Expanded Core Curriculum for Visual Impairment: The Nine Areas and How to Implement Them

Ask a teacher what a student with visual impairment needs and you'll usually hear about accessible materials. Larger print, a screen reader, more time on tests.

That's the visible half. The other half is everything the student isn't picking up by watching, and it's the half that determines whether they can live independently at 22.

The expanded core curriculum (ECC) is the set of nine skill areas that students with visual impairment need taught directly, because sighted classmates absorb them incidentally. It supplements the general education curriculum. It never replaces it.

This page covers what each of the nine areas contains, how schools actually deliver ECC instruction, where implementation breaks down, and what to do when your student isn't getting it.

Why the ECC Exists
A sighted four-year-old learns an enormous amount without anyone teaching it. How far apart people stand when they talk. That milk comes from a fridge in a store, not from nowhere. What a parent's face does when they're annoyed. How someone crosses a street — where they look, when they step.

None of this is on a lesson plan. It's absorbed by watching, constantly, from birth.

A child with significant visual impairment misses a great deal of it. This isn't a cognitive difference or a developmental delay. The information was simply delivered through a channel they can't fully access.

(You may see a claim that "80% of learning is visual." It's worth knowing that figure has no research behind it; it traces back to a 1996 trade book and has never been substantiated. The case for the ECC doesn't need it. The observable gap is enough.)

So the skills have to be taught on purpose. That's the whole idea behind the ECC: it makes explicit what would otherwise be invisible curriculum.

IDEA supports this in two places. An IEP must contain measurable annual goals designed to "meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum" and to "meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability" (34 CFR 300.320(a)(2)(i)(A) and (B)).

That second clause is the one to remember. "Other educational needs" is precisely where independent living, orientation and mobility, self-determination, and the rest of the ECC live — needs that are educational, that result from the disability, and that sit outside the general curriculum.

The Nine ECC Areas

1. Compensatory Access Skills
The skills that make the academic curriculum reachable at all: braille reading and writing, listening and auditory comprehension, tactile graphics interpretation, note-taking systems, organizational strategies, and concept development.

Concept development matters more than people expect. A student who has never seen a mountain, a skyscraper, or a crowd needs those concepts built deliberately rather than assumed.

2. Orientation and Mobility
Orientation is knowing where you are and where you're going. Mobility is moving through space safely. Together they cover body and spatial awareness, indoor route learning, cane technique, street crossings, and eventually public transit and unfamiliar community travel.

O&M is a related service under IDEA and is delivered by a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS), not by the TVI.

3. Social Interaction Skills
A large share of human communication is visual: facial expression, posture, gesture, gaze. A student who can't see those cues needs them described, explained, and practiced.

Goals here cover conversational turn-taking, orienting toward a speaker, personal space, reading tone as a substitute for facial cues, and self-advocacy in social settings.

4. Independent Living Skills
Personal care, cooking, cleaning, laundry, money identification and handling, clothing organization, time management.

These start in elementary school. Waiting until transition planning at 16 is the single most common sequencing error in ECC implementation. By then there isn't enough time.

5. Recreation and Leisure
Adapted sports, fitness, hobbies, games, community activities. This area gets cut first when schedules tighten, and it shouldn't be. Students who never learn to enjoy leisure independently tend to become isolated adults.

6. Career Education
Career awareness in elementary, exploration in middle school, job sampling and workplace accommodation vocabulary in high school. The goal is a graduate who can name what they need at work and ask for it.

7. Assistive Technology
Screen reading software, magnification software, refreshable braille displays, electronic magnifiers, and general digital literacy.

The distinction that matters: providing a device is not instruction. A braille display handed to a student without structured training gets abandoned within a term.

8. Sensory Efficiency
Using remaining vision, hearing, and touch as effectively as possible. Scanning patterns, eccentric viewing, efficient use of optical and electronic devices, tactile discrimination, and auditory localization.

This area applies to students with partial vision as much as to students who are totally blind.

9. Self-Determination
Decision-making, goal-setting, understanding one's own eye condition and its functional implications, and knowing one's rights.

A student who can walk into a college disability services office and clearly describe their condition and required accommodations was taught that. It doesn't happen on its own.

How Schools Actually Deliver ECC Instruction
Three service models, usually in combination:

Direct instruction. The TVI or COMS works with the student one-on-one, either pulled out or pushed into a class. This is where braille, cane skills, and assistive technology proficiency get built.

Consultation. The specialist advises classroom teachers on adaptations, materials, and environmental changes without working directly with the student that period.

Embedded practice. ECC skills are practiced inside existing routines: money handling at lunch, orientation during passing periods, self-advocacy at parent conferences.

Emphasis shifts with age. Early elementary weights sensory efficiency, concept development, and social skills. Middle school shifts toward assistive technology and independent travel. High school weights career education, self-determination, and independent living.

Where ECC Implementation Breaks Down

TVI caseloads are too large. A specialist covering multiple districts across a wide geography has limited time per student, and ECC instruction is what gets squeezed when scheduling conflicts arise.

Academics crowd it out. When a student is behind in reading, ECC time is the first thing repurposed for remediation. Understandable, and usually a mistake — the ECC skills don't get made up later.

Service time gets displaced. Standardized testing weeks, assemblies, and field trips routinely consume TVI sessions. Nobody makes them up.

ECC skills are hard to assess with standard tools. There's no state test for cane technique or self-advocacy, so progress is easier to let slide.

Families don't know it exists. Parents who've never heard the phrase "expanded core curriculum" can't ask for it. This is the most fixable of the five.

If you're a parent: ask at the next IEP meeting which ECC areas were assessed, which have goals, and how many minutes per week are allocated to each. Ask for the answers in the IEP document, not in conversation. A specific, documented request is much harder to leave unaddressed than a general concern.

When the ECC Isn't the Right Frame

The ECC is a strong framework, and it isn't universal.

For students with CVI, standard ECC assumptions need real adaptation. Cortical visual impairment is brain-based. Sensory efficiency strategies built around optical devices and conventional visual training often don't transfer, and CVI-specific approaches fit better.

For students with significant additional disabilities, all nine areas at once is unrealistic. Prioritizing two or three areas that most affect daily functioning beats spreading thin across nine.

If your student is doing well academically and socially with straightforward accommodations, a full ECC push may be more than they need right now. Consideration should still be documented annually, but consideration and formal goals aren't the same thing.

The honest version most people won't say out loud: **a school can technically comply with ECC consideration by checking a box in an IEP meeting and never delivering an hour of instruction.** Consideration is a documentation requirement. Instruction is a service. Ask which one your student is actually receiving.

Getting ECC Support for Your Student
Of the nine areas, assistive technology is the one where the gap between "device provided" and "student proficient" is widest, and it's the area where outside expertise most often closes it.

New England Low Vision and Blindness provides assistive technology assessment, device matching, and structured training for students, families, and school teams across New England. We work alongside your TVI rather than replacing them, and our recommendations are written so they can go straight into IEP goals.

Schedule No-Obligation Consultation to review which assistive technology fits your student and how to build it into their ECC instruction.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the expanded core curriculum required by law?
The phrase "expanded core curriculum" does not appear in IDEA, but the underlying obligation does: IEPs must include goals meeting "each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability" (34 CFR 300.320(a)(2)(i)(B)). Some states go further and name the ECC directly: Texas Education Code § 30.002 requires evaluation and instruction in the expanded core curriculum for students with visual impairments, and even addresses scheduling ECC instruction outside regular school hours where needed. So a team can be required to provide the instruction whether or not the specific term appears in your state's rules.

Who teaches the expanded core curriculum?
Mostly the teacher of students with visual impairments, with orientation and mobility delivered by a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist. Classroom teachers, families, and related service providers reinforce ECC skills, but the specialized instruction comes from certified vision professionals.

Does ECC instruction replace regular classes?

No. The ECC supplements the general education curriculum. Students still take math, science, and English. ECC instruction is scheduled around those classes through pull-out sessions, push-in support, or embedded practice during existing routines.

Related Articles

- IEP Goals for Students with Visual Impairment: SMART Framework and Goal Bank
- Assistive Technology for Students with Low Vision: Teacher's Guide
- Assistive Technology Support for Special Education Directors

About This Document

This white paper was created by New England Low Vision and Blindness. Portions of the content were generated using AI technology and reviewed for accuracy. However, the information is provided "as is" and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice or a comprehensive assessment.

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