Chapter 14 - Visual Impairment

Definition under IDEA of Visual Impairment

Visual impairment including blindness means:
*an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a student's educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness*

Overview of Visual Impairment

The terms partially sighted, low vision, legally blind, and totally blind are used in the educational context to describe students with visual impairments. In terms of educational definitions, each is defined as the following:
"Partially sighted" indicates some type of visual problem has resulted in a need for special education (NICHCY).

"Low vision" generally refers to a severe visual impairment, not necessarily limited to distance vision. It indicates that some functional vision exists to be used for gaining information through written means with or without the assistance of optical, nonoptical, or electronic devices (Kirk, Gallagher, & Anastasiow). Low vision applies to all individuals with sight who are unable to read the newspaper at a normal viewing distance, even with the aid of eyeglasses or contact lenses. They use a combination of vision and other senses to learn, although they may require adaptations in lighting or the size of print, and, sometimes, Braille.

"Legal blindness" is defined as visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the person’s eye after correction, resulting in some confusion (NICHCY).
“Blindness” implies that a student must learn and use Braille a system of raised dots that the student reads tactilely), aural methods in order to receive instruction, or other non-visual media (Heward; NICHCY). It refers to a person with “no vision or only light perception” (the ability to determine the presence or absence of light (Huebner)

Prevalence of Visual Impairment

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Visual Impairments represents less than 1.0 percent of all students having a classification in special education. However, this percentage is not representative of the total number of students with visual impairments. This is due to the fact that students with visual impairments will often have other disabilities, as well, thereby being reported in another IDEA disability category (Mason et al.).
Characteristics of Students with Visual Impairments

The effect of visual problems on a student's development depends on the severity, type of loss, age at which the condition appears, and overall functioning level of the student. Many students who have multiple disabilities may also have visual impairments resulting in motor, cognitive, and/or social developmental delays.

A young student with visual impairments has little reason to explore interesting objects in the environment and, thus, may miss opportunities to have experiences and to learn. This lack of exploration may continue until learning becomes motivating or until intervention begins.

Because the student cannot see parent/guardians or peers, he or she may be unable to imitate social behavior or understand nonverbal cues. Visual handicaps can create obstacles to a growing student's independence (NICHCY)

Procedures and Assessment Measures used to diagnose Visual Impairments

Evaluation for a visual impairment should include the following:

1) evaluation by trained medical professional such as an ophthalmologist or optometrist, which documents the eye condition with the best possible correction;

2) a written functional vision and media assessment, completed or compiled by a licensed teacher of students with Visual Impairments, which includes:

- observation of visual behaviors at school, home, or other environments
- educational implications of eye condition based upon information received from eye report
- assessment and/or screening of expanded core curriculum skills (orientation and mobility, social interaction, visual efficiency, independent living, recreation and leisure, career education, assistive technology, and compensatory skills) as well as an evaluation of the student’s reading and writing skills, needs, appropriate reading and writing media, and current and future needs for Braille
- school history and levels of educational performance
- documentation and assessment of how Visual Impairment adversely affects educational performance in the classroom or learning environment.

Besides these assessment measures, the following should be considered:

If a student is suspected of having a visual impairment under the definition set forth in IDEA, the following assessment measures should also be considered:

- An observation by a team member other than the student’s general education teacher of the student’s academic performance in a general classroom setting; or in the case of a
student less than school age or out of school, an observation by a team member conducted in an age-appropriate environment;

- A developmental history, if needed
- An assessment of intellectual ability
- Other assessments of the characteristics of speech and language impairments if the student exhibits impairments in any one or more of the following areas: cognition, fine motor, perceptual motor, communication, social or emotional, and perception or memory. These assessments shall be completed by specialists knowledgeable in the specific characteristics being assessed
- A review of cumulative records, previous individualized education programs or individualized family service plans and teacher collected work samples
- If deemed necessary, a medical statement or health assessment statement indicating whether there are any physical factors that may be affecting the student’s educational performance
- Assessments to determine the impact of the suspected disability:

  On the student’s educational performance when the student is at the age of eligibility for kindergarten through age 21
  On the student’s developmental progress when the student is age three through the age of eligibility for kindergarten

- Additional evaluations or assessments necessary to identify the student’s educational needs.

### Eligibility for a Diagnosis of a Visual Impairment

In order to make a final determination whether a student meets the criteria as a student with a visual impairment, the following steps should be taken:

1. The team should review all existing information, including information from the parent/guardian(s), the student’s cumulative records, and any previous individualized education programs or individualized family service plans. Evaluation documentation includes relevant information from these sources used in the eligibility determination.

2. The team should review all of the assessments done by the Multidisciplinary Team to determine the impact of the disability

3. The team should then determine whether any additional assessments are necessary to identify the student’s educational needs, including a functional assessment of the student’s residual visual acuity or field of vision

4. Upon successful completion of the above, the team must then show that the student meets one the following criteria:

   The student’s residual acuity is 20/70 or less in the better eye with correction; or
The student’s visual field is restricted to 20 degrees or less in the better eye; or

The student has an eye pathology or a progressive eye disease which is expected to reduce either residual acuity or visual field to either an acuity level of 20/70 in the better eye or a visual field of 20 degrees or less in the better eye; or

The assessment results of a licensed ophthalmologist or optometrist are inconclusive, or the student demonstrates inadequate use of residual vision.

5. The team has must also determine that the student’s disability has an adverse impact on the student’s educational performance when the student is at the age of eligibility for kindergarten through age 21, or has an adverse impact on the student’s developmental progress when the student is age three through kindergarten; and

6. The team has must also determine that the student needs special education services.

7. The team must show that it has considered the student’s special education eligibility, and determined that the eligibility is not due to:

   a. a lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development; reading fluency/oral reading skills; and reading comprehension strategies);
   b. a lack of instruction in math; and is not due to limited English proficiency.

8. The team agrees that this student qualifies for special education.

Final Thoughts

In schools, students with visual impairments can often be easily identified if their visual loss is severe. However, many students have milder losses that are much more difficult to identify and may go several years without being recognized (Smith, Polloway, Patton, and Dowdy). Students with visual impairments can be grouped by their age of onset. Individuals who are born with visual impairments at birth or during infancy are considered to have congenital visual impairments, while those with visual impairments after the age of 2 years old are considered to adventitious visual impairments (Huebner).

Most students with visual impairments are able to use vision for some activities. Families and professionals could encourage use of vision for activities where it is more efficient or can provide information. Use of vision in general activities can be determined by administration of a functional vision evaluation, an observational assessment completed by a certified teacher of visually impaired students. This assessment should include recommendations for adaptations, services, and instructional skills that will help the student learn to use vision appropriately (Erin).