

VI and O&M MENTOR PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Outreach Programs, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

What is a mentor?

In the field meetings that representatives of TSBVI's Outreach Program held in 1997 with all of the ESC-VI and O&M specialists, the following definition for mentoring was developed. *"Mentoring is a practical skill-oriented, helping relationship between experienced and inexperienced practitioners. It includes activities which are both planned and spontaneous. This is a separate process from university supervision, internship and/or practicum."* A mentor is a special partner in the professional growth process.

How was the statewide mentoring program developed?

The statewide mentoring program for all new VI teachers and O&M specialists in Texas was initially part of the Visually Impaired Preparation (VIP) Program, a collaborative project which links consumers, all twenty Education Service Centers (ESCs), two Texas universities (Texas Tech University and Stephen F. Austin State University), the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Texas Commission for the Blind (TCB). The overall goal was to provide more quality VI professionals (VI teachers and O&M specialists) for the visually impaired children of Texas. The VIP Program focused on recruitment, mentoring, instruction, and advocacy, and was initially funded by TEA. The mentor program along with the university professional preparation programs has continued to be funded by the Texas State Legislature.

During 1997 & 1998, the Professional Preparation Advisory Group (PPAG), composed of members from all the above-described entities as well as advocacy groups for blind and visually impaired individuals, reviewed the professional preparation options for VI professionals and proposed an action plan. Emphasis was on expanding collaboration between universities and regional Education Service Centers, developing collaborative curricula, increasing the training options, expanding recruitment strategies, and establishing a mentor program.

In January 1998, ESC-Region XI received a three-year contract from TEA as part of the decentralized process to train, support and employ 50 new O&M specialists and 100 new VI teachers in Texas. Organizing and coordinating a mentor program for all new VI teachers and O&M specialists trained in Texas was part of this initiative, and the task of establishing the mentor program was sub-contracted to TSBVI. The goal of the mentor program is that each pre-service VI teacher or O&M specialist attending any of the training options will be provided a mentor during his/her first year of training and will continue to have a mentor through the first year of employment as a VI professional or for one entire school year beyond when all training and certification requirements are completed.

What are the training options available?

Beginning in 1998-1999, the VIP Program established five training options for earning certification as a teacher of students with visual impairments and four training options were available for students seeking certification as an O&M specialist.

The four training options for O&M specialists are:

On-campus: Students travel to a college campus to attend regularly scheduled classes.

Outreach: College faculty travel to ESCs or local school districts to provide training

Professional Development School: Students and faculty traveled to TSBVI for training during three consecutive summers beginning summer 1998 through summer 2000. This option is no longer available.

TETN and Internet: Students take university-led training for all lecture classes either by attending compressed video classes (TETN) at their regional ESC, or by using a computer to connect to the internet for web-based courses. Cane travel training is conducted in person under the supervision of certified O&M specialists who meet AER criteria for instructor status.

All O&M students are required to meet the same AER/ACVREP certification requirements regardless of the training option that they choose.

The additional training option for VI teachers only is:

Alternative Certification Programs: Students receive instruction about teaching visually impaired students at a regional education service center as directed by ESC personnel. These programs have been approved by the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC).

Availability and scheduling of the training options is determined by the universities and ESCs providing them.

How important is mentoring?

Teaching students who have visual impairments is a challenging job. It requires extensive knowledge of a unique set of adaptive techniques as well as an ability to work effectively with other education professionals. Often the VI teacher and the O&M specialist are the only professionals on a visually impaired student's educational team who have knowledge about the specialized resources, equipment, and skills that are essential for the student's success.

Being a VI teacher or O&M specialist is also a challenge in personal terms. Critical personal skills such as mastering working without a campus peer group, dealing with the pressures of the intense needs of parents as well as students, and maintaining a high level of self confidence in new and uncharted educational territory are essential for success. All of these considerations make mentor support even more important for beginning VI professionals than for their fellow entry-level educators. In addition:

“Research shows that beginning teachers who have had the continuous support of a skilled mentor are much more likely to stay in the profession and much more likely to get beyond classroom arrangement concerns to focus on student learning. All beginning teachers should be assigned a skilled mentor.” (*What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future, 1996*).

VI professionals know the variety of abilities and needs manifested by blind and visually impaired students. It is impossible for universities or alternative programs to cover all of the needed adaptations necessary for each student to succeed. In addition, many future VI teachers get emergency certification prior to completion of their university training. (Emergency certification is NOT available for O&M specialists.) In light of these facts, the PPAG has agreed that mentoring is so important that it will be an integral part of every preservice VI professional's plan and will extend through the first year of employment.

Why would anyone want to be a mentor?

Mentoring offers individuals a unique opportunity for professional development and is a recognized activity for the PDAS teacher review process and for O&M re-certification.

It can provide a profound sense of satisfaction and growth.

Mentoring a new VI teacher or O&M specialist can provide an excellent contribution to the field and help to ensure the continued quality of VI professionals.

Mentoring can facilitate the formation of new bonds and connections between professionals at various levels of professional development.

Other mentors have stated that it has been an important part of their own 'professional renewal' process.

Who is qualified to be a VI and/or O&M mentor?

VI teachers are qualified to be mentors if they have the following:

commitment to serve as a VI mentor for two years

four years of experience as a VI professional

good communication skills

solid understanding of the professional field

written administrative approval and support

O&M specialists are qualified to be mentors if they meet the following criteria:

willing to serve as an O&M mentor for two years.

have a minimum of **three years** of experience as an O&M specialist. Three years must have been spent in an education setting in which the prospective mentor served a diverse (blind, low vision, multiply disabled) student population as an O&M specialist.

have current AER/A.C.V.R.E.P. Division IX O&M certification.

completed the O&M Mentor application process

willing to serve as an O&M mentor for two years

Personal qualifications for both VI and O&M mentors may include:

has high standards for self and others,

is confident, secure, and current in professional knowledge,

shows interest in professional development

has ability to help others without 'smothering' or 'taking charge.'

Mentors are not superhuman. *They are not expected to be experts in all areas.* But they should be good teachers. Mentoring is a learning, as well as a teaching process.

What is the process for becoming a mentor?

Mentors may be self-nominated or nominated by either their school district or the VI staff of their local ESC. **All applicants** must complete and submit the following documentation:

- an application for VI/O&M mentorship.
- a completed recommendation form from someone with whom they have had a consulting relationship (regular education teacher, special education teacher, related service personnel, parent, O&M specialist, etc.).
- a completed Supervisor Recommendation form **and** a letter of permission and support from their immediate supervisor. (If self-employed, this requirement is waived.)

Applicants to become **VI mentors** need this additional documentation:

- a letter of support from the ESC-VI consultant in their Region (unless they are an ESC-VI consultant).

Applicants to become **O&M mentors** need these additional documents:

- ♦ a brief resume outlining past professional experience
- ♦ an additional recommendation from **one** of the following
 - an ESC-VI or O&M specialist in their region.
 - a professional co-worker (regular or special educator).
 - another O&M specialist.
 - a VI teacher.

Blank applications and supporting documentation are available at <http://www.tsbvi.edu/pds/mentors.htm>, on the TSBVI website.

Note: On the recommendation forms, we request that applicants sign a statement allowing the recommendations to remain confidential.

**** A NOTE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT FOR MENTORS****

Potential mentors may not have a clear picture of the administrative support available to them or may not have such support but would like to be a mentor. TSBVI is committed to helping this process be a success. The Mentor Coordinator will be glad to talk with district administrators, either in groups or singly, to explain the mentor program and answer questions.

How will mentors be selected?

1. All application materials are to be forwarded to the Mentor Coordinator.
2. Application materials are reviewed by the Mentor Selection Committee once all documentation for an applicant has been received.

This committee is composed of one representative from each of the ESC Clusters, a university professor in the field of VI/O&M and the Mentor Coordinator (who is not a voting member).

Members of the committee abstain on their own applications.

The committee members vote by secret ballots.

What will a VI/O&M mentor do?

Activities:

Two checklists are used to guide the mentor/protégé relationship: one for VI mentor/protégé teams and one for O&M mentor/protégé teams. The checklists suggest mentoring activities related to the expanded core curriculum and/or the courses taken for certification. Both lists

were compiled and prioritized by master VI teachers and O&M specialists. *Early on in the mentoring process, the mentor-protégé team should review these activities and prioritize them according to the needs and desires of the protégé.*

While the lists may seem long, remember that students in all training options will have a mentor for a minimum of two years. Activities can be completed during the protégé's training and during the first year of employment as a VI professional once the training program is complete. Additionally, many of the activities are short projects and may be completed with a phone conversation. It is not expected nor required that all the activities be completed.

The Activities Checklist is disseminated to each mentor-protégé team when they receive a letter confirming their team assignment. It is a tool for the mentor/protégé team to use when planning content for team interactions. **While the activities are not graded or evaluated, we ask that the dates of completion be recorded on the Activities Checklist.** At the end of the formal mentoring relationship, the checklist is to be turned in to the mentor coordinator. It is the responsibility of the protégé to maintain this record. Both the protégé and the mentor need to sign it before it is turned in to the mentor coordinator. These checklists will then be used by the mentor coordinator to compile a report about the overall success of the mentoring program. They are not used to evaluate individual teams, but will be looked at to get a global view of what is being worked on by the mentor/protégé teams.

******Mentors will not be asked to provide grades or evaluations. Mentoring provides a supportive relationship to the protégé, not an evaluative one.******

What time commitment is involved in being a mentor?

Length of the Program:

In general, mentors will be teamed with their protégés throughout the training period and for the protégé's first year of employment in a school district as a VI professional beyond the date when the training is complete. The actual length of time will vary depending on the training model. Mentors are asked to make a two-year commitment to their protégé and will be given the opportunity to continue as a mentor if the protégé's training takes longer than two years. Hopefully, this will provide the mentor and the protégé with an opportunity to develop a relationship that will become a professional resource for both of them. Of course, adjustments will be made if conditions change for either mentor or protégé.

Time and Contact Requirements:

For each mentor-protégé team, the specific time will vary and will be tailored for the needs of the team members. Mentors can expect their duties to take from ten minutes to two hours per week, depending on the needs of the protégé. With a protégé who has an excellent background in education, the mentor should anticipate the following **minimum** contacts:

- One introductory face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the relationship.
- A minimum of one informal observation of the protégé doing a lesson during the induction year.
- One additional face-to-face meeting (e.g., at a conference), and
- A minimum of two required routine contacts per month.

Either mentor or protégé may initiate contacts. Whenever possible, a regular schedule of contacts should be established by the team members. It is the responsibility of the protégé to document all contacts on the Activities Checklist.

Interaction Formats:

Contact does not always need to be in person. The mentor and the protégé may choose to interact through a variety of different methods including (but not limited to):

- personal, face-to-face meetings.
- telephone conversations or conference calls.
- videotaped demonstrations or observations.
- interactive television.
- e-mail.
- sending each other products (articles, materials, kits, books, etc.)
- “shadowing” of the mentor by the protégé.

.During the first year of working as a VI professional, the mentor should expect to spend two days (one each semester) with the protégé in his/her school district. Additionally, it is recommended that the protégé spend at least two days observing the mentor in his/her school district and participating in such activities as performing a functional vision exam or orientation and mobility evaluation. Whenever possible, it is recommended that the extended sessions occur when either the protégé or mentor has a professional development day as districts often do not have VI-related workshops available for VI teachers and O&M specialists. Since mentoring is a recognized activity for the PDAS teacher review process, the time spent mentoring can provide for professional growth and meet criteria for the PDAS system. Mentoring is also recognized by A.C.V.R.E.P. as an activity that can be used towards O&M re-certification.

Impact of Emergency Certification:

It is possible for VI protégés to get emergency certified and hired as VI teachers after taking only two courses. Emergency certification is NOT available for O&M specialists. For VI protégés, those protégés who are emergency certified and functioning as VI teachers will likely need frequent support from their mentors for at least the first semester. Non-emergency certified protégés (some VI protégés and all O&M protégés) may need less contact with their mentors during their preservice training but will need increased contact during their first year of employment as a VI teacher or O&M specialist.

How many mentors are needed?

Each student seeking certification as either a teacher of the visually impaired or O&M specialist will need a mentor. In some regions of Texas, VI children receive only minimal service because there is not an adequate number of VI-certified personnel available. The VIP Program was created to assure quality service for all VI children in Texas regardless of where they live.

Because of the size of our state and the shortage of VI personnel, it is not always possible to match a protégé with a mentor who works nearby. To deal with this problem, the Mentor Program has hired two O&M specialists and two VI teachers as statewide mentors. The statewide mentors are very experienced VI professionals who work on a contractual basis for school districts, either because they are semi-retired or choose to be self-employed. Therefore, they are free to travel around the state to support protégés in outlying areas that have few, if any, other VI professionals who qualify as mentors.

Can someone mentor more than one protégé?

If mentoring is a part of someone's job description, it is certainly possible. This is more likely to be true for ESC consultants or persons who are retired or work part-time. However, it is less likely that district staff will be able to mentor more than one protégé. Since district administrative support is an essential prerequisite to become a mentor, we do not expect administrators to allow their employees extensive time away from their own caseloads.

How will mentors be supported?

Training:

Each mentor will be required to attend one two-day training session. The first day is devoted to the general principles of mentoring. The second day, the participants learn more about the unique mentoring role for VI teachers and itinerant personnel. The mentor program will pay for all expenses for the mentors to participate in the training.

Topics for the training sessions will include the following:

- The Mentor Program and how it works,
- Sound practices and strategies in mentoring, and
- Best practices in working as a teacher and/or as an orientation and mobility specialist for students with visual impairments

Training sessions are conducted yearly, and are usually held in January or February. Please call Ruth Ann Marsh, the Mentor Coordinator, if you are interested in attending.

In addition, mentors are often brought together during conferences (e.g., TX Focus, TAER, etc.) each year for networking and support sessions when they are provided with additional training in areas of perceived need. To promote contact between mentors, they are regularly provided with updated lists of both VI and O&M mentors.

Financial Support:

Each VI mentor will be paid \$300 per year as a stipend, payable at the end of the academic year in July. Partial payments are prorated based on trimesters.

An additional \$120.00 will be distributed to each mentor yearly to help with costs of maintaining protégé/mentor contacts such as telephoning, mileage (for distances less than 100 miles), e-mail accounts, postage, etc. Partial payments are prorated based on trimesters.

Prior to the protégé's employment as a VI professional, the mentor program will provide financial support for the protégé to visit the mentor's employment site to engage in observations and guided teaching experiences.

To continue to facilitate face-to-face contact, once the protégé is employed as a VI teacher or O&M specialist, the mentor program will provide reimbursement of travel expenses for either the mentor or protégé if there is a significant distance (100 or more miles) between the mentor and protégé's locations. If an overnight stay is required, lodging expenses will also be paid (upon submission of receipts) at the state rate.

If the VI mentor or protégé is employed in a self-contained setting, the mentor program will pay for a substitute VI teacher for two days a year to allow the team to meet, when appropriate and available.

Materials:

Materials are provided to support VI and O&M mentors through two avenues. The mentor program has helped to provide a set of books, videotapes, articles, etc., which are available at each education service center. In addition, the mentor program participated in the creation of the Resources for the Expanded Core Curriculum (RECC) which is an extensive collection of pertinent materials listed on the TSBVI website at: <http://www.tsbvi.edu/recc/index.htm>

Mentor Centers

Three times a year the protégés and their mentors are invited to attend a Mentor Center at TSBVI. Each Mentor Center begins on a Sunday afternoon when participants sign up for observations and tour the TSBVI campus. On Monday and Tuesday, participants observe the TSBVI teachers and O&M specialists as they work with a variety of visually impaired students. Participants also have the opportunity to shadow Austin ISD VI professionals as they serve children using the itinerant model. All expenses including travel, lodging and meals are paid for by the mentor program. Protégés are encouraged to attend at least one Mentor Center and are welcome to come again. Many protégés have told us that coming to a Mentor Center early in their training helped them get a better grasp of the role expected of them as a VI teacher and/or O&M specialist. And attending a second Mentor Center once they had finished their coursework and had their first job helped them obtain ideas about how to better serve specific students back in their own districts.

How will TSBVI Outreach be involved in this process?

Ruth Ann Marsh, the Mentor Coordinator, facilitates and supports the mentor-protégé teams and provides information about the mentor program to their respective school districts and/or ESCs. She oversees the training of mentors and the matching of proteges and mentors with input from district and ESC personnel. She is available for phone or face-to-face conversations with administrators in order to supply information and respond to individual needs for support.

Cyral Miller, Outreach Director, is also available to provide information or answer questions (512-206-9242).

Other TSBVI Outreach staff will be available as needed. For instance, Jim Durkel, Statewide Staff Development Coordinator, canvasses the mentors to determine if they would like additional training on any specific areas of being a VI teacher or O&M specialist so they can better serve both their students and their proteges. KC Dignan, as Statewide Coordinator of Professional Preparation, answers questions on the five training models for prospective VI professionals. The Outreach VI and Deafblind Consultants are available for training and support.

Who should you contact first?

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