

Installment #4: Experiences of Vision Professionals – Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments and Orientation and Mobility Specialists – Who Participated in the *Access and Engagement Survey*, June 22, 2020

The *Access and Engagement to Education Survey* collected information from both families and vision professionals. Installments #2 and #3 focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted families of children and youth with visual impairments, including those with multiple disabilities and deafblindness. In Installments #4 and #5 we want to tell you a little about how educational services and supports have changed from the experiences of vision professionals, that is teachers of students with visual impairments (referred to as TSVIs for the remainder of this report), orientation and mobility specialists (referred to as O&M specialists for the remainder of this report) and dually-certified vision professionals (those who are dually certified and working as a TSVI and O&M specialist. Installment #4 provides information about the TSVIs and O&M specialists employed during the 2019-2020 school year.

TSVI Demographic Information

The 890 TSVIs worked with children and families from early intervention through K-12 age students and youth in transition programs. There were 180 TSVIs who identified as dually-certified and their responses are included in this section. A total of 28 (4.8%) of TSVIs were also a family member/guardian of a child (or children) with a visual impairment: 2 reported they had also completed survey data for a child(ren) in early intervention, 3 for a child(ren) in preschool, and 23 for a school age child(ren).

There were 824 TSVIs from the United States and 56 from Canada. There were 575 TSVIs who provided the state in which they live. (There was a glitch with the survey and many participants were not provided the questions in the demographic section.)

The TSVIs were from 46 states, Washington DC, the US Virgin Islands, and from an overseas Army base. The 10 states with the highest number of TSVIs were:

- Texas (n= 112)
- California (n=41)
- New York (n=42)
- Pennsylvania (n=36)
- North Carolina (n=27)
- Washington (n=26)
- Kentucky (n=25)

- Arizona (n = 24)
- Massachusetts (23)

The Canadian TSVIs represented three provinces:

- Ontario (n=24)
- British Columbia (n=14)
- Quebec (n=2)

In Installment #4 we wanted to give you a snapshot of these teachers' experiences. Not every TSVI answered every question so our reporting is limited to trends (in terms of percentages) for those who answered specific questions.

TSVIs Employment for the 2019-2020 School Year

There were 710 TSVIs-only and another 180 professionals who were working as both a TSVI and an O&M specialist prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

When asked specifically about where they worked, we found:

- 363 (40.7%) were employed by a public-school district
- 127 (14.2%) were employed by a cooperative (e.g., service center, Intermediate unit, BOCES)
- 98 (11.0%) were employed by a school for the blind and worked on campus
- 76 (8.5%) were employed as a private contractor with a district
- 63 (7.0%) were employed on contract by a company that provides services to school districts
- 43 (6.1%) were employed by an outreach department of a school for the blind
- 15 (1.6%) responded "other"

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 853 (95.8%) of the TSVIS reported the number of districts they were serving:

- 1 district (n=452, 50.7%)
- 2 districts (n=88, 9.9%)
- 3 districts (n=77, 8.7%)
- 4 districts (n=46, 5.2%)
- 5 districts (n=37, 4.2%)
- 6 districts (n=28, 3.1%)
- 7 or more districts (n=125, 14.0%)

How COVID-19 Effected Educational Services Provided by TSVIs

The TSVIs were asked the types of learners they were serving on March 1, 2020. We did acknowledge in the survey that we recognized that learners do not “fit neatly” into the three categories provided. There were 556 (62.5%) TSVIs serving academic blind students, 720 (80.9%) serving academic low vision students, and 702 (78.9%) serving students with multiple disabilities.

There were 815 (91.6%) of the TSVIs who reported they were serving students with visual impairments during the COVID-19 pandemic in *at least one* capacity (which included telephone calls, email, and online education). Due to COVID-19, for 269 (30.2%) of the TSVIs the number of direct service students on their caseload changed and for 144 (16.1%) TSVIs the number of consult students on their caseload changed.

We also asked TSVIs about how they were providing TVI services once the decision was made for students to stop attending school. Ways in which TSVIs provided service in the closing days of the 2019-2020 school year included:

- 454 (39.6%) reported sending resources such as websites, videos, or blog posts to their students’ families.
- 448 (39.1%) called families on the telephone to speak directly with the family member/guardian to consult, give suggestions, etc.
- 398 (34.7%) reported texting with families to consult and give suggestions.

TSVIs Communication with Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Data were collected between April 22 and May 13, 2020. We asked TSVIs about their experiences communicating with families/guardians during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked if there were “... students whose family member/guardian they had not been able to reach since the COVID-19 pandemic?” 305 (34.2%) of the TSVIs told us they had been able to contact all of their students’ families/guardians. Of those who had not made contact with all of their families we found:

- 421 (47.3%) had tried to make contact and continued to do so
- 22 (2.5%) had tried to make contact but had chosen to no longer try to make contact
- 16 (1.8%) had tried to make contact and an administrator had told them to no longer try to make contact

TSVIs Access to Specialized Equipment

In order to meet their students' educational needs, TSVI rely on a wide range of equipment including braille production materials and embossers, equipment for conducting assessments, and tools and supplies to develop instructional materials that allow students to access curriculum. When we asked TSVIs if they had all the materials at home they needed to serve students only 263 (29.6%) of the TSVIs had the materials they needed to serve their academic blind students, 464 (52.1%) had the materials they needed to serve their academic low visions students, and 356 (40.0%) of the TSVIs had the materials they needed to serve their students with multiple disabilities.

O&M Specialists Demographic Information

Of the 138 surveys completed by O&M specialists, we received 134 from O&M specialists in the United States and 4 from O&M specialists in Canada. Two O&M specialists reported they completed a survey for a child in the birth to three age group, 1 reported completing a survey for a child in the preschool age group, and 1 completed a survey for a child in the K-12 to transition age group.

For those O&M specialists who indicated the state or province in which they lived, we have surveys from 98 individuals U.S. states including:

- Texas (n= 16)
- New York (n=9)
- California (n=7)
- Massachusetts (n=6)
- Delaware (n=4)
- South Carolina (n=4)

One (1) O&M specialist told us they lived and worked in Ontario, Canada

In Installment #4 we wanted to give you a snapshot of O&Ms specialists experiences. Not every O&M specialist answered every question so our reporting is limited to trends (in terms of percentages) for those who answered specific questions.

All of the O&M specialists were working prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked specifically about where they worked, we found:

- 43 (31.2%) were employed by a public-school district
- 29 (12.0%) were employed on contract by a company that provides services to school districts

- 28 (20.3%) replied “other” and indicated they worked for an organization such as a state agency or private agency/commission/center
- 20 (14.5%) were employed by an outreach department of a school for the blind
- 18 (13.0%) were employed by a school for the blind and worked on campus
- 13 (9.4%) were employed by a cooperative (e.g., service center, Intermediate unit, or BOCES)
- 5 (3.6%) were employed as a private contractor with a district

Looking at the number of districts O&M specialists were serving prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 124 (89.9%) participants reported serving:

- 53 (38.4%) 1 district
- 11 (8.0%) 2 districts
- 11 (8.0%) 3 districts
- 6 (4.3%) 4 districts
- 8 (5.8%) 5 districts
- 7 (5.1%) 6 districts
- 28 (20.3%) 7 or more districts

The Impact of COVID-19 on O&M Services for Children and Youth

The O&M specialists were asked the types of learners they were serving on March 1, 2020. There were 94 (68.1%) O&M specialists serving academic blind students, 106 (76.8%) serving academic low vision students, and 109 (79.0%) serving students with multiple disabilities.

There were 106 (76.8%) O&M specialists who reported they were serving students with visual impairments during the COVID-19 pandemic in *at least one* capacity (which included telephone calls, email, and online education). Due to COVID-19, for 40 (29.0%) of the O&M specialists the number of direct service students on their caseload changed and for 17 (12.3%) the number of consult students on their caseload changed

O&M is unique in that much of the learning of community safety necessitates one-on-one direct instruction with an O&M specialist. We asked O&M specialists about their students’ IEP goals. There were 53 (38.4%) O&M specialists who reported that they had students with IEP goals to learn to travel on their school campus; 17 (51.4%) had students with goals to travel in neighborhood or residential settings; 53 (38.4%) had students who had goals to travel in a business or commercial area; and 52 (37.7%) had students with goals to use public transit, use rideshare services, or explore low-vision driving.

With this in mind we asked O&M specialists about how they were providing services once the decision was made for students to stop attending school. Among the top ways O&M specialists provided service in the closing days of the 2019-2020 school year included:

- 56 (40.6%) were sending families/guardians resources (e.g., web sites, videos, blog posts).
- 50 (36.2%) were having students' complete assignments (e.g., researching transit options in the community, reading blog posts about others' travel experiences, listing pros and cons of rideshare services versus taxis).
- 49 (35.5%) were calling families/guardians directly for consultation and to give suggestions.

O&M Specialists Communication with Families During the COVID-19 Pandemic

We asked O&M specialists about their experiences communicating with families/guardians during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked if there were "... students whose family member/guardian they had not been able to reach since the COVID-19 pandemic?" 27 (19.6%) told us they had been able to contact all of their students' families/guardians. Of those who had not made contact with one or more students, we found:

- 66 (47.8%) had tried to make contact and continued to do so
- 5 (3.6%) had tried to make contact but had chosen to no longer try to make contact
- 2 (1.4%) had tried to make contact and an administrator had told them to no longer try to make contact

O&M Specialists Access to Specialized Equipment

We asked O&M specialists if they had all the materials at home they needed to serve students. Only 38 (27.5%) of O&M specialists had the materials they needed to serve their academic blind students, 51 (50.5%) had the materials they needed to serve their academic low visions students, and 38 (27.5%) had the materials they needed to serve their students with multiple disabilities.

Looking Ahead

We hope that this glimpse into the experiences of TSVIs and O&M specialists during the COVID-19 pandemic response will enable you to better understand the challenges they are facing during this time. With 926 (80.3%) of TSVIs and 120 (87.0%) of O&M specialists completing the survey also taking the time to write comments to open-ended questions we have rich and detailed data to analyze. In Installment #5 we will close the circle and return to looking at how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted services to families and students by looking at some of the ways TSVIs and O&M specialists adapted their instruction to meet the needs of children and youth on their caseloads.