**Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind**

**and Visually Impaired (AER) Position Paper:**

# **Orientation and Mobility Assessments for**

# **Students in Education and Life Skills Settings**

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Approved 2021 by AER Division 9, Orientation and Mobility

and the AER Board of Directors

Note: This paper is primarily targeted at those providing service in the United States; hopefully it will serve as a model for other countries to build tools that mirror their laws, regulations, and policies.

## **Justification for Assessment**

§300.1 Code of Federal Regulations states…

“The purposes of this part are-

1. To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.

To adequately determine needs for the purpose of preparing students “for further education, employment, and independent living,” assessments in all areas related to the disability need to be conducted, and in order to comply with IDEA, “the evaluation is [must be] sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the child’s special education and related services needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child has been classified” (IDEA, 2017). An O&M assessment determines the effect(s) of the visual impairment, along with any other impairments (e.g., auditory, orthopedic, cognitive, etc.) on age/grade level, purposeful movement, travel, and orientation expectations, including access to the environmental information that support it. When gaps are identified, areas of instructional need and methods of instruction that close the gap are recommended. Orientation and mobility skills influence present and future success in career, college, and community. Assessment in orientation and mobility, as a related service, must take place to prepare young people for their present needs as well as those they will experience as they transition into adult life.

“It also is very important for blind and visually impaired children, including those with other disabilities, who need orientation and mobility services, to receive appropriate instruction in orientation and mobility as early as possible. Providing these children with needed orientation and mobility services at the appropriate time increases the likelihood that they can participate meaningfully in a variety of aspects of their schooling, including academic, nonacademic, and extracurricular activities. Once these individuals are no longer in school, their use of acquired orientation and mobility skills should greatly enhance their ability to move around independently in a variety of educational, employment, and community settings. These skills also should enhance the ability of blind and visually impaired students to obtain employment, retain their jobs, and participate more fully in family and community life.”

“…An evaluation under Part B must assess the child in all areas related to suspected disability, including, if appropriate, ‘health, vision, hearing, social, and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities.’ In addition, the evaluation must be sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the child’s special education and related service needs, whether or not commonly linked to the disability category in which the child has been classified…. A child’s need for orientation and mobility services and the appropriate method or methods for acquiring the requisite skills also should be assessed, and this generally would be accomplished through an assessment of motor abilities, as well as vision and communicative status, which should be conducted as early as possible. This is especially important because parents and organizations representing the interests of blind and visually impaired individuals have reported that, in some instances, these students are not receiving appropriate orientation and mobility services and that appropriate evaluations of their needs for these services are not being conducted. In all instances, the results of all assessments administered to determine the child’s needs resulting from one or more disabilities other than blindness or visual impairment must be considered as the child’s IEP is developed” (National Archives, 2000).

## Why to assess

IDEA requires all children who meet eligibility as a child with a documented visual impairment receive an O&M evaluation to determine whether or not the visual impairment effects the acquisition of age/grade level expected O&M skills. The orientation and mobility assessment determines the need for instruction and is the basis for developing instructional goals and objectives commensurate with a student’s current needs which also build the foundations for future needs. It is said that assessment drives instruction (Olson, 2003, as cited in Stanford & Reeves, 2005). The findings of the assessment also inform the family and other team members of the best ways to support and nurture independence. Though the student’s home school may understand the present needs very well, the completed assessment report provides information to the receiving team if a student enters a new instructional setting, either by promotion, moving to a new district, or into adult transition services. Assessment also helps the instructor know whether teaching methods are working and whether changes need to be made to ensure student progress.

## When to assess

Initial assessment in orientation and mobility should occur during the process of determination of eligibility for special education based on visual impairment. Ongoing assessment in orientation and mobility should also be considered as part of every three-year reevaluation for students who are receiving special education services based on their visual disability. An orientation and mobility specialist should be part of the decision-making process to determine if an assessment in the area of orientation and mobility is needed at a reevaluation. For very young children ages birth through two, who are receiving special education services through an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), assessments should be conducted annually rather than every three years.

“After the initial assessment for eligibility for visual impairment, an orientation and mobility specialist must be part of the multidisciplinary team that determines the scope of any needed full and individual reevaluations.” (TSBVI, 2020).

It is very rare that a child or young person will go for three years (or even one year in the case of infants and toddlers) without significant development. An assessment should be conducted to accurately reflect the new abilities of the young person, many of which occur by natural developmental processes, even in the absence of direct instruction. Concepts, physical abilities, changes in sensory ability, etc. all occur rapidly in childhood and continue throughout adolescence and early adulthood. Additional times to conduct a new assessment include when the student experiences significant changes in visual function, physical ability, or cognitive abilities.

## Who should assess

Assessment to determine need for orientation and mobility instruction should be conducted by a certified and or licensed orientation and mobility specialist, either a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS), National Orientation and Mobility Certification instructor/teacher (NOMC), or a state-licensed or state-certified orientation and mobility specialist; states may have their own specific regulations in place regarding certifications currently recognized for qualified orientation and mobility specialists in the school-age system.

## What to assess

IDEA specifies what is included in the category of orientation and mobility:

Sec. 300.34 (c) (7)

(7) Orientation and mobility services—

(i) Means services provided to blind or visually impaired children by qualified personnel to enable those students to attain systematic orientation to and safe movement within their environments in school, home, and community; and

(ii) Includes teaching children the following, as appropriate:

(A) Spatial and environmental concepts and use of information received by the senses (such as sound, temperature and vibrations) to establish, maintain, or regain orientation and line of travel (e.g., using sound at a traffic light to cross the street);

(B) To use the long cane or a service animal to supplement visual travel skills or as a tool for safely negotiating the environment for children with no available travel vision;

(C) To understand and use remaining vision and distance low vision aids; and

(D) Other concepts, techniques, and tools.

Orientation and Mobility Career, College, and Community Readiness (CCCR) Standards (Tellefson, 2017) establishes five domains to consider when looking at the whole picture of the learner: Concept Development; Sensory Development; Orientation & Mapping; Formal and Travel Techniques; Communication, Personal Safety and Advocacy. Each of these domains represent areas of needed development for independence as an adult; they should each be considered when conducting an assessment.

AER Division IX, Scope of Practice for Orientation and Mobility (O&M) includes the following domains as components of O&M assessment and instruction: concept development, sensory awareness and development, sensorimotor development and facilitation, orientation, mobility, assistive technology, environmental access, social, and psychosocial. There are some states that have also explicitly outlined the minimum requirements for an orientation and mobility assessment; as an example:

The Orientation and Mobility Assessment Report (see Appendix E) should include the background referral information, a list of tests and/or procedures administered, assessment findings, and documentation of assessment validity. Assessment findings must include the following components:

* Home and Community Environments - the student’s ability to safely locate functional destinations and areas of need and interest inside the home and outside in the neighborhood
* School Environment - the student’s ability to safely locate functional daily classroom destinations, recreational areas, and miscellaneous areas of need and interest, travel in crowded hallways, safe travel on steps, elevators, and the cafeteria
* Lighting Conditions - the student’s ability to safely deal with glare, transition from light to dark and from dark to light, travel in sunny, dim, and reduced lighting conditions (night travel)
* Indoor Environments - the student’s ability to safely use self-protective techniques, landmarks, directions, sounds, and other clues for orientation, utilize systematic search patterns to explore the environment, cane skills, safe/efficient movement, and problem- solving strategies
* Outdoor Environments - the student’s ability to use self-protective techniques, landmarks, sounds, directions, and other clues for orientation, systematic search patterns to explore the environment, cane skills, street crossing techniques (stop sign, interference, traffic light, etc.), safe/efficient movement, knowledge of where, when and how to solicit assistance, and problem-solving strategies
* Familiar Environments - the student’s ability to use self-protective techniques, use of systematic search patterns to explore the environment, and safe/efficient movement
* Unfamiliar Environments - the student’s ability to use self-protective techniques, safe/efficient movement, knowledge of where, when, and how to solicit assistance, and problem-solving strategies
* Other skills that may be evaluated during the O&M assessment - various forms of public transportation (e.g., taxi, ride services, public bus, light rail, subway, paratransit, etc.)

Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Early Intervention/Special Education Services. *TA Bulletin: Orientation and Mobility (Technical Assistance Bulletin 18-03, March 2018)*

“Assessment and instruction of safe, efficient, purposeful travel for people who are blind or have low vision (O&M) are provided in a wide variety of natural settings. Unlike conventional classroom instruction, O&M assessment and instruction for children and adults with visual impairments must occur in the environments in which the skills will be used (the natural setting). Lessons take place in all areas of the community, at all times of the day and in all kinds of weather, including at night or in dim lighting.” (AER, 2013).

In addition to the areas related specifically to orientation and mobility, there are other areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) that the orientation and mobility specialist is involved in with students and that should be included in the assessment report. Some districts may have included ECC areas with the orientation and mobility assessment, while others may have a separate assessment report for addressing ECC areas.

“Both the TVI and the COMS have roles in evaluating or ensuring appropriate

evaluation of the student’s needs in all areas of the ECC. The COMS must perform the O&M evaluation. In other areas of the ECC, the two professionals may collaborate with each other as well as other members of the team, including the family, to ensure a valid comprehensive evaluation” (TSBVI, 2020).

“Collaborative efforts addressing the ECC by the TVI [TSVI], COMS, parents and other team members is an effective model for many ECC areas (e.g., social skills, independent living skills, recreation and leisure, self-determination, etc.).” (Statewide Leadership Services, 2014)

Another area assessed is functional vision, with results often included in the formal orientation and mobility assessment report as well as the Functional Vision Assessment, FVA or a Functional Vision Evaluation, FVE. O&M professionals are encouraged to look into their state regulations and guidance documents, as well as at their district and local level, as policies regarding evaluation procedures vary. The preferred method of completing assessment of functional vision is through collaboration of the teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI) and the orientation and mobility specialist (O&M). There are many situations that also require assessment of the child’s environment(s) and other components of the child’s day.

“A quality assessment goes beyond examination of the use of vision; it also includes consideration for compensatory adaptations needed within the daily routine[s] at times when the visual sense is not the primary mode for accessing information” (Mazel et al., 2020).

Finally, assessing the child’s or young person’s functional auditory ability as it relates to orientation and mobility and other areas of the ECC is important to determine if any hearing loss or processing challenges will impact the child’s ability to use hearing for accessing information (including environmental sounds) and traveling safely and efficiently. A dual sensory loss of vision and hearing has a synergistic effect as one system cannot compensate for the other.

“The combined effects of a vision and hearing loss may prevent the student with Deafblindness from fully benefiting from amplification due to the loss of visual cues (i.e., speech reading, identification and location of sound source, visual access to items and events under discussion, facial expression, body language, sign language and fingerspelling.) Due to the reduced access of these visual cues, students with Deafblindness may require individualized auditory training to fully benefit from amplification by attaching meaning to auditory input.

“Conduct a functional evaluation of the student’s current ability to attach meaning to auditory input. The evaluation should be conducted by a multi-disciplinary team including, but not limited to, a Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (TDHH), a Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI), and a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS).” (Tabb, C., 2021).

## Conclusion

Orientation and mobility assessment is necessary for determining the needs of children and young people who qualify for instruction, justifying any decision to deny needs for specially designed instruction, and for keeping team members (including families) aware of a child’s functional level, needs, and strategies for supporting the child’s development as related to blindness, low vision, and deafblindness. Assessment should be conducted to determine initial need for special education based on visual impairment and then should be repeated at least annually for infants and toddlers and at least every three years for children up to their departure from the school-age system.

## Resources

The LiveBinder called “Paperwork Basics for COMS” contains many resources from around the country and the world, for assessment, standards, guidelines, etc. The LiveBinder can be accessed at https://www.livebinders.com/b/1821742

Individual states often have resources related to assessment with state and regional guidance included, such as Michigan Department of Education, Low Incidence Outreach, https://mdelio.org/blind-visually-impaired/expanded-core-curriculum/orientation-and-mobility

Resources related to individuals who are deafblind can be accessed via the National Center on Deaf-Blindness at https://www.helenkeller.org/hknc, , Helen Keller National Center at https://www.helenkeller.org/hknc, as well as searching for the Deafblind Project in each state across the country, such as https://txdeafblindproject.org.

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