What Does a Teacher of the Visually Impaired Do? A Guide for Families and School Teams

If your child was just identified as having a visual impairment, someone has probably mentioned that a “TVI” will be involved. If you’re a classroom teacher, you may have been told a TVI is coming to consult about a student in your room this year.

Either way, the title doesn’t explain much.

A teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) is a state-certified educator who specializes in how vision loss affects learning. They assess how a student actually uses their vision, determine whether that student should read print or braille, teach the disability-specific skills no general education teacher is trained to teach, and adapt the curriculum so it’s reachable.

Here’s what that looks like in practice, how to work with one well, and what your options are if your school doesn’t have one.

What a TVI Actually Does

Runs the two foundational assessments. The Functional Vision Assessment documents how a student uses vision in real environments: a bright cafeteria, the whiteboard, a worksheet, a busy hallway — as opposed to acuity measured in a darkened exam room. The Learning Media Assessment determines the student’s primary and secondary reading media: print, large print, braille, audio, or a combination.

Nearly every accommodation and goal on the IEP traces back to those two documents.

Teaches disability-specific skills directly. Braille reading and writing. Listening and note-taking strategies. Tactile graphics. Assistive technology proficiency. Efficient use of remaining vision. These come from the expanded core curriculum, and a general education teacher isn’t trained to deliver them.

Adapts materials. Converting print to braille or large print, producing tactile graphics, remediating inaccessible digital files, and making sure a worksheet handed out Tuesday is usable Tuesday rather than the following week.

Trains the adults. Showing classroom teachers what a given accommodation actually requires, what the student can and can’t see, and which habits help or hurt.

Writes and monitors VI-specific IEP goals. The TVI drafts the goals that address vision-related needs and tracks progress data against them through the year.

Consults on the environment. Seating, lighting, glare control, board contrast, hallway obstacles, and where materials live in the room.

What Qualifies Someone as a TVI

TVIs hold **state certification or licensure** in visual impairment, typically earned through a university personnel preparation program. Requirements vary by state, but generally include a teaching license plus specialized coursework in braille, anatomy of the eye, assistive

technology, and methods for teaching students with visual impairments, followed by a supervised practicum.

One point that gets muddled constantly: **there is no ACVREP "TVI" certification.** ACVREP, the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals, certifies related but distinct specialists, including Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMS), Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (CVRT), Certified Low Vision Therapists (CLVT), and Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialists (CATIS). TVI status comes from the state, not ACVREP.

This matters when you're evaluating whether the person assigned to your student is actually qualified. Ask which state credential they hold.

How TVI Services Are Delivered

Direct service means the TVI works with the student: pulled out for braille or assistive technology instruction, or pushed into a class to support a specific activity. This time should be protected. It routinely gets displaced by testing weeks, assemblies, and field trips, and it's rarely made up.

Consultation means the TVI advises the team without direct student instruction that period: adapting an upcoming unit, recommending a change to the room, troubleshooting a device.

Assessment is ongoing: updating the FVA and LMA, evaluating assistive technology needs as the curriculum gets harder, and collecting progress data.
The mix should be driven by assessment, not by staffing convenience. A student who needs braille instruction needs direct service, and a consultation-only model won't produce a braille reader.

Working Well With Your TVI

Share materials in advance. A TVI can't braille a worksheet you hand them at 8:55 for a 9:00 class. A week's notice changes what's possible. This is the single highest-impact thing a classroom teacher can do.

Ask basic questions. No question about visual impairment is too elementary. TVIs would far rather answer "can he see the board or not?" than watch a student sit through a month of inaccessible instruction.

Implement between visits. The TVI might be in your building one day a week. The accommodations have to hold the other four. Consistency between visits matters more than anything that happens during them.

Include them in planning. A TVI who learns about the science unit after it starts is doing damage control. One who sees the plan in advance can prepare materials properly.

Respect the schedule. Many TVIs serve students across multiple buildings or districts, with significant drive time between them. A cancelled session isn't a small thing.

If Your School Doesn't Have a TVI

The shortage is real, and rural districts feel it worst. Certified vision professionals, including TVIs, orientation and mobility specialists, and vision rehabilitation therapists, are in short supply across the country, and a single TVI covering several districts is common rather than exceptional.

Your student is still entitled to the service. If evaluation shows a need for specialized vision instruction, the district must provide it. "We don't have a TVI" describes a staffing problem, not a legal exemption.

Request evaluation in writing. A dated written request to the special education director starts the timeline. Verbal requests at a meeting often don't.

Ask how the district plans to provide it. Common answers include contracting with a regional collaborative, an educational service agency, a nearby district, or a private provider. Teletherapy is increasingly used for consultation, though it works poorly for early braille and hands-on assistive technology instruction.

Push for interim accommodations now. While the district sorts out staffing, the student still needs enlarged materials, preferential seating, extended time, and accessible digital formats.

When a TVI Isn't Who You Need

If the concern is safe, independent travel, you need a COMS. Cane technique, route learning, and street crossings are orientation and mobility, a separate related service with a separately certified provider. A TVI can flag the need but shouldn't be teaching cane skills.

If your child is an adult who lost vision after school age, this whole framework doesn't apply. TVIs serve students under IDEA. Adults work with vision rehabilitation therapists and low vision therapists through a different system.

If your student has a visual processing difference rather than an eye condition, a TVI may not be the right evaluator. Some processing difficulties are better addressed by a school psychologist or neuropsychologist.

Here's something you won't hear from a district: **a TVI on the IEP does not mean adequate service.** A student can have a certified TVI listed and receive twenty minutes a week of consultation — technically compliant, functionally inadequate for a student learning braille. Look at the service minutes, not the credential.

Getting Vision Expertise When Your Team Needs It

Even schools with an excellent TVI often need outside help on assistive technology. The field moves quickly, and a TVI covering forty students across six buildings can't stay current on every device and stay proficient enough to train it.

New England Low Vision and Blindness provides assistive technology assessment, device matching, and training for students, families, and school teams throughout New England. We

work alongside your TVI, not in place of them, and our reports are written to drop directly into IEP goals. Districts without a TVI on staff can also access our support for special education directors.

Schedule No-Obligation Consultation to talk through your student's assistive technology needs and what support your team is missing.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between a TVI and an O&M specialist?
A TVI teaches academic access and disability-specific learning skills: braille, assistive technology, sensory efficiency, adapted materials. A Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist teaches safe independent travel, including cane technique and street crossings. They are separate credentials, and many students need both.

How often should a student see a TVI?
Service frequency should come directly from the evaluation. A student learning braille may need daily direct instruction. A high schooler who is a fluent braille reader with established technology skills may need monthly consultation. The service minutes belong in the IEP and should come from assessment data, not from the TVI's available schedule.

Can a student get TVI services with a 504 plan instead of an IEP?
Usually not in the same form. A 504 plan provides accommodations, while specialized instruction from a TVI is typically special education under IDEA and requires an IEP. A student with mild visual impairment needing only accommodations may be served under 504, but direct braille or assistive technology instruction generally requires IEP eligibility.

Related Articles

- IEP Goals for Students with Visual Impairment: SMART Framework and Goal Bank
- Expanded Core Curriculum for Visual Impairment
- Assistive Technology for Students with Low Vision: Teacher's Guide

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.

About New England Low Vision and Blindness

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