Advancing Education for All Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired with Multiple Disabilities
About Perkins International

Perkins School for the Blind, founded in 1829, is a world-renowned center of excellence in the education of people who are blind, deafblind, and visually impaired with multiple disabilities. Perkins has many notable alumni, including Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. The fundamental mission of Perkins is to support people in reaching their greatest possible independence. Through the development of knowledge, skills, and confidence, students learn to live, work, and function as independently as possible within their communities. Teacher preparation is also a central part of our mission. Since 1920, Perkins has trained teachers from both the U.S. and around the world and has helped universities develop or expand teacher training programs.

From the beginning, Perkins identified solutions to problems and issues faced by people who are blind or have visual impairment with multiple disabilities. A pioneer in deafblind education, Perkins was also one of the first residential schools in the United States to expand education programs for children who were blind with multiple disabilities. Another such undertaking was the development of embossed type – a precursor to Braille – to enable people who are blind to read and write. Since 1951, Perkins has manufactured and distributed more than 330,000 Perkins Braillers, the standard for brailing excellence, in 170 countries. In October 2008, Perkins unveiled the Next Generation™ Perkins Brailler®. This improved device is even easier for students to use, thus enabling them to develop literacy skills more quickly.

In 1989, with the generous support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Perkins established a comprehensive international program to support the education of children who are blind or have visual impairment with multiple disabilities. The primary focus of Perkins International is on building capacity at local, regional and national levels to develop independent, sustainable educational services. Local and global partnerships are the foundation of our international work. We collaborate with schools, parent organizations, universities, government representatives and international agencies in a shared effort to improve educational opportunities for children in need. Our programs empower and unite community leaders with a shared vision to enrich children’s lives, transform education and disability policies, and cultivate pioneering alliances.
When Perkins’ international program was initiated, fewer than 250 children who were deafblind or blind with multiple disabilities were being educated in specialized programs in the developing world. With the help of Perkins, today, our local partners provide direct services to more than 12,000 children in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Eastern and Central Europe. In addition, more than 217,000 children, family members, teachers, and professionals have directly benefited from the Program’s activities – from our teacher training programs, to the help we provide in developing curricula and life skills training programs, and to our work to ensure that governments recognize the specialized educational needs of this marginalized population.

It is estimated that there are 5 million children who are blind or visually impaired worldwide who do not attend school.1 We estimate that a large percentage of these children have one or more additional disabilities. Perkins’ and our partners’ experience confirm that when these children have the opportunity to receive an education, their lives, in addition to the lives of their families and community, are remarkably transformed.

In support of Education for All goals, Perkins is committed to advocating for the advancement of the education, economic and political rights of all children and adults who are blind and visually impaired. Underlying all these efforts is Perkins International’s vision:

• Every child has the opportunity to receive an education
• Teachers of children with visual and other impairments are adequately trained
• Schools have the tools to provide quality education to children, including the use of readily available, local, low-cost materials or high-tech equipment where appropriate
• People who are blind or visually impaired are empowered to read, write and communicate through Braille or other appropriate language skills
• Young adults have the opportunity to receive vocational training and/or develop the skills needed to live as independently as possible

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Advancing Braille Literacy

Perkins envisions a world in which all people who are blind or visually impaired who have the cognitive ability are empowered to read, write and communicate through Braille or appropriate language skills and enjoy the benefits of literacy through increased educational opportunities, employment and independence. Perkins advances Braille literacy worldwide by ensuring that schools, agencies and individuals have access to Braille devices and appropriate technology. We also develop Brailer repair networks in many regions of the world to lengthen the life of Perkins Brailers® and provide educators with resources and information on Braille instruction.

Perkins applauds the inclusion of Braille literacy policies and statements in international education campaigns, such as UNESCO’s Education for All initiative, and in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.²

The following issues are critical for ensuring that all people who are blind are empowered to enjoy the benefits of Braille literacy:

• National policies must recognize the importance of Braille literacy and promote Braille literacy education
• International education initiatives should incorporate Braille in literacy campaigns and monitoring activities
• Teachers of students who are blind or visually impaired must be trained to provide instruction in Braille
• Students should be taught Braille throughout their educational experience
• All children who are blind or visually impaired should be assessed for the appropriateness of instruction in the use of a Braille writing machine
• Infants and toddlers should be exposed to tactile and other sensory learning activities to lay a foundation for developing Braille literacy skills
• Libraries need to be equipped with literature in a range of accessible formats, such as Braille, large print and audio

Achieving Education for All

Since 1989, Perkins International has worked with local partners in more than 60 countries around the world to expand educational opportunities for children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities. As a result of this 20-year history, we have identified several common policy and regulatory barriers towards ensuring children receive quality education services. To eliminate these barriers, we recommend that educational systems include, but not be limited to, the following elements:

1. A functional definition and a formalized system for identifying children with visual impairment and multiple disabilities
2. Training for special and regular education teachers on methods of teaching children who are visually impaired with multiple disabilities
3. Funding structures based on the needs of children with multiple disabilities who often need a smaller teacher-to-student ratio
4. Knowledge of curriculum accessibility
5. Systems for assessment and evaluation of students
6. Support, encouragement and training for families to be included in education planning and development
7. Vital linkages with other government agencies to develop comprehensive systems of support and continuity

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Policy Recommendations

Disability advocacy efforts were greatly enhanced in 2005 when the United Nations passed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention mandates accessible education without exception for all children with disabilities. In addition, the Convention specifically draws attention to the needs of students who are deafblind and/or have severe disabilities. As of October 2008, more than 135 countries have signed the Convention.1

Perkins International is committed to contributing to the Convention’s implementation by expanding access to education around the world for children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities, including deafblindness. This unique population of learners, though diverse, requires specific education planning as a result of reduced access to environmental information as a consequence of reduced capacity of distance learning channels of vision and hearing. To provide opportunities for children to achieve quality of life, planned lifelong education intervention is needed.

It is our recommendation that the following issues be considered in the development of comprehensive programs addressing education for all for children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities.

- Develop a functional definition for this population and systems for screening and identifying children with visual impairments
- Offer a continuum of services from early intervention through transition to adult life
- Establish a variety of school placement options, including special schools, classrooms, resource centers, and regular education classrooms
- Assure that each child has an individualized education plan
- Train general and special education teachers in best practices and methods for educating students who are visually impaired with additional disabilities
- Include families as full educational team partners and provide ongoing training and support
- Assure expanded time for education and training

Systems of Evaluation and Identification
Without the development of a targeted definition along with systems of identification, children are often mislabeled. This leads to children being excluded from programs or placed in programs with inadequate training and planning. This is particularly true if clinical and functional screening is performed by persons without basic training in the field of sensory abilities.

Continuum of Services
From early intervention through transition to adult life planning, linkages need to be established between services in partnership with families and agencies. Systems need to be evaluated to assure that specific education needs and personnel development are addressed through planning and training. Consequently, programs with trained personnel in specific methods of education are essential to support life-long learning and development.

Range of Placement Options
Experience around the world has shown that the education needs of children are diverse and that individual children respond differently to a range of environments. The population of children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities and/or deafblind is low-incidence, yet through the education process a variety of teaching approaches are needed. Specifically in education beginnings and linkages to adult life, these children often require specialized instruction in structured environments to open the door to wider possibilities of learning and maximized education outcomes. Often specific centers are required both as a resource to inclusive education and as learning environments responsive to individualized needs. Also, children need access to instruction in a range of community environments in order to apply learning to societal integration and expanded opportunities.

Individualized Education
Inclusive education must bring together the best of education and special education in service to the individual child and his/her family. Though part of a larger population of children who respond to common methods of education, each child who is visually impaired with additional disabilities and/or deafblind is a unique learner whose specific capacities and abilities need to be identified and nurtured. This necessitates that a comprehensive plan of education be developed in conjunction with families and a trained education team. This plan should address specific curriculum adaptations which provide individualized access to education. Classrooms should provide access to one-to-one instruction tailored to the child’s sensory disabilities. Children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities lack opportunities for incidental learning; anything beyond their fingertips may be unavailable to them.

Systems of Personnel Development and Training
To truly be accessible, education systems need to develop a comprehensive plan for the development of teachers and education team members with competencies to address the unique education needs of children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities. These systems should address both pre-service and
in-service development and be available to special and general education professionals who are part of the child’s education team. Key topics with which teachers and education team members should be familiar include, but are not limited to, communication, literacy, individualized educational planning, functional curriculum, instructional strategies, sensory development, and orientation and mobility.

Parent Training

For many children with multiple disabilities, parents are the life-long voice representing their needs and rights to education. Parents and family members are powerful advocates for ensuring that their children are included in systems of education. Thus, on-going parent training and support is essential to ensure quality services throughout the education process.

Expanded Time for Education

In many systems, children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities receive part-time education due to limited resources and trained personnel. In reality, the rate of learning impacted by reduced sensory capacity is slower and requires more time on a daily, weekly and yearly basis. Education needs to not only address standard curriculum but also reduced access to incidental and environmental learning.

Perkins International Education Programs

Perkins International partners with local agencies in more than 60 countries across the globe to provide educational services to children who are blind or visually impaired with additional impairments.
How Perkins Can Help

Perkins International can contribute to the development of policies and services to benefit children who are blind or visually impaired with multiple disabilities. Specifically, Perkins can:

• Train teachers, parents, and school administrators on best practices in the education of children who are visually impaired with multiple disabilities
• Strengthen the capacity of schools and agencies to develop or expand quality educational programs
• Adapt national curriculum to meet the needs of children with visual impairment and multiple disabilities
• Empower parents to become effective advocates for their children’s education
• Support policymakers to incorporate the needs of children who are blind or visually impaired with multiple disabilities into policies and services
• Expand access to the Perkins Brailler® and assistive technology devices
• Support the development of university training programs for teachers of this population of students
• Make available, in a variety of languages, selected educational resources and literature for teachers, students, parents and the general public
• Help governments to implement policies and practices outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol

Further Information

To learn about examples of educational systems that successfully incorporate the needs of children with visual impairment and other disabilities, please visit www.perkins.org/clearinghouse. For other resources, please visit www.perkins.org/researchlibrary.

To learn more about Perkins’ services and potential ways to support educational programs in your country, please contact Sergei Sorokin, Director of Perkins International, by email at sergei.sorokin@perkins.org.
Perkins School for the Blind is committed to providing education and services that build productive, meaningful lives for children and adults around the world who are blind, deafblind or visually impaired with or without other disabilities.