

2017



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2017 SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONALS IN VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN TEXAS

A review of education professionals who work with Texas students with visual impairments, including a description of selected characteristics, projections of attrition, and projected future needs.



2017 Executive Summary of Need for VI Professionals

Since 1996, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has conducted an annual survey of the Visual Impairment (VI) consultants at the Education Service Centers, university VI programs, and TSBVI to assess the characteristics of and need for VI professionals in Texas. “VI professionals” includes certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMS). The most striking findings of the September 2017 survey include:

- In 2017, the **total number of VI professionals**, including leadership positions, **decreased** from 952 to 934 individuals. The most significant drop was seen in the number of part-time TVIs. This continues a decline noted since 2014 in the total number of TVIs overall. The data also include a drop in the number of COMS for a second year in a row.
 - The number of part-time TVIs providing direct service fell by 14, from 158 to 144.
 - Full-time TVIs grew by 8 individuals, from 529 to 537.
 - COMS providing direct service dropped by 5 individuals to 265.
 - Dually certified service providers are up from 58 to 66 in 2017.
- Reports of **increased caseloads** continue.
 - For the eighth year in a row, the majority of the 20 regional VI consultants reported increasing caseloads for TVIs.
 - Eleven education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs
 - Nine ESCs saw an increase in caseloads for COMS
- **Attrition in the previous year increased** from 29 to 41 individuals.
 - After falling significantly in 2016, attrition climbed once again to a total closer to the 10-year average of 39 individuals.
- Expanding **cultural diversity** of VI professionals remains a challenge.
 - The number of VI professionals who are Asian decreased by 50 percent.
 - Although the number of VI professionals who are African-American increased from 36 to 45, a large majority of VI professionals in Texas are Caucasian, while the student population grows more diverse.
 - The number of VI professionals who are fluent in Spanish increased this year by 29%.
- Texas universities continue to see **above average totals** in student enrollment and in the number of graduates completing training programs.
 - There are a total of 168 future VI professionals in a program leading to certification as either a TVI or COMS. One hundred-six are working toward their TVI certification and 62 are enrolled in an orientation and mobility program.
 - Seventy-seven individuals received a TVI or O&M certification. Forty-two TVIs and 35

COMS entered the VI field in 2017.

- Seventy-nine percent of students enrolled are receiving financial support through Texas stipends for their training.
- If tuition continues to rise, existing funding will provide less support to students than in previous years. This will create an even greater challenge in meeting the need for an adequate number of VI professionals.
- **The number of students with visual impairments continues to grow.** In 2017, the number of students reported to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* increased by 174 students, or approximately 1.75%, bringing the total number of students to 10,074.

Contents

2017 Executive Summary of Need for VI Professionals	1
Introduction.....	4
Characteristics of VI Professionals in Texas.....	4
Number of VI professionals in Texas	4
Part-time service providers	9
Contract service providers	9
Dually certified VI professionals.....	9
Direct services provided by ESCs.....	10
Overall perceptions of caseloads	11
Cultural diversity	12
VI professionals who have a visual impairment	13
Growth in Population of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals ...	13
Attrition	15
Attrition factors.....	15
Projected 3-year attrition.....	16
Projected vs. actual attrition	17
Anticipated Need	18
Posted positions.....	18
Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals	19
Discussion of projected need and teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs)	21
Discussion of projected need and O&M specialists	22
Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals.....	23
Summary	26
Appendix.....	29
Methodology	29
References	31

Introduction

Since 1996, the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired has conducted an annual survey to assess supply and demand for VI professionals in Texas. The term “VI professionals” includes certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) and certified orientation and mobility (O&M) specialists (or COMSs). This report provides information about the results of the survey conducted in September 2017.

Data were collected from the 20 regional education service centers (ESCs), the two Texas university personnel preparation programs that prepare VI professionals, and the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). TSBVI serves as a statewide resource, with a concentration of students and VI professionals. As a result, TSBVI data were collected separately from that of the ESCs. Unless otherwise noted, TSBVI data are included in the data presented in this report. Data from TSBVI include information about TSBVI professionals who provide direct services via the Comprehensive Program and who provide statewide training, short-term services, and leadership via the Short-Term Programs and Outreach Programs. (Note: More information about how data were collected is included in the Appendix.)

Characteristics of VI Professionals in Texas

The survey asked about the number of people *functioning* as VI professionals. Although many professionals may hold certification as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) or as an orientation and mobility specialist (COMS or O&M specialist), this report summarizes data on those with *a current job assignment* as a TVI or COMS. Some VI professionals hold *both* TVI and O&M certifications. Those professionals whose current job assignment includes functioning in both roles are considered dually certified for this report.

It is important to note that most VI professionals are not classroom teachers; they are primarily itinerant specialists in visual impairment who work in a variety of schools, community settings, and homes. In addition to direct services, they also provide critical consultations to other team members on the functional impact of a specific visual impairment on a student in a range of settings and ensure that appropriately modified materials are available. Additionally, they must travel to the student and provide instruction in the home, school, and community environments, not in a single classroom. Understanding the difference between classroom teachers and VI professionals is crucial when assessing the current and future need for specialists in visual impairment (Correa-Torres & Johnson Howell, 2004).

Number of VI professionals in Texas

This information has been gathered annually for 22 years. Over that time the number of VI professionals has risen with an occasional drop in numbers as reflected in data collected this year. The 2017 number of VI professionals in Texas is 934 individuals, or 866.5 full-time equivalents (FTEs). While the number of VI professionals decreased by 18 individuals in Fall

2017, the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* from Spring 2017 identified 174 additional students, a 1.76% increase in the student population. (TSBVI, 2017).

Below is a graph that displays the changes in the number of VI professionals over a 10-year span, from 2007-2017.

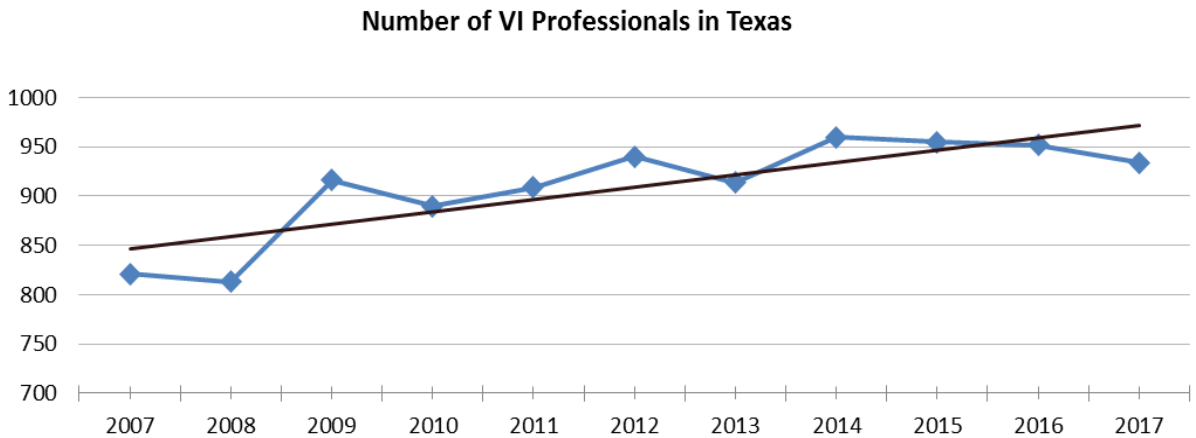


Table 1 that follows provides further details about VI professionals in Texas within the last 3 years. The term “individuals” includes both full- and part-time VI professionals. The full-time equivalent (FTE) data adjusts for the part-time VI professionals, including those who are dually certified.

Table 1: Total VI Professionals Statewide

	2015		2016		2017	
	Individuals	FTE ²	Individuals	FTE ²	Individuals	FTE ²
ESC leadership ¹	26	18.7	25	18.8	25	19
TSBVI statewide ¹	28	26.9	28	26.5	29	26
VI and O&M service providers (adjusted for dually certified professionals)	901	840	899	824	880	821.5
Total VI professionals	955	885.6	952	869.3	934	866.5

¹ TSBVI statewide consulting staff (Outreach and Short-Term Programs) and ESC consulting VI staff provide leadership/technical assistance statewide or within their organization. Educators at TSBVI or at ESCs who provide direct educational service to students with visual impairments are counted as "VI and O&M direct-service providers."

² FTE = (part time x .5) + full time for all charts

Direct-service providers

Below are data regarding full and part time direct-service providers. The term “direct-service providers” includes teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs), certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs), and dually certified personnel who work with students on a regular basis, and/or are the teacher-of-record for issues related to visual impairments. This category does not include those who provide vision-related leadership, technical assistance, or statewide services at ESCs or TSBVI through the Short-Term Programs and Outreach Programs.

This survey captures information about the number of individuals working with students with visual impairments in the state of Texas in either a full- or part-time capacity. It does not gather information on the number of districts that employ full- and/or part-time VI professionals. Full- and part-time status is broadly defined. The reference to “full-time” and “part-time” refers to the total employment of the VI professional, not to how long a specific district employs a VI professional. Individuals who work part time in multiple districts are considered “full-time VI professionals.” As a result, the number of “full-time” VI professionals described may vary from the number of districts or co-ops that employ TVIs on a full-time basis.

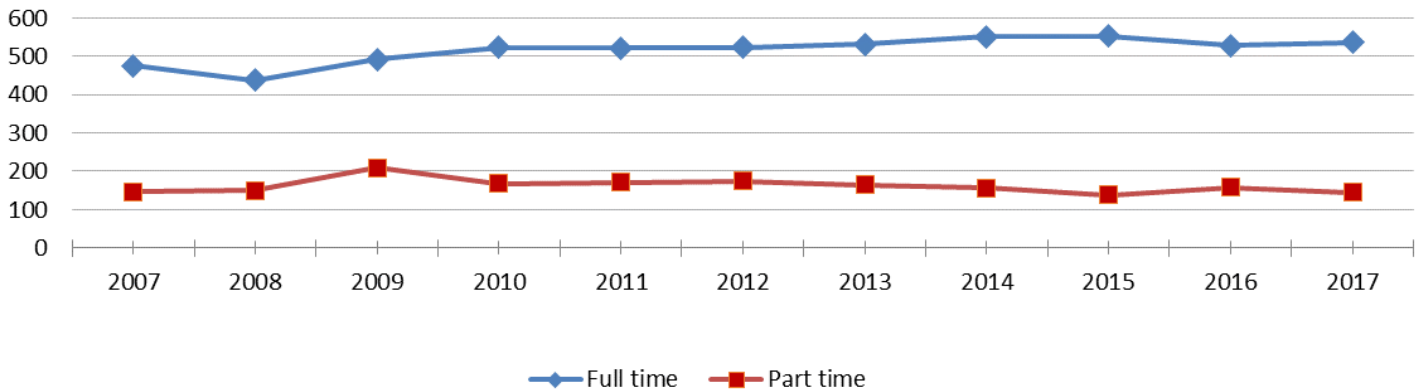
For the purposes of this survey, professionals who are certified *and* employed in both visual impairments and orientation and mobility (dually certified) are counted as a part-time TVI and a part-time COMS. These specialists are embedded in TVI data and the COMS data. Specific information on dually-certified VI professionals is listed in Table 4. Information about the number of combined direct-service providers has been adjusted for dually certified professionals.

Table 2: Direct-Service Providers: Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs)

	2015		2016		2017	
	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹
Full-time TVIs	553		529		537	
Part-time TVIs	139		158		144	
Total VI staff	692	622.5	687	608	681	609

1. FTE = part time x .5 + full time for all charts

Full- and Part-time TVIs



The total number of *individuals* (full and part time) who work as a TVI decreased in the year 2017 by 6 individuals, or by .8%. A decrease of fourteen TVIs was seen in the part-time category; the total number of full-time VI teachers grew by 8 this year.

The graph below shows the absence of significant change in the number of full - and part-time TVIs over recent years. This lack of change along with the decrease in the availability of TVIs in 2017 is a concern given that 1,877 additional students have been added to the *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* since the number of TVIs peaked at 701 in 2009.

Full- and Part-time TVIs

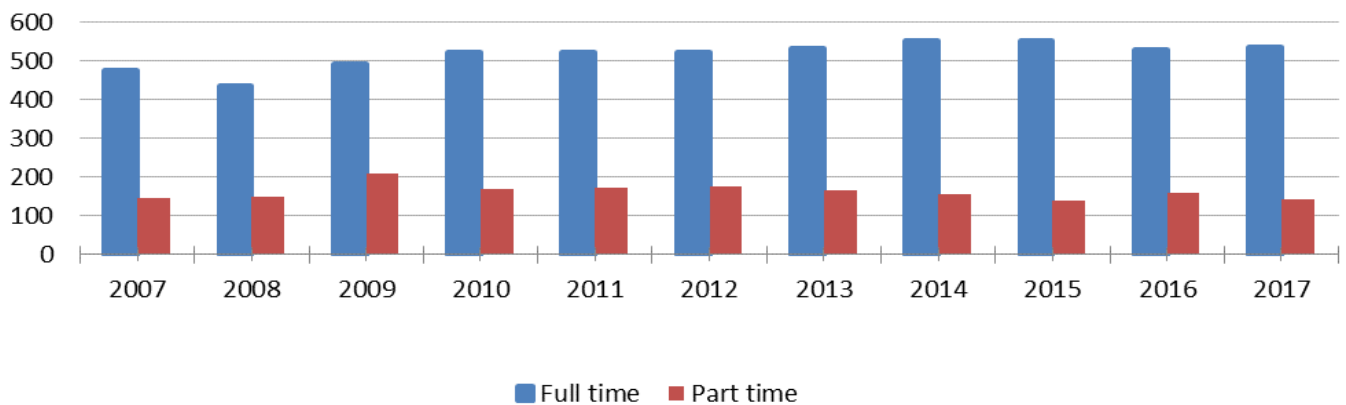
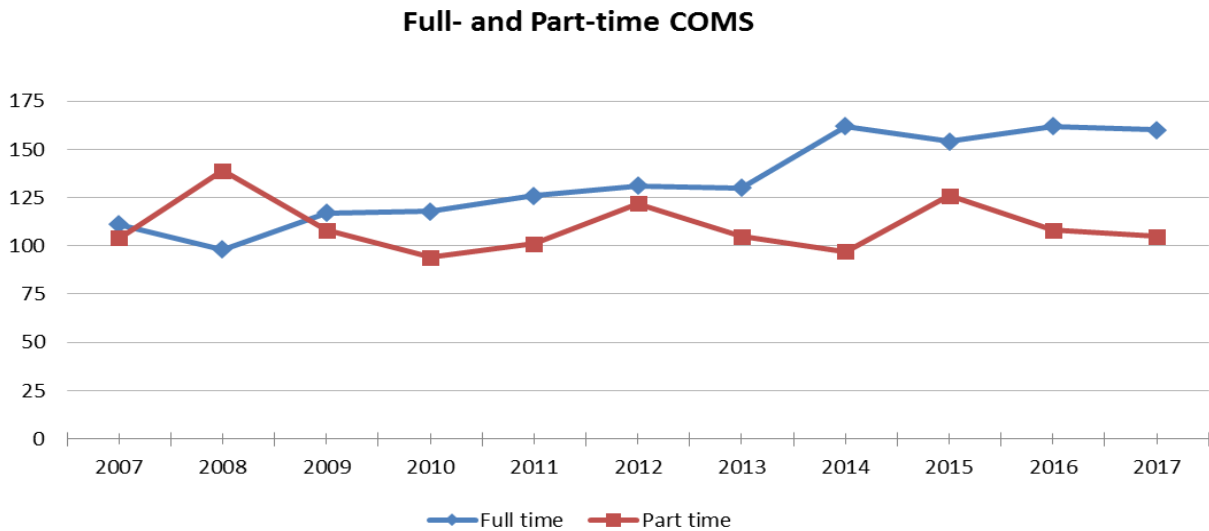


Table 3: Direct-Service Providers: Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMSs)

	2015		2016		2017	
	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹	Individuals	FTE ¹
Full-time COMSs	154		162		160	
Part-time COMSs	126		108		105	
Total O&M staff	280	217	270	216	265	212.5

1. FTE = part time x .5 + full time for all charts

As seen in Table 3 above and the graph below, the total number of O&M specialists decreased this year by 1.85 % or down by 5 individuals overall. This is the second decrease in the number of COMS reported since 2013. The decline is seen in both the part-time and full-time categories.



All initial evaluations of students with visual impairments must include an O&M evaluation by a certified O&M specialist in the home, school and community setting per changes made in 2013 to TEC 30.002. This emphasis may explain why 498 students were evaluated by a COMS and 175 additional students were identified in 2017 as needing orientation and mobility services.

Statewide data on the number of students who receive O&M services have been collected since 2001. Since that time, this number of students has increased by 132% from 1,684 to 3,907. The rate of growth in O&M services over the past 17 years exceeds that of VI services overall (50%) during that same period. Although the number of students receiving O&M services is increasing, the drop in individual COMS seen in 2016 and again this year must be considered as the total number of students with visual impairments continues to grow.

There are indications that access to evaluations is also affected by availability of adequate staff. The increase in staff seen from 2014 to 2015 (21 additional COMS) has led to an

increase in the number of students who have been evaluated by an O&M specialist, and therefore the number of students who are receiving needed services.

Part-time service providers

As seen in Table 2 and Table 3 and the graphs above, both the number of part-time TVIs and part-time COMS decreased in 2017. It is important to note that part-time VI professionals have advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include supporting districts with a small number of students with visual impairments to meet their local needs. Part-time VI professionals can increase flexibility in districts that have just a bit more, or a bit less, than a full-time VI professional can reasonably handle and still provide quality services. In addition, part-time VI professionals may either be employed by the district on a part-time, contractual basis for VI-only purposes, or may be hired full time with duties unrelated to visual impairments.

Disadvantages include logistical challenges in meeting the needs of the students. Due to other commitments and/or responsibilities, part-time staff members are at risk for not being able to provide the full caseload management or comprehensive array of services necessary for even small caseloads. Part-time contract employees are not part of the collaborative educational team if their service hours are limited to direct hours only by the hiring district or co-op. It may be hard to carry out collaborative consultation to the degree needed as a full-time employee would be able to do. Without time for collaboration, such VI professionals may not adequately meet the needs of their students since it is other team members who assist with generalization of skills learned when the specialist is not there (TSBVI, n.d.).

Contract service providers

Many VI professionals work for school districts throughout the state as contract service providers on either a part-time or full-time basis. According to ESC consultants, 147 VI professionals serve in this manner. This number reflects approximately 16% of the total number of individual VI professionals in Texas.

Dually certified VI professionals

Dually certified VI professionals are those who are certified and function both as a COMS and as a TVI. While many professionals may hold both certifications, not all dually certified professionals function in both capacities. This survey gathers data only about those who currently *function* as a TVI and an O&M specialist. Since 2001, this number had fluctuated between 74 and 62 before falling to 58 last year. Currently, there are 66 dually certified individuals serving in both roles. With an average of 72 over the last 10 years, this year's total of 66 falls closer to the 10 year average. Given the decrease of part-time VI professionals in 2016 and the increase seen in TVIs overall, it is possible that many who were functioning in a dual role last year transitioned to a full-time TVI position in 2017.

Table 4: Dually Certified Professionals

2015 2016 2017

Dually certified	71	58	66
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Dually certified professionals are unique and offer districts maximum flexibility. Administrators are able to modify work assignments according to the needs of the district and the needs of students for a particular year. While these VI professionals may be employed full time in a district, they must split their time and expertise between two different, although related, professions. An administrator must understand the challenges faced by these professionals to ensure that neither area is slighted.

Direct services provided by ESCs

Statewide, districts are expanding their ability to serve students locally, while still relying on ESCs when that service delivery system works best for that district. The increase in full-time COMS seen last year and the increase of full-time TVIs in 2017 may be a reason ESCs are serving fewer students. Therefore, it seems likely that there is a relationship between the number of VI professionals available at the local level and increases/decreases in services from the ESC.

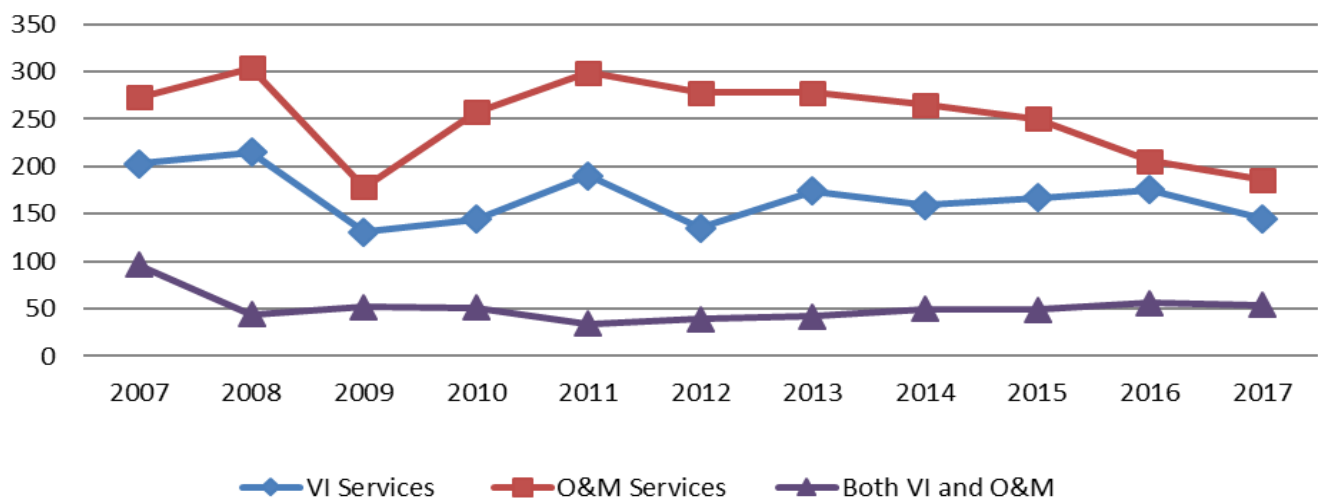
Each regional education service center (ESC) provides an array of services to districts. ESCs are a *major* part of the state’s infrastructure that ensures access to high quality VI services. Regional specialists in visual impairments are critical players in the provision of technical assistance, leadership, workshops, and materials for VI professionals, families, and students. They also assist TVIs and 122 braille transcribers within the state in braille production. They act as a vital source of information on VI-related issues for special education administrators in the region. A significant portion of Texas’ reputation for leadership in visual impairments is due to the high level of skills and services provided by its VI specialists in regional education service centers.

Some ESCs provide direct services to students with visual impairments. In these regions, the ESC staff members are listed on the student’s individualized education program (IEP). Currently, nine ESCs provide O&M services, 3 provide VI services, and 3 provide both. Table 5 reflects the number of students receiving direct services from the ESCs. This total decreased by 6% in 2016 and even more significantly in 2017, decreasing by 12%. Students receiving only orientation and mobility services through the ESC make up the majority of the 12% change with a difference of 64 students in two years. The number of students receiving VI services through the ESC saw the most change in 2017; an additional 30 students are receiving VI services at the local level.

Table 5: Students Receiving Services from ESCs

	2015	2016	2017
VI-only services (3 regions)	167	175	145
O&M-only services (9 regions)	250	206	186
Both VI and O&M services (3 regions)	49	56	54
Total	466	437	385

Students Receiving Services from ESCs



The provision of direct services from an ESC depends on many factors, including population size, region/district agreements, regional service delivery options, and fiscal constraints. While many factors can affect the number of students served by ESCs, the local districts' capacity to meet the needs of their students is a primary one.

Overall perceptions of caseloads

Since 2010, this survey also asked about perceptions of overall changes in caseloads regionally. The survey did not ask about specific districts or how many districts in a region experienced a change. The VI consultants were asked to use their professional expertise in their estimates.

Table 6: VI ESC Consultants' Perception of Regional Overall Changes in Caseloads

	TVIs	COMS
Increases 2017	11	9
Decreases	1	1
No significant change	7	6
Unknown	1	4

For the eighth year in a row, the majority of regional VI consultants reported increasing caseloads for TVIs and COMS overall. Specifically, 11 of 20 education service centers (ESCs) reported increased caseloads for TVIs and 9 saw an increase in caseload size for COMS. Others noted caseloads remained the same. One ESC reported that TVI and O&M caseloads experienced a decrease in their region.

Cultural diversity

Texas is a diverse state and requires a diverse workforce to serve its citizens. This survey asks about African-American, Hispanic, and Asian VI professionals in relation to services provided. It also queries the number of VI professionals fluent in Spanish. The results from the survey follow.

Table 7: Culturally Diverse VI Professionals

Hispanic VI Professionals

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs	74	73	69
COMSs	15	18	18
Dually certified	8	4	6
Total	97	95	93

Spanish-Speaking VI Professionals

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs	68	67	74
COMSs	10	12	26
Dually certified	9	5	8
Total	87	84	108

African-American VI Professionals

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs	22	21	28
COMSs	15	15	16
Dually certified	0	0	1
Total	37	36	45

Asian VI Professionals

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs	7	11	6
COMSs	4	8	4
Dually certified	0	1	0
Total	11	20	10

This was a year with varied results in assessing diversity of VI professionals in Texas. Looking at specific categories, the number of VI professionals who are Asian decreased by 10, or 50%, after an increase of 81% last year. African-American VI professionals and those fluent in Spanish increased this year. Hispanic VI professionals decreased slightly in 2017. ESC consultants and TSBVI staff were also asked to provide the number of Native-American and Caucasian VI professionals working in their region/school. Data provided showed that the majority of VI professionals in Texas are Caucasian, and there were no Native-American TVIs or COMSs identified. Recruiting and retaining ethnically and culturally diverse educators continues to be an important goal in Texas to reflect the student demographics.

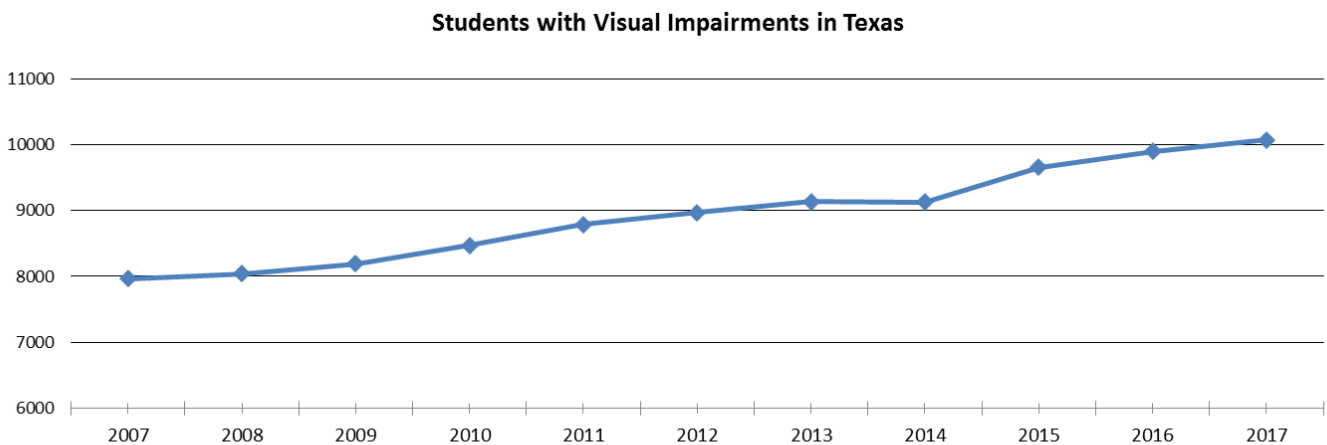
VI professionals who have a visual impairment

The ESCs were asked how many VI professionals serving in districts within their regions are visually impaired. The ESCs reported that a total of 20 VI professionals in Texas are blind or have a visual impairment, an increase of 2 individuals. This includes direct service providers, ESC leadership, and TSBVI statewide consultants.

Growth in Population of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals

In January, 2017 there were 10,074 students with visual impairments in Texas. Data collected since 2000 project that the student population will increase by an average of 2.6% per year over the next 3 years (an additional 804 students) for a total of 10,878 students by 2020.

Below is a graph that displays the growth in the number of students with visual impairments over a 10-year span, from 2007-2017. The trend is a steady increase in students.



Impact on teachers of students with visual impairments

Statewide, the student-to-teacher ratio increased in 2017 to 16.5 students per TVI full-time equivalent (FTE) position. Looking back over the past 10 years, caseloads have averaged 15 students per TVI FTE. If this ratio is applied to the number of expected new students, it is projected that Texas will need approximately 54 additional FTEs by 2020 to accommodate student growth alone. However, given that only 79% of TVIs are full time, it will take more individuals to meet the expected need of 54 FTEs. If the current average ratio of full- to part-time teachers continues, the number of TVIs needed to total 54 FTEs will be closer to 65 individuals.

Impact on O&M specialists

Information about students with visual impairments is collected each January. The 2017 *Annual Registration of Students with Visual Impairments* indicated that the percentage of students who were receiving O&M services increased from almost 38% to approximately 39%. Although the number of O&M service providers went down this year, an additional 498 students were evaluated for services and 175 students were added to caseloads. It is anticipated that by 2020, 4,497 students will be receiving O&M services, an additional 590 students.

Statewide, the average student-to-COMS caseload in 2017 is 18 students per FTE. Sixteen students per COMS is the average ratio seen over a 10-year period. Using this year's data to predict need, by 2020 Texas will need an additional 33 full-time equivalent (FTE) orientation and mobility specialists to meet expected student growth.

In Texas, full-time equivalent positions can be quite different from the number of individuals needed to equal the FTEs, especially with O&M specialists. In 2017, 60% of COMSs were employed full time. These O&M specialists work full time in a single district or contract with several districts. If the current ratio of full- to part-time individuals is applied, the number of individual O&M specialists needed to result in 33 FTEs is likely to be closer to 46 individuals.

Texas Education Code (TEC) 30.002 requires that all *initial* evaluations of students with visual impairments include an O&M evaluation by a certified O&M specialist. This language was amended in 2013 and became effective immediately. The higher total number of students who have been evaluated by a COMS and the 26.5% additional students now receiving O&M services is likely due in part to the new language in TEC 30.002.

Variance in growth of students with visual impairments and O&M services

An additional concern is the gap in the average growth rate of students (2.6% per yr.) and the increase in the percentage of students receiving O&M services (1% per yr.). It is unknown how many of the projected 10,878 students with visual impairments may need O&M services by 2020, since the level of evaluation in the past has not kept pace with the student population

increase. As of January 2017, approximately 25% of current students had not been evaluated by an O&M specialist.

Attrition

It should be noted that the attrition data collected in this survey specifically addresses those who have left the field. The data do not include those who move from school employment to private contractual work, change districts, or retire and re-hire in the same or a different district.

Attrition increased for all VI professionals for the first time in 3 years, by a total of 12 individuals. Specifically, attrition increased by 1 for COMS and by 12 for TVIs. The ESCs did not report any dually certified VI professionals leaving the field.

Although the attrition number increased in 2017, last year the ESCs had not seen an attrition total as low in six years. This year's attrition total of 41 falls into more of a typical range for the VI profession.

Table 8: Actual Attrition within the Past Year (1-Year Attrition)

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs	35	26	38
COMSs	3	2	3
Dually certified	4	1	0
Total	42	29	41

Attrition factors

VI professionals are rare and difficult to find. Therefore, retention is of critical concern. Unlike other disciplines, even in other high-need subject areas, when a VI professional is unavailable, often there is no one else in the district with the specific expertise needed to assess and meet the unique educational needs of students with visual impairments. To that point, consider the population of students with visual impairments as noted in the *2017 Guidelines and Standards for Educating Students with Visual Impairments in Texas*:

- May be totally blind or have varying degrees of low vision
- Range from birth to 22 years of age
- May have been born with a visual impairment or may have acquired a visual impairment at a later time in their life
- May or may not be learners on the academic level of their age peers
- May also have hearing impairments (DeafBlindness)

- May also have any number of other disabilities (mild to severe intellectual disability, physical disability, other sensory loss, emotional or behavioral problems, autism and/or specific learning disabilities)
- May have vision impairment related to ocular disorders or due to neurological causes (such as cerebral or cortical visual impairment) or both
- May have additional medical needs and considerations
- May be receiving instruction in a variety of instructional settings, including the home, school and community

Several factors can affect recruitment and attrition of VI professionals:

- Most educators and other likely candidates are unaware of the VI field. Students with visual impairments are a low-prevalence and extremely diverse population. Therefore, recruitment challenges exist. People must be aware of the field and its possibilities before they can become a VI professional.
- Most VI professionals are mid-career professionals and are likely to have shorter careers in this second field.
- Because VI professionals are so critical to student learning, a change of even one VI professional, in any single district, can have dramatic effects on the annual yearly progress of students.
- As a profession, education is an aging field. A study by Ingersoll and Merrill (updated in 2014) indicated that in the late 1980s, the age of teachers was in a typical distribution pattern with the peak at 41 years old. A review of that same data in 2008 showed that the peak had increased to 55 years old.
- In addition to age and economic factors, attrition is affected by factors commonly cited as important for retention. For VI professionals, among the most important retention factors are administrative support and caseload size. As reported previously, there has been a trend for the past 8 years indicating that caseloads are increasing.

Projected 3-year attrition

Projected attrition data is valuable for predicting and preparing for the VI professionals needed in the near future. Individuals who function as dually certified have both VI and O&M expertise. Projecting the attrition of dually certified personnel appears to be especially difficult with a reliable degree of accuracy. This is a fluid group. Based on district need, an individual may function as dually certified one year but not the next. The information below includes individuals who are dually certified in both categories (and cannot be added). The “Overall” data reflects all VI professionals and has been adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

Gathering accurate data regarding a VI professional's retirement plans can be challenging. In general, VI consultants at the ESCs must rely on others for the information. Some people may be reluctant to share their plans or their plans may change in the interim period. Others may retire from their job, but take another contractual job in another district. Historically, projections are below actual attrition by a noteworthy margin, particularly for TVIs. Nonetheless, VI consultants at the ESCs are the best and only source for information on future attrition for VI professionals.

It is important to mention again that the data addresses individuals who will leave the field. The data do not include those who move from school employment to private contractual work, change districts, or retire and re-hire in the same or a different district.

Table 9: Projected 3-Year Attrition

Projections made in:	2015	2016	2017
TVIs ¹	95	92	92
COMSs ¹	32	22	27
Overall¹	111	105	105

¹ Projections by ESC consultants reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, TVIs and COMSs include data for dually certified staff and cannot be totaled. "Overall" includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

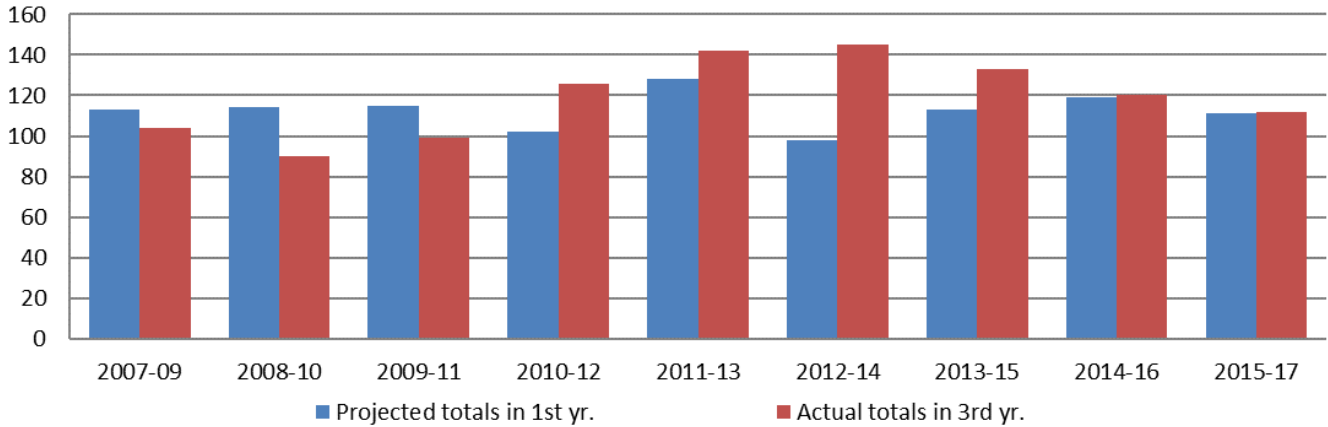
In 2017, the VI consultants at the ESCs projected that, overall, 105 VI professionals will leave the field within the next 3 years. This is identical to the number projected in 2016. Historically, ESC projections are conservative, with more people leaving than expected. If the 105 projection is accurate, we can expect that 11% of *existing* VI professionals will retire or otherwise leave the field prior to 2020.

Projected vs. actual attrition

Looking at the most recent 3-year time frame, 2015 to 2017, in 2015 it was projected that 111 people would leave the field by 2017. During that same period, the field lost 112 VI professionals, a difference of one individual. Taking into consideration projections made in 2014, ESC estimated three year attrition totals to reach 119 individuals. In fact, 120 VI professionals left the field, a difference again of one individual. ESC consultants appear to be closing the projected vs. actual attrition discrepancy considering they over projected by only one individual two years in a row.

The bar chart below compares projected totals (blue) and actual totals (red) for each of the 3 year periods shown. With the exception of the 3-year cycles that ended in 2009, 2010 and 2011, the actual attrition over the 3-year cycle is larger than the projected attrition. The gap of 48% in 2012 is one of the largest since the data has been collected; however, the gap of one individual last year and again this year is the smallest seen since data was collected in 2002.

Projected versus Actual Attrition



* 2015–2017 is the last time frame for which a complete set of data is available.

In summary, VI professionals at the ESCs are the best and only source for statewide information on attrition over the past year and projected attrition. During the economic downturn, the projections exceeded the actual attrition. This trend was reversed in 2012 when 25% more VI professionals left the field than projected in 2010 and continued through 2015. Data received over the last two years indicates a new trend. ESCs appear to be closing the gap between projected and actual attrition.

Anticipated Need

Interpreting and understanding the need for educational professionals traditionally relies on several factors, including the number of posted positions and recommendations from knowledgeable professionals. Below (Table 10 and the graph that follows) are data from each of these areas. The expected student growth of 804 students should be kept in mind when considering the anticipated need of the VI professionals who will serve them.

Posted positions

The respondents at each ESC and at TSBVI were asked how many part- or full-time positions were posted in their regions or at TSBVI in September 2017. These data were collected in September and reflect numbers after all regular hiring for the academic year had been completed. These positions remained unfilled and active because districts were unable to find a VI professional or the positions were opened after the start of the school year.

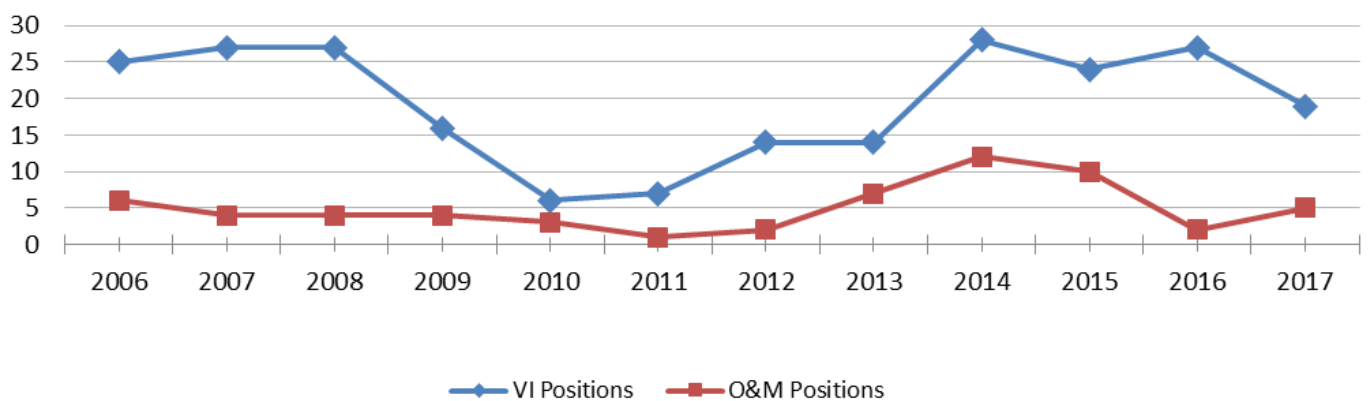
Table 10: Posted Positions

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs	24	27	19
COMSs	10	2	5
Dually certified	3	0	3
Total	37	29	27

This year the number of existing vacancies, after all typical hiring had been completed, decreased slightly from 29 to 27. The trend of having unfilled posted positions in September continues to decrease over time.

Previous formal and informal data indicates that vacancies are a poor indicator of actual need. The reasons vary. Many administrators will identify a need and encourage an existing educator to get VI certification rather than post a vacancy. The need for a private contract TVI or O&M position may not necessarily be posted. Regardless of the reason, with the exception of the 2016 numbers, data collected since 1996 indicates a poor correlation between vacancies in September and the need for VI professionals. In 2016, the number of posted positions matched the attrition number; however, this year, after all typical hiring had been completed, the total number of posted positions is far less than the attrition total of 41.

Posted Vacancies for VI Professionals



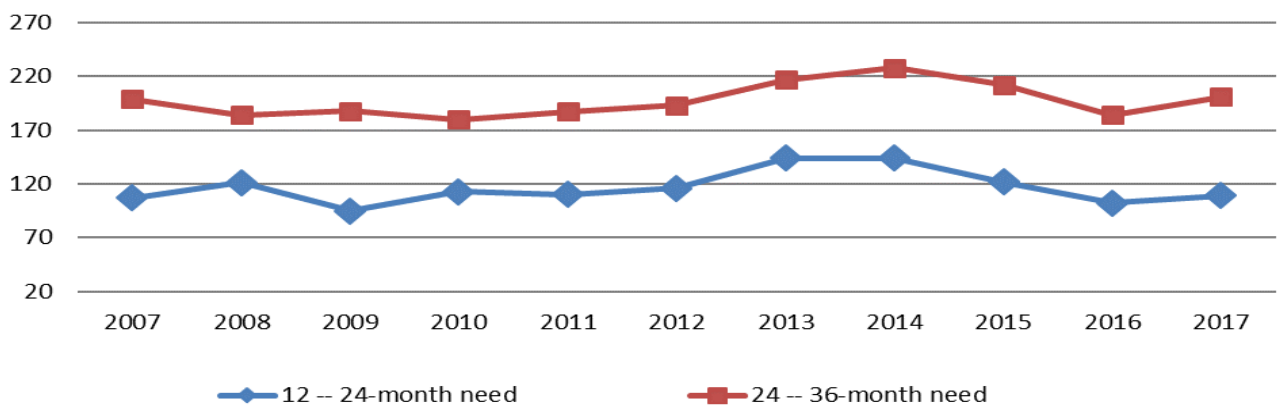
Recommendations by knowledgeable professionals

Regional VI consultants are the experts in visual impairments for their region. VI consultants and TSBVI staff were asked how many TVIs, O&M specialists, and dually certified personnel were needed in their area. The survey asked about projected need, not about positions available. However, historically, positions follow the availability of VI professionals.

There are two ways to assess the shorter- and longer-term projected needs: either by job assignment or by professional expertise. The terms “TVI” or “COMS” indicate a type of expertise as expressed through the certification in a professional discipline. Those in the “dually certified” category hold both certifications and function in both professional disciplines.

Functioning as a dually certified VI professional primarily reflects district need and therefore is a job assignment and not a unique discipline. Dually certified assignments are also very fluid and vary from year to year. For the purposes of this section of the report, the data reported will be by professional expertise, not by job assignment. Understanding need by expertise informs the future training and funding needs. Dually certified VI professionals function as part-time TVIs and part-time COMSs. As such they will be added to both areas as part-time TVIs and O&M specialists.

Projected Shorter- and Longer-Term Need for VI Professionals



When considering the needs, VI consultants are advised to reflect on real attrition over the past year and anticipated or projected growth and attrition (those who are expected to permanently leave the field). The results are indicated in the graph above and Tables 11 and 12 below.

Table 11: Projected Short-Term Need: 12–24 Months

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs¹	92	79	76
COMSs¹	44	31	46
Overall¹	122	102	109

1 Projections reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, “TVIs” and “COMSs” include data for dually certified staff in both categories and cannot be totaled. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

Table 12: Projected Longer-Term Need: 24–36 Months

	2015	2016	2017
TVIs¹	157	141	149
COMS¹	81	61	73
Overall¹	212	184	201

¹ Projections reflect job expertise, not assignment. As a result, “TVIs” and “COMSs” include data for dually certified staff in both categories and cannot be totaled. “Overall” includes all VI professionals and is adjusted for dually certified VI professionals.

Both the projected short-term and longer-term need peaked in 2014 before falling again two years in a row. This year, both totals saw an increase with ESCs projecting a need for 109 VI professionals within the next one to two years and 201 within the next three years.

Given the anticipated student growth, it is good to see that the lowered projection by the ESCs over the last two years did not become a trend. The ESCs estimation of need peaked at 103 in 2013 for TVIs and hit a high of 94 COMS in 2014. Student growth, attrition, and the anticipation of updated orientation and mobility evaluation requirements in TEC 30.02 are all possible factors in the heightened 2013-14 totals.

Discussion of projected need and teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs)

The projected need for certified teachers of students with visual impairments (TVIs) decreased in the shorter-term need category and increased slightly in the long-term category. As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (pages 13-14), Texas will need between 54 and 65 TVIs to meet the anticipated growth in the number of students with visual impairments.

In addition to meeting the needs related to expected demographic increases, Texas will need to replace TVIs who leave the field. It is projected that 92 individuals with VI expertise (TVIs and dually certified professionals) will leave the field prior to 2020. Historically, the 3-year attrition ratios for those with VI expertise exceed projections by 15%. The attrition could be closer to 106 full- and part-time individuals certified as teachers of students with visual impairments.

Combining projected growth and attrition, Texas will need between 146 and 157 teachers of students with visual impairments in the next 3 years to replace those who are likely to leave and respond to anticipated growth. The projection of 149 TVIs falls within this range.

Table 12: Projected Need and TVIs

Number of TVIs needed to meet student growth	54 - 65
Number of TVIs needed due to attrition	92
Total FTE needed by 2020	146 - 157

In the Fall of 2017, 106 people were seeking VI certification through a university program in Texas. Forty-five were working under an emergency permit. Consequently, these TVIs are already working with students and included in this count as TVIs. If the university TVI program completion rates continue to reflect the total seen in 2017, the number of newly certified TVIs (129) will fall below the range of anticipated need. However, if the completion totals were to increase once again to totals seen in 2016 (53), the number of TVIs would exceed the anticipated need by 2 individuals. Given that university enrollment closely reflects the amount of stipends available and assuming tuition costs continue to increase at a steady rate, funding will remain an essential factor in the training of new TVIs.

Discussion of projected need and O&M specialists

The projected need for orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) increased significantly in both the shorter- and longer-term categories. Projecting need for O&M specialists included consideration of the following additional factors:

- * At this point, there are no reliable statistical projections on the percentage of students with visual impairments who will need O&M services *at any given time*.
- * Further, 27% of current students with visual impairments have not had an O&M evaluation to determine whether they need O&M services.
- * TEC 30.002 requires that *initial* evaluations of students with visual impairments include an O&M evaluation.

As discussed in the Growth of Students with Visual Impairments and Impact on VI Professionals (page 14), Texas will need between 33 and 46 O&M specialists to meet the anticipated growth in the number of students with visual impairments.

Regional VI consultants project that 27 people with O&M expertise (O&M specialists and dually certified professionals) will be leaving the field by 2020. If the expected student growth is combined with the 3-year projected attrition and based on statewide average student-to-teacher ratios, it is likely that Texas will need approximately 60 additional full- and part-time O&M specialists over the next 3 years. The projection of 73 made by the ESC consultants, who know their regions best, is significantly above this figure. The variance is possibly due to the increases in services anticipated with additional evaluations. The next step is for districts to

ensure that all students with visual impairments receive consideration by an O&M specialist of their need for an orientation and mobility evaluation. Only then can the educational team members be assured that those who need O&M instruction are receiving it.

Universities are maximizing their existing resources to produce COMS. An average of 30 individuals completed the orientation and mobility certification process over the last three years. Presuming that the number of completers continues at the same rate, and that districts will hire the O&M specialists, the need for 60 new COMS by 2020 will not only be met but exceeded. Although this is encouraging, future attrition should also be taken into consideration. This year the O&M field saw a drop of 5 individuals, the second decrease since 2013.

Enrollment to Prepare VI Professionals

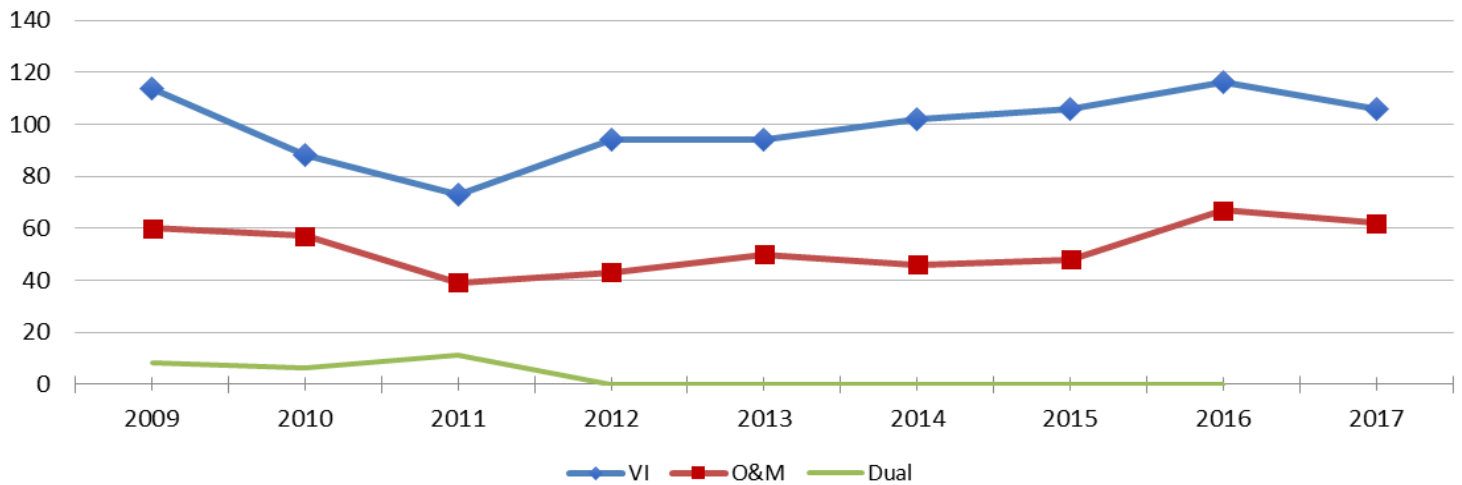
Texas is fortunate to have two collaborative partners who train VI professionals: Texas Tech University (TTU) and Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU). Both schools have graduate programs for TVIs and O&M specialists. SFASU also has an undergraduate program for orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration. Both schools serve students throughout the state with a combination of face-to-face, voice-over-the-internet, and Internet courses.

The combination of distance-learning options and supportive funding has had a major impact on the number of VI professionals in Texas. Enrollments increased substantially with the development of distance-learning options in 1998. Since then, the biggest factor affecting enrollment seems to be the availability of tuition support. Increases in the number of VI professionals appear to be directly affected by tuition support.

Table 13: Number of Students in Training Programs

	2015	2016	2017
Visual impairments	106	116	106
Orientation and mobility (incl. undergraduates)	48	67	62
Total	154	183	168

Number of Individuals Registered for Courses in Fall of Each Year



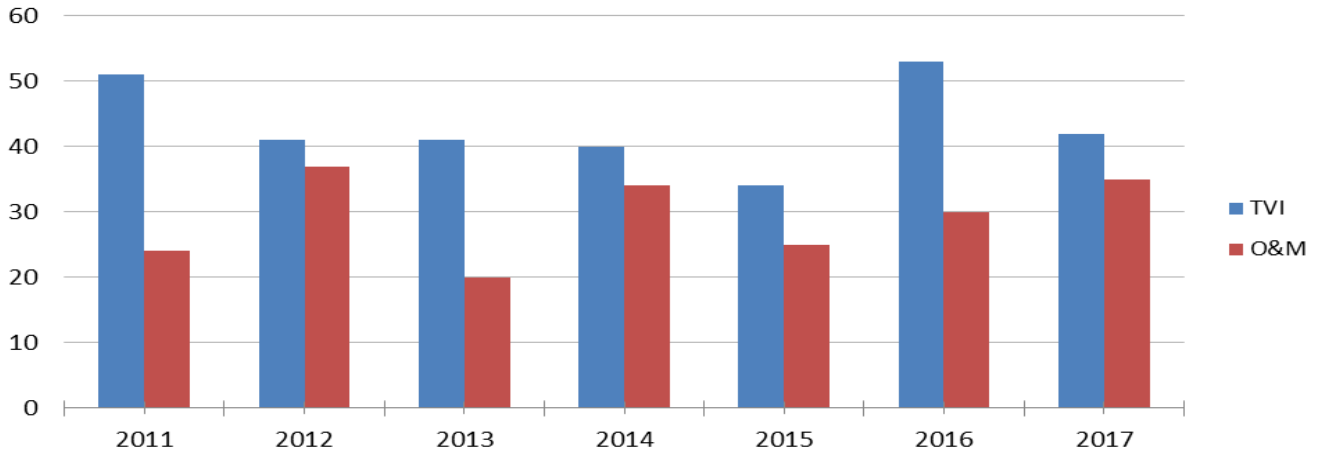
* The data collection definitions changed in 2012. Since students must complete one certification before the other, they are now counted in either the VI or O&M category.

In the Fall of 2017, a total of 168 students were registered for courses leading to certification either as a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) or an orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). Eighteen of the pre-service O&M specialists are undergraduates. One-hundred-six individuals are seeking VI certification and 62 are en route to O&M certification. Although totals reflect a decrease from the number of students registered in the Fall of 2016, enrollment exceeds that of the 5 year average (159). Last year universities saw enrollment increase by 18%.

Candidates must complete their entire program before they can start working as an O&M specialist. O&M certification is a national certification and valid in any state. It is also applicable for all age groups, not just for school-age students. Unless school districts hire graduating O&M specialists, many new O&M specialists may take positions elsewhere. It is hoped that most new O&M specialists will find jobs in Texas in education.

Over the past year, a total of 77 people completed their certification programs. Forty-two individuals completed VI training and 35 completed their O&M program. This matches the 5-year average for TVIs and is 20% above for COMS and is an encouraging trend toward meeting student growth.

Number of Individuals Completing Certification Programs



In 2017, the percentage of students in personnel preparation programs (VI Certification and O&M) receiving financial assistance was 79%. Ninety-three percent of those in the TVI certification programs and 55% in the O&M programs received assistance. Tuition is a strong incentive for enrollment especially considering that gaining a certification to work with students with visual impairments does not typically lead to an increase in salary.

Table 14: Percentage of Students Receiving Support through Texas Grants

	2014	2015	2016	2017
Percentage of students receiving TX stipends	73%	74%	83%	79%

Tuition continues to increase at a steady rate. As reported last year, tuition and fees rose an average of 112% in Texas between 2003 and 2016 or 67% when adjusting for inflation (Legislative Budget Board, 2016). In 2017, one of the Texas universities offering VI certification programs saw an increase of 4.5% in tuition. Increases in the number of VI professionals appear to be directly affected by tuition. Therefore, with the expectation that tuition will continue to rise, existing funding will provide less support to students than in previous years. This creates a greater challenge in meeting the need for an adequate number of VI professionals. In addition to the need for more funding for student tuition going forward, as the university programs continue to grow to meet statewide shortages, there is also a need for increased program operation funding, particularly funds to hire additional full-time faculty to improve program quality and meet teacher candidate needs.

Summary

This report reviewed characteristics of and indicators of need for VI professionals. In September 2017, Texas had 934 individuals (866.5 FTEs) providing vision-related services, either directly to students or in a leadership and/or technical-assistance capacity. After adjusting for dually certified professionals (66), there are 880 individuals providing direct service either on a full- or part-time basis. The total includes the following full- or part-time individuals:

- 681 teachers certified in visual impairments (TVIs) or 609 FTEs; a reduction of 6 individuals and an increase of 1 FTE since 2016.
- 265 orientation and mobility specialists (COMSs) or 212.5 FTEs; a reduction of 5 individuals and 4.5 FTEs since 2016.
- 66 dually certified professionals; up by 8 from 2016.

In addition, there are:

- 54 regional or statewide leadership or technical-assistance specialists (45.1 FTEs)
 - 25 individuals or 19 FTEs are at the regional education service centers (ESC)
 - 29 individuals or 26 FTEs are at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired either in Outreach or Short-Term Programs

With a current total of 25, the number of individuals providing leadership and technical assistance at the ESCs remained the same in 2017. The same was seen in the actual amount of time available to assist districts and families. ESCs reported 19 FTEs this year and 18.8 in 2016.

The total number of VI professionals (both TVIs and COMS) decreased by 18 individuals in 2017. The TVI category showed a decrease of 6. The 2017 total number of TVIs (681) reflects a decrease of approximately 1% from 2016, yet the number of students continually increases.

The number of COMSs decreased from 270 to 265 individuals, or by approximately 2%. This is the second year a decrease was seen in the number of COMSs since 2013. This could be the result of various factors including a transition from functioning in a dually certified role to a full-time TVI position.

In September 2017, ESCs reported that there are 28 TVIs, 16 O&M specialists and 1 dually certified VI professional who are African-American. The Hispanic VI professionals included 69 TVIs, 18 COMSs, and 6 dually certified professionals. Seventy-four TVIs, 26 COMSs, and 8 dually certified professionals are fluent in Spanish, which is a significant increase from 2016.

There are 6 TVIs and 4 O&M specialists who are Asian. Overall, the VI field saw an increase in African-American VI professionals (+9) and in those who are fluent in Spanish (+24). There was a decrease in Hispanic and Asian VI professionals this year. Continued efforts to expand diversity to reflect the student demographic are indicated.

An examination of attrition, projected attrition, student population growth and need within the past year yielded results. The attrition rate in 2017 grew by 12 yet falls just below the 10-year average across all VI professionals. This year 41 VI professionals left the field, 12 more than last year. Thirty-eight TVIs and 3 O&M specialists, respectively, left the VI field.

The projected 3-year attrition rate was estimated at 105, or 12% of all VI professionals. Further analysis of the data over the past decade indicates that although the regional VI consultants are the best predictors for attrition and the projected vs. actual attrition gap continues to lessen substantially, even they have underestimated attrition for TVIs and COMS. Therefore, it is likely that as retirements are realized, attrition over the next 3 years will continue to be a pertinent factor in planning for an adequate number of VI professionals

A long-term examination of growth patterns predicts that the number of students with visual impairments needing services will increase by 2.6% each year, or by 804 additional students between 2017 and 2020. It is expected that Texas will have at least 10,878 students with visual impairments by 2020.

This report assessed need based on two methods:

- (a) counting the number of posted available positions in September, and
- (b) taking recommendations from VI consultants at the ESCs.

Job-vacancy-posting data gathered since 1996 have proven to be a poor predictor of need. Even so, the number of vacancies in September 2017 was down. The total number of vacancies decreased from 29 in 2016 to 27 in 2017.

This report uses a knowledgeable informant model to project need. It considers the recommendations of the VI specialists at the regional education service centers to be the best indicators of real need in Texas. These professionals have extensive knowledge of their districts and region. Their estimates continue to indicate a steady but attainable need for VI professionals. With enrollment in university programs exceeding the 5 year average for 4 consecutive years, the VI profession conceivably will not have the same level of difficulty in meeting the needs of students with visual impairments as in the past.

Table 15: Summary of Need by Expertise 2017

	TVIs	O&M specialists	Overall
12–24-month-need projections	76	46	109
24–36-month-need projections	149	73	201

Both types of indicators of need were reviewed in this document: posted vacancies and recommendations by regional consultants. While each source revealed a different set of numbers, what is clear is that regardless of the method used, Texas has an ongoing need for VI professionals. Although an increase in university enrollment and in the number of completers are both attainable goals, tuition support is imperative in sustaining an adequate number of newly certified TVIs and O&M specialists needed to serve the growing number of children with visual impairments across the state.

Appendix

Methodology

The ESC consultant and TSBVI survey asked about the number of people *functioning* as VI professionals. These individuals may be TVIs, O&M specialists, or both. Those *functioning* in both roles are referred to as being dually certified. The VI professionals provide instruction to students in a direct or consultative capacity and/or provide leadership or technical assistance from regional education service centers (ESCs) or Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). Those who provide leadership or technical assistance may have full- or part-time positions.

Texas employs both full- and part-time VI professionals. Full-time professionals are those who work at least .6 FTE or more. Part-time professionals are those who work .5 FTE or less. This method has been used by TEA and is considered to be an adequate estimate of the number of full-time equivalent VI professionals. Part-time VI professionals are a significant proportion of the Texas VI workforce (23% of the TVIs and 40% of the O&M specialists).

When relevant, information about full-time equivalent (FTE) positions is also presented. The number of FTE staff was determined by multiplying the number of people employed in part-time positions by .5 and adding the result to the number of people employed as full-time VI professionals (part time X .5 + full time = FTE).

The descriptive and need data reflect statewide totals of a combination of TVIs and O&M professionals. Data on each profession are also included separately. When appropriate, data on dually certified VI professionals are also presented.

People who provide both O&M and VI services (dually certified) are counted as part-time TVI and part-time O&M. Although they may be full-time employees of a district or cooperative, dually certified professionals are considered part-time TVIs and part-time O&M specialists. As a result, dually certified individuals appear on both the TVI and O&M tables as part-time professionals. This results in a variance between the data listed in the Statewide Totals table (Table 1) and the combined totals of the Direct-Service Provider tables (Tables 2 and 3). Simply adding together the discipline-specific totals would result in double-counting some individuals. Statewide totals are adjusted for dually certified professionals.

This survey captures information about the number of individuals working with students with visual impairments in the state of Texas in either a full- or part-time capacity. It does not gather information on the number of districts that employ full- and/or part-time VI professionals. Full- and part-time status is broadly defined. Individuals who work part time but in multiple districts are considered “full-time VI professionals.” The reference to “full time” or “part time” refers to

the total employment of the VI professional, not to how long a specific district employs a VI professional.

For the purposes of this survey, professionals who are certified *and* employed in both visual impairments and orientation and mobility (dually certified) are counted as a part-time teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) and a part-time orientation and mobility specialist (COMS). These specialists are embedded in the TVI data and the COMS data. Specific information on dually certified VI professionals is listed in Table 4. Information about the number of combined direct-service providers has been adjusted for dually certified professionals.

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