss all her life, and then adventitiously lost her vision to glaucoma, learned how to use VoiceOver on an iPhone and iPad with her Bluetooth-connected hearing aids.
- A woman in her 70's who had been using assistive technology on her computer wanted to learn how to better take advantage of her iPhone's abilities. She has now learned how to use apps like Seeing AI, Be My Eyes, and Uber on her phone, and she also now plays accessible New York Times puzzle games like Wordle and Connections. As a result, she no longer feels left out of social gathering conversations that focus on these puzzles.
- A woman in her mid-80s who had undergone multiple surgeries for keratoconus and now has advancing glaucoma, initially learned how to use Spoken Content on her iPhone for occasional reading support, and is now returning to learn VoiceOver as her vision continues to deteriorate.

In addition to our one-on-one training, Second Sense also offers various programmatic activities and events. One of these is our Apple Exchange program, which is a monthly Zoom presentation on a variety of topics related to using Apple products while visually impaired. We have participants from all over who join us for these programs.

I'm very happy with the career choice I made for my Act II. The work is incredibly rewarding and fulfilling. "Life after vision loss" is the tag line incorporated into the Second Sense logo. Our clients are very grateful to have accessed our services, and the favorable impact upon their lives is quite evident. We are offering them the means to cope with their vision loss - and thrive despite it.





We are currently recruiting for Teachers of the Vision Impaired, AT Specialists & Orientation & Mobility Specialists.

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Finding a Pathway into the Field of Low Vision and Blindness

Samantha Eyley

Samantha.eyley@perkins.org

Graduate of Florida State University

I sort of fell into the field of vision education. In high school, I took American Sign Language (ASL) to meet my language requirement and completely fell in love with it. That experience stayed in the back of my mind, and for a long time I thought I would eventually do something in Deaf education.

When I started college, I honestly was not sure what my major was going to be. I knew I wanted to do something more with ASL, but I learned quickly that Deaf education was not an option at my university. After talking with my guidance counselor, she suggested two possible paths. The first was speech-language pathology, which I explored briefly but realized was not the right fit for me. The second suggestion was visual disabilities education. She asked if I had ever considered the “opposite of deafness,” and I had not. At that point, I did not know

anyone who was blind or had low vision, so the idea of working in this field had never crossed my mind.

I did not really know what the field was or what the work looked like. My counselor connected me with the program director, and after meeting with them, everything began to click. They spoke honestly about the field, how no two days look the same, how hands-on and deeply student-centered the work is, and how important relationships are in supporting student learning. It felt like a good fit in a way I had not experienced before. I also began to see how my interest in Deaf education could translate into this work, particularly through supporting students who are Deafblind.

I completed both my undergraduate and graduate degrees at Florida State University. My undergraduate degree is in Visual Disabilities Education, which prepared me to work as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI). I then earned my master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Orientation and Mobility, preparing me to become a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) through the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP).

Learning that the program was federally funded and that there was a strong need for professionals in the field helped solidify my decision into a profession I had never even heard of before college. Federal funding made it possible for me to

pursue this path in a meaningful way. While I entered college with some scholarships, knowing that my preparation program could be fully funded removed a significant barrier. It allowed me to focus on my studies, commit to staying in the profession, and graduate without the weight of financial stress. That support gave me the space to fully invest in my learning and deepened my commitment to the work.

Today, I serve as the Assistant Education Director of Vision Services at Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts. In this role, I directly supervise, mentor, and provide instructional support to TSVIs, COMS, Assistive Technology Specialists, and Literacy Specialists across campus programs. Since graduating ten years ago, my work has impacted students, families, and professionals throughout Massachusetts and around the globe.

I began my career providing itinerant vision services to students across the state, which gave me a strong foundation in understanding the wide range of service delivery models and student needs. I later transitioned to campus-based work, supporting students with a variety of learning profiles and complex needs. Three years ago, I had the opportunity to expand my impact globally through Perkins' international work. In that role, I supported, trained, and mentored educators and professionals from around the world, with a focus on best practices

for working with students who are blind or have low vision, including students who are Deafblind.

Across all of my roles, my focus has remained the same: ensuring that students with visual impairments have access to meaningful instruction, high-quality teachers, and systems that support their long-term success. Through this work, I have also come to understand the importance of leadership within vision services. Effective programs require leaders who are grounded in instruction, invested in students, and knowledgeable about the unique needs of learners with visual impairments. The strong mentors and leaders I have had throughout my career have been instrumental in encouraging me to pursue and step into leadership roles myself.

I am currently pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership at Boston College, with the goal of strengthening leadership practices in the field of vision education and expanding my impact on students, educators, and families. My hope is to help build and sustain systems that support high-quality instruction for students, provide meaningful support for TSVIs and COMS, and intentionally develop and retain professionals within the field.

Reflecting on my pathway into this field and the experiences I have had throughout my career, several implications emerge not only for preparation programs, but also for districts and organizations that support vision services.

While this is my personal journey, I believe it reflects broader patterns that continue to influence who enters the profession, how long they remain, and how leadership capacity is developed.

Greater intentionality in creating awareness and exposure to vision education as a career pathway earlier in educator preparation could strengthen our recruitment efforts. Many individuals who become TSVIs or COMS have had personal interactions or prior experiences with individuals who are blind or have low vision. For those who have not had those experiences, like myself, intentional outreach and recruitment are essential. If my guidance counselor had not mentioned visual disabilities education to me, I would not be where I am today. Information about the field should be shared widely with college advisors and education faculty and should extend beyond higher education into K–12 settings to build early awareness and interest.

For me, participation in a federally funded preparation program was a critical factor in both choosing and remaining in the field of vision education. Not only did it reduce a significant financial barrier, it also helped the profession feel valued and validated. When paired with strong preparation and mentorship, federal funding can do more than support individual professionals; it can strengthen the low vision and blindness education workforce by creating pathways that are both accessible and intentional. These investments support not only the preparation and

retention of vision professionals but also ensure that students with visual impairments have consistent access to high-quality teachers and instruction. At the core of this work is a shared commitment to equity and access, grounded in the belief that every child deserves the opportunity to fully participate in their education, and that this is only possible when we invest in programs that prepare and retain qualified TSVIs.



CEC's Special Education Convention & Expo is a can't-miss experience for ALL educators.

CEC 2026
SALT LAKE CITY

ONE COMMUNITY ONE VOICE

The Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) is a professional membership organization dedicated to empowering vision professionals who provide services for individuals with vision loss. AER promotes and supports professionals through education, training, and advocacy and helps build a community where members can connect, collaborate, and grow. Visit us online at www.aerbvi.org.

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The intended purpose of the Spring 2026 convention issue is to provide manuscripts aimed at practitioners about presenter contributions to the CEC 2026 program and work related to the field of visual impairments and deafblindness. This issue will allow those who were unable to attend your session to know more about your work.

Guidelines:

- 2,000 - 5,000 Words
- Tables and figures should have a text description & title (APA 7th edition)
- Alt text included for images
- References
- APA formatting (7th Edition)
- 12 point, Times New Roman or Arial font
- Author information for title: Name, affiliation, highest degree earned, and email address
- Please identify target audience

Email your manuscript submission to Kathleen.Farrand@asu.edu.

Deadline for submission: April 10, 2026

Growth, Courage, and Purpose: My Path to the Field of Vision

Emily McQueen

epmcque@carollk12.org

Graduate of UMass Boston

My name is Emily McQueen, and my path into the field of visual impairments has been shaped by curiosity, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to making education more accessible for all learners. My journey began during my undergraduate years at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, where I earned my degree as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI). But the foundation for this work began even earlier, during my first year of college, long before I fully understood how transformative this field would become for me.

I originally enrolled at Lebanon Valley College with the intention of majoring in early childhood education. I loved the idea of supporting young learners and helping to build their earliest educational experiences. Yet, as I progressed through my first year, I began to sense that I wanted something more that allowed me to both teach and advocate, something that challenged me to think

creatively and pushed me to problem-solve in meaningful ways. At the same time, I struggled with feeling that my own needs as a student weren't fully being supported. This combination of wanting to specialize and wanting an environment that aligned more closely with my goals ultimately led me to transfer to Kutztown University.

The decision to transfer was not an easy one, but it was an intentional step toward a future that felt much more aligned with my values as an educator. It was at Kutztown that I first learned about the TSVI program, and as soon as I was introduced to the field, I was intrigued. I quickly became fascinated by the unique blend of creativity, specialized knowledge, advocacy, and human connection required to support students with visual impairments. The more I learned, the more confident I became that this specialty would allow me to make a meaningful difference in the lives of students who often require individualized and adaptive instructional approaches.

After earning my degree and spending several years working as a TSVI, I began to see firsthand how rapidly technology was evolving—and how profoundly the right tool or strategy could impact a student's ability to participate, communicate, and thrive. My teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic further illuminated just how essential assistive technology had become. Students who had once relied heavily on in-person support were suddenly navigating digital

platforms, screen readers, and remote-access tools. It became clear to me that if I wanted to continue providing the highest level of support to my students, I needed to deepen my knowledge in assistive technology.

This realization motivated me to pursue my M.Ed. in Visual Impairments with a focus on Assistive Technology at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston). The program's remote format was especially appealing, as relocating was simply not an option for me. Finding a reputable program that allowed me to continue working while advancing my education felt like the perfect fit.

During my graduate studies, I had the privilege of being supported by federal funding from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), along with partial support from my employer. This financial support truly changed the trajectory of my graduate experience. Because the OSEP funding covered tuition, fees, books, and essential supplies, I was able to fully immerse myself in my coursework without the weight of future debt looming over me. I appreciated that the grant was specifically designed for teachers who planned to remain in the field for at least three years after completing their program—a commitment I was not only willing to make, but eager to fulfill. This funding allowed me to focus on learning the technologies, teaching strategies, and research-based practices that would later shape how I support students today.

My time at UMass Boston offered me countless opportunities to refine my skills and engage with professionals who were at the forefront of the assistive technology field. I learned to analyze accessibility barriers, evaluate technologies, and design instruction that addressed the diverse needs of students with visual impairments. The program pushed me to think more deeply about independence, access, and the role of technology in supporting agency for students. Without the financial and institutional support, I received, I would not have been able to devote the same level of energy and focus to my coursework, collaboration, or professional development.

I am now in my tenth year as a TSVI for Carroll County Public Schools in Maryland. In this role, I support students from birth through age 21 with a wide range of visual impairments and educational needs. Each day presents new challenges and new learning opportunities, and I continue to be inspired by the resilience, creativity, and determination of the students and families I serve.

My work spans a diverse range of environments and developmental stages. For infants and toddlers, I support early literacy, sensory development, and family coaching. With young learners, I adapt curriculum, introduce tactile learning strategies, and collaborate closely with classroom teachers to ensure equitable access to instruction. For older students, I focus on developing the skills they will need for independence—whether that involves assistive technology, braille

literacy, self-advocacy, or preparation for life after high school. Across all age groups, collaboration is at the heart of what I do. I regularly partner with families, early intervention providers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, classroom teachers, and other related service providers to ensure that each student has the tools and strategies they need to succeed.

The integration of assistive technology has become one of the most dynamic parts of my work. Just in the past school year, I have had the opportunity to apply many of the skills I gained during my graduate program. I have helped students learn to use screen readers such as NVDA, JAWS, and VoiceOver; supported learners in navigating new accessibility features on classroom devices; and introduced students to switch interfaces, eye-gaze systems, and other emerging technologies. Each of these tools opens a new pathway to communication and independence for students who may not otherwise have access to traditional methods of interaction.

One of the most meaningful experiences this past year has been teaching a student to type using Morse code through a two-switch interface. It is a method I might never have considered before pursuing my advanced training, yet it has proven to be an empowering and effective solution for this particular student. Moments like these remind me why I pursued additional education: to expand my

capacity to think creatively, problem-solve in real time, and approach each student with a mindset that prioritizes access, adaptability, and potential.

Looking back on my journey—from early childhood education student, to transferring universities, to becoming a TSVI, and eventually specializing in assistive technology, I see a path defined by growth, courage, and purpose. I have learned to trust my instincts, follow my curiosity, and embrace the ever-changing nature of technology and education. Most importantly, I have learned that supporting students with visual impairments is not just about teaching skills; it is about fostering independence, dignity, and confidence.

I am deeply grateful for the experiences and support that have shaped me as an educator, and I remain committed to staying current with emerging technologies and best practices. My work continues to be motivated by the belief that every student deserves meaningful access to their education—and that with the right tools, strategies, and support, they can thrive.



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Connecting the vision loss community to a world of resources

The APH ConnectCenter offers FREE curated advice and resources to assist children, parents, adults, and job seekers who are blind or low vision, and their associated professionals.

Through the [APH ConnectCenter](#) website, you are able to access these ConnectCenter resources, and much more:

- **APH Information & Referral Hotline:** One of our experienced representatives can provide free information on virtually any topic related to visual impairment and blindness. Call toll-free (800) 232-5463 or e-mail us at connectcenter@aph.org.
- **For Families:** Find support and resources for families of children who are blind or low vision.
- **For Job Seekers & Employers:** Find employment information, tools, and guidance for job seekers who are blind or low vision or for employers who work with individuals who are blind or low vision.
- **VisionAware:** Designed for adults and seniors who are living with vision loss.
- **ConnectCalendar:** For use by the entire blindness field to find and promote events, all in one place. [Promote and share](#) your organization's event by adding it to the Calendar or [discover upcoming events](#).
- **APH ConnectCenter Transition Hub:** Planning for graduation and life after school brings up a lot of questions. Find information about transition programs that emphasize empowerment, career exploration, and work experiences for teens and young adults who are blind or low vision.



ConnectCenter
for Families

ConnectCenter
for Job Seekers and Employers

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For independent living with vision loss

From South America to *American Idol*

Steve Pohl

pohls1@yahoo.com

Graduate of Northern Illinois University

My name is Steve Pohl, and I have been a teacher of students with visual impairments and a certified orientation and mobility specialist for 12 years. My introduction to the field of visual impairments and blindness began in Cochabamba, Bolivia, at the Centro de Educación Especial Padre Ignacio Zalles [Fr. Ignacio Zalles special education center]. It was there that I learned about the challenges faced by adults and youths with visual impairments, along with the strategies they used to live more independently, access information, and pursue their goals. Some of my most formative training was with the center's community-based rehabilitation team. While traveling with colleagues to remote areas, I learned the importance of community engagement in the education and rehabilitation of people with disabilities, and how to be creative with extremely limited resources.

The dedication and resourcefulness of my Bolivian colleagues inspired me to pursue formal training in blindness and visual impairments upon my return to the U.S. As I explored graduate programs, I learned about the severe shortage of qualified professionals worldwide. Like many people, I had hardly heard of this field and was unaware of the critical need for personnel. I was excited about the prospect of building upon my overseas experience and contributing to the profession, but I was very concerned about the cost of graduate studies and accruing heavy debt. Prior to my time in Latin America, I had worked as a draftsman and a machine programmer, so I had no formal training in rehabilitation or education. This meant that I would have to complete prerequisite coursework and incur additional expenses.

Upon calculating the cost of a graduate degree and prerequisite courses, I concluded that the only way I could proceed would be with the assistance of a large grant or scholarship. While researching programs, I learned that the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) offered full-tuition grants for students studying low vision and blindness. In exchange, I would need to teach in U.S. public schools for four years. Among the programs I considered, Northern Illinois University had secured the OSEP grant. This would allow me to study full-time, pursue my goals, and avoid needing a loan.

With sufficient funds in place, I began studying to become an orientation and mobility specialist and a teacher of students with visual impairments. The program at Northern Illinois University was rigorous, requiring 18 graduate credits nearly every semester. I was able to build upon my experience in Latin America and more thoroughly learn the multiple skill sets needed for my career, such as instruction in braille, assistive technology, independent living skills, orientation and mobility, and assessment of functional vision. During my student teaching and orientation and mobility internship, I was fortunate to train under dedicated and innovative mentors. After completing my practicum requirements, I earned an M.S.Ed. in 2013.

Upon earning my degree, a career opportunity brought me to Virginia, where I have been working for the last 12 years. During this time, I have served students in school divisions from central to Eastern Virginia. Each school year has introduced me to students of all ages, and no two days have ever been the same. It is not uncommon for me to work with a high school student and then head to a kindergarten classroom to meet my next student. I enjoy the challenge of shifting my mindset, teaching strategies, and vocabulary as I encounter students of different ages and personalities throughout the day.

In addition to accommodating age and personality differences, I teach a wide variety of skills, depending on each student's abilities and goals. On a given day, I may teach braille literacy and assistive technology to one student, and visual efficiency skills to another. I may also instruct a student in how to analyze busy intersections and safely cross streets along a new route. Along with teaching, I am constantly collaborating with classroom teachers, special education teachers, and other service providers to help students access their curriculum, meet their goals, and determine next steps.

Through my experience of teaching and collaboration, I have learned that while each student prepares me for future students, I cannot simply assume that a previous strategy will work again. Rather, the students' unique needs and circumstances present constant challenges. I try to learn from these challenges and identify adjustments that I can make to help students succeed. I may combine techniques used with previous students or seek an entirely different approach. Despite my years of experience, it is still common for me to initially feel unprepared when encountering a new student and determining which strategies to use.

One of my most memorable experiences of feeling unprepared began when I received an 11th grade student who had been diagnosed with papilledema (optic

disc swelling) as a result of a brain tumor. The student had no history of a visual impairment and had missed half of the 2017-2018 school year due to surgery and recovery. When she returned to school, she had very little functional vision. The student's paraprofessional and I faced several hurdles in making her curriculum accessible, helping the student catch up from missed content, educating instructors about the student's visual condition, and teaching the student braille, assistive technology, and orientation and mobility. Additionally, the student had a background in theater and show choir, so learning music and choreography presented further challenges.

Despite the difficulties in accessing music, the student's involvement in theater and show choir was a source of joy, so we encouraged her to continue participating. During the student's senior year, her paraprofessional and I learned that our area was one of the sites chosen to host auditions for *American Idol*. Knowing how much the student loved to sing, we urged her to go, even if it meant just having the experience. Unsurprisingly, the student passed her first audition and within a month, she was heading to Atlanta for her next round of auditions. After more success in Atlanta, the student was invited to audition in front of the three celebrity judges in Louisville.

Once in Louisville, the student sang an impassioned rendition of Andra Day's "Rise Up" for the judges and earned a golden ticket to compete in Hollywood the following month. A flurry of activity followed, including a visit from one of the show's producers and a camera crew. They recorded several school scenes and included a lesson in braille and assistive technology. Months later, we saw a brief glimpse of our lesson when the episode aired.

After the visit from the producer and camera crew, they asked if we could send something to simulate the student's vision. Fortunately, I had been trained in how to make vision simulation goggles during graduate school. Based on the student's ophthalmological reports and my assessment of her vision, we began adapting three sets of goggles that a science teacher had donated. We repeatedly ran visual field and acuity tests with the goggles and adjusted them until the results matched the student's vision as closely as possible. Throughout the process, the student's input was invaluable, as she was able to articulate what had changed with her vision since her diagnosis. With the simulation goggles ready, the student headed to Hollywood.

During the Hollywood segment of the competition, the contestants were divided into teams of four and asked to perform a song together. The student's teammates were given the simulation goggles to help them understand her vision,

and they chose to wear them while performing. This small act of solidarity was quite meaningful to the student, and it appeared when the episode aired. After successfully competing in Hollywood, the student advanced to the next round in Honolulu.

As the student advanced in the competition, her absence from school posed several challenges. First, the student still needed to complete her schoolwork in order to stay on track to graduate. Since her visual condition was relatively new, she did not yet have mastery of braille or efficient use of screen-reading software. This meant seeking formats for the student to access her materials, producing the materials in a timely manner, and getting them to her either before she left to compete or while she was away. Daily collaboration with her high school teachers was essential for identifying what to prioritize and establishing appropriate deadlines.

In addition to collaborating with the student's teachers, we partnered with the tutor that *American Idol* provided for all of the student contestants. The tutor did not have a background in visual impairments, so we had to accommodate the tutor's skills and limited availability. Working across time zones presented a sizeable hurdle, especially while the student competed in Hawaii. When she was

not competing, the student returned to high school and continued learning braille, assistive technology, and orientation and mobility.

As the student transitioned back to high school, the impact of competing on a nationally televised show overshadowed her readjustment. The student, her paraprofessional, and I were constantly preparing for the next phase of the competition without knowing how far she would advance. When she was home, the student was expected to cultivate her fanbase on social media. While most of her peers were immersed in classes, extracurricular activities, and college applications, the student had traveled across the country and experienced the intensity of competing before celebrity judges and a national audience. This amount of pressure in such a short time was a lot for any contestant to navigate, especially a high school student.

After a demanding seven months and multiple transitions, the competition finished. Ultimately, the student did not win, but she was invited to sing “Rise Up” with Andra Day for the finale. Immediately following the show’s completion, the student received multiple invitations for interviews from local news outlets, as well as requests to sing at events. Meanwhile, with graduation just two months away, the student still needed to fulfill several school obligations, including mastering as much braille and assistive technology as possible in the remaining time.

Since graduation, both braille and technology skills have proven beneficial to the student. Although her main focus has been recording music and performing, she has also worked for the Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired. Through the student's roles as a braille teacher for adults and a mentor for high school students, she has directly shared her skills with others in the community. Her experience with multiple transitions has made her a valuable resource for people adapting to change and seeking to increase their independence.

In addition to helping adults and youths adapt to change, the student likewise helped me be more flexible and adjust to uncertain circumstances. Within a year after the student's graduation, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered numerous challenges. Once again, I was working within the context of a wildly unpredictable future. I had to find ways to make educational content accessible to students who had not yet mastered braille or assistive technology and manage to teach them these skills without being physically present. While I did not have to work across time zones, I had to navigate remote instruction at a time when it was still new to public education. My teaching strategies needed constant adjusting and I had to seek more efficient ways to collaborate with teachers.

The flexibility and pursuit of improvement that I learned from my student and the COVID-19 pandemic continue to serve me today. I am much more willing

to ask for help or suggestions, even while working with a familiar student. Whenever possible, I try to observe other service providers and classroom teachers to help generate strategies, whereas before, I mainly sought ideas at conferences for vision professionals. The unpredictability that I experienced over multiple school years has helped me become more resourceful, much like I had to be when my career was first starting in Bolivia.

From the beginning of my career to the present, I am convinced that my greatest opportunity was receiving the OSEP grant. Without the grant, I would have been deterred from pursuing graduate studies in low vision and blindness. Instead, it enabled me to reach my goal of helping others live more independently and pursue their interests. I have been fortunate to witness students gain the skills and confidence needed for a variety of activities, from accessing information to safely crossing streets and using public transportation. I am grateful for the opportunity that I received to go to graduate school, and I remain committed to empowering individuals with visual impairments to lead independent, fulfilling lives.

Portland State University's Mobility Matters



Mobility Matters 2026

Thursday, February 26, 8:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Join us for [**Mobility Matters**](#), a virtual interdisciplinary conference exploring the connection between navigation and community. This year we'll highlight innovative mobility devices, braille training grants, wayfinding, transportation design, and proprioceptive teaching.

This event brings together thought leaders and experts from a variety of fields with a central focus on inclusion and accessibility for people who are blind, have low vision, or are DeafBlind, as well as those with other disabilities.

Featured presenters: Amos Miller, Creator of Soundscape; Dr. Penny Rosenblum, national braille innovator, and more!

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GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Intervention Specialist: Visually Impaired Licensure Program

A 22-credit hour program offering graduate level coursework leading to licensure as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI). The program is designed to be completed in one year and applicants must hold a valid Ohio teaching license. Coursework is mostly online with extensive face-to-face field and practicum experiences.

Intervention Specialist: Hearing Impaired Licensure Program

A graduate level, 24-credit hour program offering coursework leading to licensure as a teacher of the Deaf/hard of hearing. The program is designed to be completed in one year and applicants must hold a valid Ohio teaching license. Coursework is mostly online instruction with extensive face-to-face field experiences.

Certificate in Deafblindness Education

A graduate level, 15-credit hour program, leading to a certificate in Deafblind Education from Shawnee State University. This certificate will meet the post baccalaureate education needs of working professionals. The program courses provide in-depth knowledge of the needs of and supports for children with combined hearing-vision loss (also known as deafblindness) and is aligned with CEC standards for deafblindness

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM

Intervener Certificate Program

A 30-credit hour program offering undergraduate level coursework leading to a Shawnee State issued Intervener Certificate. The Intervener Program is designed to be completed in two years. Applicants must meet the admission requirements at Shawnee State University. An intervener provides consistent one-to-one support to a student who is Deaf, blind or dual sensory impaired (ages 3 through 21) throughout the instructional day. Coursework is primarily completed in an online format, culminating with a field based practicum experience.

- Online Coursework through our Consortium partner institutions of higher education
- Field based practicum/internship experience
- Funding support provided by the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, Office for Exceptional Children
- Aligned with Ohio Priorities
- Made possible with support of the Ohio Deans Compact and the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Gail Chinn
gchinn@shawnee.edu // 740.351.3571

Shawnee State University
940 Second Street // Portsmouth, OH 45662

Highlighting the Impact of Funded Programs in the Field of Low Vision and Blindness

Sheena Walton

Sheena.walton@hcesc.org

Graduate of Shawnee State University

My name is Sheena Walton, and for the past 22 years I have served as a Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. My career began in a resource room setting—what we called at the time a “unit”, a place where multiple districts would send their students to one centralized location and I would serve students there. During those early years, I thrived on the close-knit interactions with my students, cherishing every breakthrough, big or small. The service model eventually shifted, students returned to their home schools, and with it I shifted into an itinerant role. Traveling across various school districts in my county and even neighboring ones, I encountered diverse teaching environments and a myriad of student needs. Over the years, I developed not only a deep respect for the challenges my students faced but also an unwavering commitment to adapt and grow as an educator.

A New Challenge

Throughout my career, I have worked with very few students that had dual sensory loss and none of them had been totally blind. However, it was during the 2022–2023 school year that I encountered a situation which became a turning point in my professional journey. I began working with a high school student who was born completely blind and had recently lost their hearing, suffering a profound loss in one ear and a mild to moderate loss in the other. This situation was especially challenging given that their academic workload consisted primarily of Advanced Placement courses, where rigorous content demanded that they have consistent access. In my role as a Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, I had long relied on visual techniques such as speechreading and maximizing visual access to overcome auditory barriers. While these methods served most of my students well, they proved insufficient for this particular student's complex needs. Faced with this challenge, I recognized that I needed to expand my repertoire of strategies. I began doing research on strategies for students who were deafblind that would enable my student to fully access their demanding classroom environment. Although I grappled with some self-doubt during those early weeks, my determination to support this brilliant student only grew stronger.

A Path Forward

During a staff meeting that winter, I was intrigued when my supervisor casually mentioned the existence of the Shawnee State University Intervention Specialist: Visually Impaired Teacher Licensure Program—a state funded grant program aimed at empowering educators to specialize in working with students who are blind or visually impaired. Motivated by a desire to provide better support for my student, I had begun immersing myself in research. I scoured the internet for scholarly articles and participated in webinars to learn more about specialized teaching methods tailored to visually impaired students. Yet the Shawnee State University program continued to linger at the back of my mind as exactly the professional development I needed for helping my student truly thrive. Then, in mid-March, during a one-on-one meeting with my supervisor, I tentatively mentioned that I had been considering the Shawnee program. To my surprise, my supervisor responded enthusiastically, even sending an email a few days later to inform me that the application deadline was rapidly approaching. The deadline was just one week away! Suddenly, I was faced with a daunting decision: to return to college after a fifteen-year hiatus, all while balancing a busy career and raising two active children, one of whom was about to be a senior in high school. After many thoughtful discussions with my family and careful personal reflection, I decided to seize this remarkable opportunity. In a whirlwind of activity, I assembled my application materials, acquired recommendations from colleagues, and poured

myself into every word of my personal statement essay. A few intense, nerve-wracking days later, I submitted my application and embarked on what would turn out to be a transformative new chapter in my career.

Starting the Program

I officially began the Shawnee State University Intervention Specialist: Visually Impaired Teacher Licensure Program in the summer of 2023. The program's blend of flexibility and rigor perfectly suited the demands of both my professional and personal responsibilities, as well as my desire for growth. With a predominantly online curriculum complemented by both synchronous and asynchronous components, the program allowed for deep, focused learning along with virtual discussions. Each week, I encountered new challenges and learning that forever altered my approach to teaching. One of the highlights of the program was undoubtedly learning braille. I dedicated time each day to practicing braille, both on my brailler and through online modules, and I vividly remember the surge of excitement when I first read an entire page in a braille book without assistance. A triumphant moment that affirmed my growth!

Developing Specialized Skills

Beyond gaining braille literacy, the program equipped me with a wealth of specialized skills that have profoundly enriched my teaching practice. I developed effective strategies tailored to the unique needs of students who are blind or visually impaired, ensuring every student can access and engage with their educational materials. I learned how to conduct functional vision assessments in diverse, practical settings, which is a critical skill for assessing how a student uses their vision within their learning environment and can help identify specific vision challenges. I also became well-acquainted with a variety of vision technologies and adaptive tools that significantly enhance the access of students who are visually impaired. I learned methods for modifying classroom materials so that every teaching moment is inclusive and accessible. The program required 110 field hours, including a rigorous practicum that provided essential hands-on experience, real-world insights, and the chance to apply the skills I had been learning. During these hours, I observed not only my exceptional mentor but also many of my colleagues, an experience that greatly enriched my knowledge of strategies for teaching students who are blind or visually impaired. In addition, I had the opportunity to practice writing lesson plans and writing clear, comprehensive Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals that reflect each student's unique needs and skills. Integrating all these specialized skills into my practice not only

boosted my confidence but also significantly improved my ability to serve students confronting dual sensory challenges.

Application of Skills

As the program advanced, I witnessed firsthand the profound impact that specialized training could have on teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. I applied the theories and strategies I learned in real classroom settings. With every new technique, my approach became more nuanced and ultimately more effective. One notable example came when I applied a multi-sensory teaching approach with a student who had previously struggled to connect with the curriculum. By combining tactile learning experiences, adapted visual materials, and assistive technology, I was able to help the team create lessons that were accessible and engaging. I remember a particular session where the difference was unmistakable. The student, who had once appeared disengaged and frustrated, began to participate. Their ability to process and understand lessons improved markedly when the combination of new teaching strategies was used. It was a vivid illustration of how every new strategy I learned directly contributed to reducing barriers and fueling academic success.

Navigating Challenges

As with any journey that involves significant change, my experience in the Shawnee State program came with its share of challenges. Returning to school after many years brought moments of self-doubt and times when balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities felt particularly demanding. However, each challenge was met with practical solutions and strong support from peers and mentors within the program. The instructors were fantastic to work with, always ready to help and flexible when life interfered. I'll never forget when Dr. Karen Koehler, the head of the program, showed incredible understanding, when I had to text her during an exam to let her know I needed to take my daughter to the emergency room. Throughout the experience, I never felt like I couldn't manage work, school, and life all at once. Despite the rigorous workload, everything always felt manageable.

Current Professional Role and Student Impact

Today, I proudly serve in a dual role in southwestern Ohio—working both as a Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments. In my itinerant role, I now serve nine school districts, working with an incredibly diverse range of students. Each district, every classroom, and every unique interaction reinforces my belief in the power of access for each student. I am currently working with an elementary-aged student who recently

transitioned into one of my districts. A bright, curious learner embarking on an educational journey with braille. Witnessing this student's initial fascination and gradual progress in mastering each new braille character reaffirms my commitment to using effective, targeted teaching strategies. The specialized training I acquired through the Shawnee State University Intervention Specialist: Visually Impaired Teacher Licensure Program has empowered me to support this student in a transformative way. Being actively involved in their journey and witnessing their growth each day is a powerful reminder of how tailored educational methods can ignite a lifelong passion for learning, regardless of the challenges. In our dynamic learning environment, the insights and techniques gained through the Shawnee State University grant program are not merely tools; they are instruments of change that enable me to be a vital witness to, and an active participant in, every student's unique journey, ensuring that each learner is empowered and supported.

Reflection on Funded Programs

I quickly realized that my path to becoming the educator I am today would not have been possible without the support of funded programs. These initiatives represent more than just an infusion of financial aid; they are catalysts for widespread transformation in the field of education. The comprehensive training I received—from mastering braille and conducting functional vision assessments to

adapting materials and writing effective IEP goals equipped me with a robust set of tools for addressing the needs of students with visual impairments. Additionally, the practical experience of completing 110 field hours and participating in events like the Braille Challenge enriched my understanding and further emphasized the importance of continuous professional development. Funded programs empower individual educators and spark positive change throughout the educational community, strengthening schools, enhancing student success, and ultimately creating an environment where every child can thrive.

Conclusion

In reflecting on my journey, I remain deeply moved by the impact of funded initiatives. The opportunity to participate in the Shawnee State program enriched my professional practice in countless ways, and I am truly grateful for the invaluable resources and insights it provided. I encourage every educator who is passionate about advancing their practice to seize similar opportunities. These initiatives not only bolster individual growth but also empower entire educational communities to innovate and excel, ultimately creating a brighter future for all students. I have seen firsthand that specialized training, comprehensive mentorship, and a community of passionate professionals can create transformative changes not just in the way we teach, but in the lives of the students we serve. I

wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the entities and individuals who support state and federally funded programs in the field of low vision and blindness. Their commitment has enabled educators like me to break new ground and expand our capabilities to meet the evolving needs of every student. The skills I acquired are a direct result of these crucial programs, and I will be forever grateful for the doors they have opened for me. For those who are eager to make a meaningful difference, I encourage you to explore state and federally funded programs. These initiatives provide not only financial support but also the advanced training and community connection necessary to create transformative educational experiences. The experiences, skills, and insights gained through the Shawnee State University Intervention Specialist: Visually Impaired Teacher Licensure Program have not only enriched my professional life but will also have a lasting impact on the lives of my students.



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Seeing Possibility Through the Strain: A Parent's Journey into TSVI

Roxana Veta Ramirez

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Graduate of Cal State LA

My name is Roxana Veta Ramirez, and I was a student at Cal State LA as well as a newly credentialed Teacher for Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI). I recently received an email regarding the impact of OSEP, or as I've come to know it, the Bienvenidos Grant. I'd like to share a bit about my journey and how the grant has made a difference in my life.

My experience in special education began in 2005 when I started working for my local school district. Over the years, I served in several roles including clerk, paraprofessional, and traveling healthcare aide for students with medical needs.

When my daughter was born with a visual impairment, my personal and professional lives converged in a new way. I felt a deep desire to return to the classroom, this time to focus on special education and learn how to better support

her as she began her school journey. I re-enrolled in college during the pandemic—a challenging time for all, especially for families managing complex medical needs. My daughter required continuous medication and underwent multiple surgeries, all while I navigated campus life and tried to figure out how to make schoolwork when so many doors (literally and figuratively) were closed.

After earning my undergraduate degree, I was accepted into the Bienvenidos Grant program, which significantly supported my path into the credential program. As the eldest in my family, I carry the responsibility of caring for my mom and sister. During my first year of teaching, finances were tight, especially with ongoing medical expenses. The support from the Bienvenidos Grant helped fill critical gaps and relieved some of the financial stress during a very demanding time.

Today, I'm in my second year as a TSVI. While I'm still growing in the field, I take great pride in the impact I've been able to make. My current goal is to foster strong connections between families and their children's educational experiences—drawing from both my professional training and my personal journey as a parent of a child with visual impairment.

I'm deeply grateful for the people and programs that make accessibility and opportunity possible for educators like me. Thank you for the vital role you and your team play in helping us succeed through challenging circumstances.

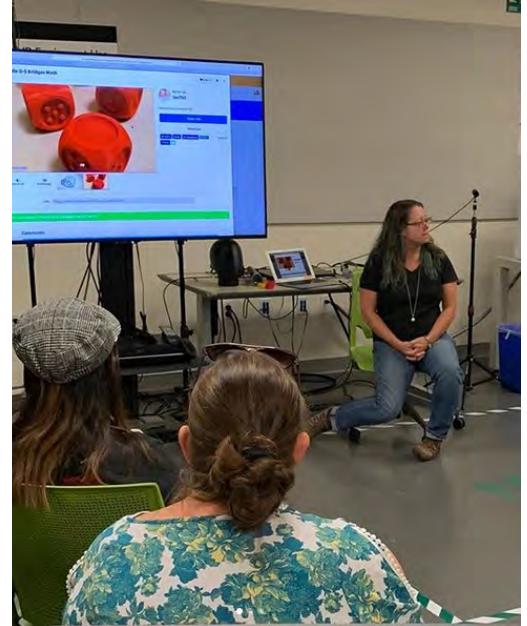


The Education Specialist Credential Program in Visual Impairment (VI)

prepares highly qualified educators to teach and empower a diverse range of blind and low vision students aged birth to 22 and their families. Our program prepares educators to bridge current evidence-based literature with practice-orientated instructional strategies that are focused on promoting students' access to core and expanded core curriculum areas, while emphasizing barrier-free membership in school, home, and community settings. We commit to exercising culturally responsive pedagogy as aligned with principles of anti-racism and anti-ableism. Candidates are expected to demonstrate skills in working with an array of professionals as well as families in order to facilitate learner participation and growth within the context of their educational experience.

Graduates from our program:

- Demonstrate competence in assessment and instruction to promote functional literacy in braille, print and auditory methodologies
- Have skills in collaborating with an array of professionals as well as families In order to facilitate learner participation and growth
- Participate in field assignments that include diverse populations, and issues related to the effects of cultural and linguistic differences
- Demonstrate knowledge and skills regarding the effects of adventitious and congenital visual impairments as well as the impact of various conditions on learning and development



**For more information, please contact:
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Diagnosis to Career Change

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Graduate of University of Arizona

As an educator with prior experience teaching in a general education setting, I was unfamiliar with the field of visual impairment until a diagnosis opened my eyes. My awareness changed when my child was diagnosed with a visual impairment at just a few months old. While seeking support and resources to navigate my child's new diagnosis, I learned about educators that worked with students who are visually impaired. Given my background in education, my curiosity to learn more about these teachers led me onto a new career journey.

Prior to my child's diagnosis, I had already earned my master's in education and was focused on pursuing continuing graduate coursework in Educational Leadership. Those professional pursuits changed after becoming a parent to a child with multiple disabilities. As a resident of Arizona, I learned about the Special Education Visual Impairment degree program at the University of Arizona. I recall having a scheduled phone interview with program staff regarding my experiences

in education. I was offered the opportunity to join a funded program to complete a graduate certificate in the field of Visual Impairment. The incredible opportunity to pursue further education through the University of Arizona program was timely. The program expanded my knowledge and understanding of individuals with visual impairment. It further prepared me for the required state exams needed to add the certification as a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) to my teaching license.

Working with students who are visually impaired in a special education setting has offered me a multitude of opportunities to grow as a professional. Over the course of the years since becoming a TSVI, I've worked in Arizona as a preschool teacher in a special school classroom setting for students with visual impairments, taught VI courses to undergraduate students seeking to become TSVI's as well as mentor TSVI candidates during their student teaching experience. Through these experiences I can consistently say that I'm always learning. This field has taught me a great deal and challenges me to seek to know more. My hope is to be able to give back to the field for all it's given me.

Teaching is something I have always been passionate about. Becoming a Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments was a professional opportunity pursued because of my personal journey of raising a child with visual impairment.

As a teacher and parent, I seek to bring both my lived experiences and professional knowledge to all I do in this field.



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If you are passionate about the education of children and youth with visual impairments and deafblindness, including those with additional disabilities, please become part of our social network on Facebook. If you have a Facebook account, you can find our page and become a fan by searching for Division on Visual Impairments and Deafblindness.

For those who do not have a Facebook account, you can view our page by going to the following URL:
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