Developing the Best Education for Your Child with Blindness or Visual Impairment
Vision is the primary sensory system that a child uses to learn. From formal teaching methods to informal classroom and social interaction, a child’s understanding of the world relies heavily upon visual input.

For children who are blind or visually impaired — including those with additional disabilities — learning is much more complicated. To compensate for vision loss their education must incorporate the **Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC)**.

The ECC is foundational to all other learning. It is critical for families not only to understand the components of the ECC, but also to partner with their school districts to design an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that adequately addresses these supplemental needs.

This guide serves as a brief introduction to the ECC for children and young adults who are blind or visually impaired, and outlines important issues for parents and school districts to consider in developing IEPs. It also lists valuable resources for those interested in more detail.

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Your child’s unique needs

Throughout the school year, students study science, math, language arts, history and social studies—all elements of the Core Curriculum. In a typical classroom children access this information through textbooks, whiteboards or computer screens. Because much of this information is inaccessible to a child who is blind or visually impaired, any educational program must adapt these materials into formats such as braille, audio and large print.

But adaptation of written material is only one ingredient of a comprehensive approach. Sighted children use vision not only to access information, but also to monitor their environment automatically. For instance, children watch how their teachers and fellow students interact in a classroom setting. They learn non-verbal communication and the norms of social interaction inside and outside the classroom.

This incidental learning is a critical part of development at school, at home and in the community. Children who are blind or visually impaired miss out on most of this incidental learning. If that lack of learning goes unaddressed, children who are blind may master academics but struggle with social interaction, setting themselves up to face enormous barriers to independence and success. To ensure that these children are adequately prepared to succeed as adults, parents and educators must design an appropriate educational program starting at an early age.
The Expanded Core Curriculum

The Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) is a foundational, essential curriculum that prepares students who are blind or visually impaired for success as adults. The ECC has evolved through decades of instruction by leading educators and was only recently formalized by Dr. Philip Hatlen in 1996. Today the ECC is widely accepted by public and private school educators of students who are blind or visually impaired, and continues to be the framework for innovation and educational program design.

There are nine components of the ECC:

- **Compensatory Access**: Learning how to acquire, share and process information without sight or with severely limited vision.
- **Sensory Efficiency**: Using all senses to access information and communication in an efficient manner.
- **Assistive Technology**: Leveraging technology such as screen-reading software and refreshable braille keyboards to support outgoing and incoming communication.
- **Orientation & Mobility**: Navigating independently and safely by knowing one’s position relative to other people, objects and places, and getting from place to place safely and efficiently.
- **Social Interaction**: Learning how to behave in social situations without the benefit of non-verbal cues.
- **Recreation & Leisure**: Participating in physical activity and learning how to plan for and incorporate social and leisure time in one’s schedule.
- **Independent Living**: Taking care of oneself as independently as possible, including a broad range of activities such as eating, dressing, money management and household operation.
- **Self-determination**: Learning how to advocate for one’s own needs.
- **Career Education**: Developing the skills and knowledge needed for success in employment.

Turn to page 10 for examples of the ECC skill areas according to age level.
Planning your child’s education using the ECC

Historically, students with blindness or visual impairment attended schools that specialize in blindness education, where ECC skills are embedded and taught in a natural, sequential way. When educational options evolved about 20 years ago, more students with blindness or visual impairment began attending public school – a setting where instruction, time and resources dedicated to these critical skills often compete with academic demands.

Today, the ECC is not automatically built into an educational program. Instead, parents and districts must partner to ensure the components of the ECC are incorporated into a student’s IEP.

Weighing the options

When evaluating public school, private school or continuing education courses, families today have multiple options to consider. Any one of those choices may meet all of a child’s needs. The best primary educational setting for a child may change over the course of his or her development. Successful scenarios often involve a primary source supplemented with additional courses as necessary.
The ECC as a guide

The ECC can serve as a guide for the full team of family members, educators and administrators planning the education of a student who is blind or visually impaired. The ECC provides a common understanding and vocabulary, enabling parents and educators to evaluate education alternatives. In assessing their child’s current or potential education choices, parents will want to determine where and how each of the nine elements of the ECC is being integrated into the program. If there are gaps, families may want to consider whether additional educators or alternative providers can fill them.

Young adults who may have completed a high school education but do not feel ready to transition to independent living, employment or continuing education can also use the ECC as a guide. Does the individual feel adequately prepared in each of the nine elements? If there are gaps, consider looking for courses, such as online, day or residential options, to meet those needs and ensure he or she will be as prepared as possible for a fulfilling life.

A common goal

Schools or districts that are new to teaching students with visual impairment can also use the ECC to evaluate the completeness of the education offered to these students. To ensure an effective partnership, schools and districts should share the ECC with students’ families so they are fully informed of the breadth of instruction their children need to gain access to fundamental academics.
# The ECC in action

This chart shows what a progression of ECC skill development might look like for typically developing children who are blind or visually impaired. Adaptations can be made for children with additional disabilities so they can learn in a manner that best suits their needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infant/Toddler</th>
<th>Elementary School</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compensatory Access</strong></td>
<td>Communicating wants and needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensory Efficiency</strong></td>
<td>Practicing tactile and auditory discrimination, localizing sound. For students with low vision, practicing eye tracking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assistive Technology</strong></td>
<td>Using a tablet to reach and tap to express preferences. Practicing swiping, pressing keys, buttons and switches. Using computer software to begin literacy.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation &amp; Mobility</strong></td>
<td>Learning to reach for objects and move toward a target, sound or stimulus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recreation &amp; Leisure</strong></td>
<td>Learning how to play independently, how to pretend, how to play with toys and manipulate objects. Engaging in physical play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Living</strong></td>
<td>Learning to assist in eating, dressing and toileting. Learning to put away toys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Determination</strong></td>
<td>Learning to choose activities and make decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career Education</strong></td>
<td>Learning responsibility like putting away toys. Understanding different roles people play (e.g. firefighter, teacher, parent).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicating with others using technology. Listening and comprehending recorded material. Conversational and written fluency.</td>
<td>Answering questions clearly. Articulating confusion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using low vision aids to read signs. Interpreting feedback accurately from mobility device (e.g., white cane). Listening for auditory cues when traveling.</td>
<td>Discriminating between various auditory cues to determine direction and other details. Determining proximity to and from different stimuli.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to use the Internet safely to research and access social media. Practicing using assistive technology to retrieve information and communicate.</td>
<td>Continuing to hone assistive technology skills. For braille readers: comfortable using electronic braille devices and scanners to convert print and electronic type to braille.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a white cane or other mobility device to travel familiar routes under supervision. Understanding direction and increasing sense of spacial awareness.</td>
<td>Recognizing and using landmarks when traveling. Using a white cane or other mobility device to travel safely and independently using proper technique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researching to find extra-curricular activities and community resources of interest. Playing physical games, reading for pleasure.</td>
<td>Gaining awareness of extra-curricular activities available to him/her including adapted sports. Engaging in a variety of leisure activities to fill spare time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using a watch to manage time, maintaining daily schedule and using a calendar to plan ahead. Using a wallet to organize money. Assisting with household chores.</td>
<td>Understanding budgeting and managing money. Shopping and cooking for meals. Taking responsibility for cleaning personal space. Completing household chores independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating self-control and awareness of his/her own interests, abilities and skills. Awareness of disability-related resources. Use of refusal skills.</td>
<td>Developing strong sense of identity. Becoming comfortable with accommodations. Knowing how to decline offers to help. Negotiating with others to resolve problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing social skills for work. Understanding workplace behavior and attire. Identifying areas of personal interest that could relate to a future career.</td>
<td>Participating in work/volunteer activities and developing awareness of his/her interests and abilities. Planning for transition to life after high school. Developing resume and cover letter and building interview skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About Perkins School for the Blind

Perkins School for the Blind’s goal is to prepare every student for a successful transition to tomorrow. We offer a continuum of specialized education programs – on campus and in the community – for children with blindness, visual impairment and deafblindness, including additional disabilities. Our experts partner with families, schools and districts to help students navigate the educational journey and prepare for what comes next.
Why Perkins?

**We’re vision experts.** Perkins is the first school for the blind in the U.S. and is today a national and international leader in blindness education. While the Expanded Core Curriculum was not formally defined until 1996, Perkins has been teaching these concepts since our founding in 1829. Our interdisciplinary experts in vision develop and refine best practices in our own classrooms, and these practices are used in public schools and partner organizations all around the globe.

**We offer a full range of services.** Our continuum of programs has something for every age and ability both in your child’s public school and here on our campus. We provide early intervention for infants and toddlers, and educational services for school-age children from preschool through high school. Our experts can provide as many or as few services as you need, including:

- Early intervention for babies and toddlers, as well as parent networking and support
- Expert itinerant teachers to support your child in his or her public school classroom
- Short courses to supplement learning when necessary
- Day and residential campus programs, which feature a school environment designed to incorporate the ECC into every moment of every day

**We teach the whole child.** Academics alone are not enough to prepare your child for an independent, engaged, happy future. Whether on our campus or in your public classroom, our educators balance academic learning with vocational exploration, self-advocacy, navigation, social skills and many other ECC concepts critical for independent living.

**Planning for independence must start now.** To participate in social situations and engage with his or her community, your child will need to work harder and be better prepared than his or her sighted peers. If your child pursues a job or career, he or she will compete with sighted peers who have the benefit of incidental learning.

**We focus on what happens after graduation.** While academics and grades are important, our ultimate measure of success is preparing your child with strategies for a successful, engaged, independent life as an adult.
How can we help?

To learn how Perkins School for the Blind can support your child’s education, visit Perkins.org or contact:
Christopher Underwood
Director of Admissions and Evaluations
Chris.Underwood@Perkins.org
617-972-7285

Resources

**ECC Essentials:**

**Perkins School for the Blind:**
Developing the Best Education for Your Child
Perkins.org/ECC

**Texas School for the Blind:**
What is the Expanded Core Curriculum?
tsbvi.org

**American Foundation for the Blind:**
The Expanded Core Curriculum for Blind and Visually Impaired Children and Youths
afb.org