

**ALBERTA EDUCATION REVIEW OF SERVICES
FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED
Questions and Answers**

Implementation of the Recommendations

Q: What will be the impact of the new funding resulting from the service review for students and children with vision loss?

A: A total of \$9.39 million in new funding is being provided over the next three years to move toward an enhanced service delivery model for these students.

More specifically, \$3.1 million per year, starting in 2008, will benefit students by:

- Improving student access to teachers of the visually impaired to support student achievement on the learning outcomes. The intent is to begin providing supports to students closer to their own communities, especially for those in rural areas.
- Providing students with vision loss access to special equipment, including training modules for staff on equipment use. With sustainable funding, school authorities will have equitable and timely access to the student equipment loan service of the Learning Resources Centre of Alberta Education.
- Providing students with improved access to the learning content of curriculum materials and provincial examinations. Through the work of a teacher of the visually impaired, Alberta Education will begin work on adapting curriculum materials early at the development stage and will work on supporting these students' special test writing needs, improving their equitable access to exams.
- Improving students' timely access to authorized learning resources in alternate format by increasing production (e.g., braille, large print, audio) especially for newly authorized learning resources.
- Building capacity in the education system for an enhanced service delivery model for students with vision loss through partnerships and collaborations. A provincial coordinator position will be established to provide leadership, to develop relationships, to address the vision specialist shortages, and to facilitate research on student success.

Q: When will the actions begin?

A: Planning is underway on the implementation of the review recommendations including the establishment of a provincial coordinator position.

Stakeholder Consultation

Q: Who requested a program review of the services for students who are blind or visually impaired?

A: In August 2007, at a meeting with the Alberta Society for the Visually Impaired and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, the Minister of Education agreed to support a program review of services for these students and children.

Q: Who was involved in the stakeholder consultation?

A: The following stakeholder organizations provided input:

- Alberta School Councils' Association
- Alberta Teachers' Association (including teaching assistants)
- Alberta School Boards Association
- Alberta Society for the Visually Impaired (ASVI)
- Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta
- Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)
- College of Alberta School Superintendents (including special education directors)
- Educational Consulting Services for the Sensory Impaired
- Regional Educational Consulting Services
- Vision Resource Centre chairs (Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge)

Organizations unable to participate in the full-day workshop were encouraged to provide written input through the [Workshop Discussion Guide](#).

Q: What was the stakeholder response from the consultation?

A: The workshop participants reported gaining a broader understanding and awareness of the supports and services these students need for high school completion.

For example, participants indicated that they were not aware of the complexity involved in the production of alternate format materials (e.g., braille textbooks).

Also, there was agreement that coordination and planning of services across the education system is critical and complex.

Q: Is there a summary of the stakeholder responses?

A: The report [Stakeholder Responses and Recommendations, December 2007](#). The report is based on input from a broad representation of education stakeholders received at the workshop and through written inputs.

Q: What guides educational programming for students who are blind or visually impaired?

A: The [*Essential Components for Educational Programming for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired*](#), (Alberta Education, 2006), guides the program development and planning for these students.

The *Essential Components* outlines how the [*Standards for Special Education, Amended June 2004*](#) might be implemented by identifying sample indicators of effective programming.

Q: How many students with vision loss are registered with the Learning Resources Centre (LRC) of Alberta Education?

A: Today, there 662 students (154 blind and 508 low vision) enrolled in 407 schools across Alberta, accessing the LRC services. Vision consultants working with schools assess students and determine appropriate educational programming. They register students with the LRC to access the alternate format and specialized equipment services in recognition of their vision loss and educational needs.

Visual impairment and blindness are low-incidence disabilities, so a student with vision loss may be the only student with this disability in his or her school.

The [*Services for Students with Visual Impairments Policy*](#) for alternate format services and for the special equipment loan service will be revised for alignment with the direction of the review recommendations.

Alternate Format Service for students with vision loss

Q: Why is access to alternate format learning resources important for students with vision loss?

A: Access to learning resources in alternate formats such as braille, electronic texts, large print and audio is necessary for these students to develop the literacy and numeracy skills to succeed and to complete high school.

Q: Where do schools obtain alternate format materials for these students?

A: The LRC loans schools alternate format learning resources to facilitate students' access to educational programs. Vision consultants support school staff by identifying the appropriate alternate format for the student.

Q: Where does the LRC obtain alternate format learning resources that schools request for students?

A: The LRC produces learning resources in alternate formats when they are unavailable from other sources (e.g., borrow from other educational jurisdictions, purchase from agencies serving the vision loss community). The total savings for 2006/07 from borrowing were \$240,059. The cost of a braille high school textbook can be around \$40,000.

The LRC school production priorities are:

- Priority 1 – basic provincially authorized resources
- Priority 2 – support provincially authorized resources
- Priority 3 – other resources locally authorized

School boards adopting locally authorized learning resources also have a role in alternate format production of these resources.

Q: How long does it take to produce a textbook in braille format?

A: The production of a high school science textbook can take from six months to two years, depending on the size and complexity of the textbook. The LRC must receive braille production requests from schools at least four months before the learning resource is needed for student use in the classroom.

When production requires a significant amount of time, and to keep up with the student's classroom needs, the school provides the LRC the order in which the chapters will be covered in the classroom. This provides the student access to the chapters as they are completed.

Q: How many braille services staff work for the LRC?

A: The LRC currently has seven full time and one half-time staff as well as 18 part-time contractors.

Special equipment loan service for students with vision loss

Q: What is the special equipment loan service?

A: The special equipment loan service supports students' access to learning materials and contributes to their independence. The LRC loans school authorities the special equipment (e.g., computers with braille input/output, brailers, talking/large print calculators and/or dictionaries, closed circuit TV systems, and audio players).

School authorities borrowing the equipment must sign loan agreements thereby assuming full responsibility for the loss of or damage to the equipment on loan, extending their own 'all risks' property insurance to cover the equipment and assuming full financial responsibility for equipment on loan.

Student use of the equipment at home is at the discretion of school authorities.

This school year, 486 students are registered to access this service. Fifty-six school authorities have loan agreements with the LRC. Equipment is also loaned to school boards that support the Calgary and Lethbridge Vision Resource Centres.

Q: When is student equipment purchased?

A: To date, equipment purchases are done on an ad hoc basis, in response to student wait list numbers and parent groups' (Alberta Society for the Visually Impaired, CNIB) concerns. With sustainable funding, it will be possible to plan for scheduled purchases.

Q: Who determines student wait lists?

A: To date, student wait lists are based on requests from vision consultants and schools. With a limited amount of equipment available, vision consultants and school staff generally request student names be placed on a wait list several years before the equipment is needed.

With sustainable funding, improvements can be made to support equitable distribution of equipment to students across the province. The LRC can be more responsive to school authorities' requests so all students can have access to special equipment to support their learning.

Q: Who is responsible for the equipment repair and maintenance?

A: Schools return student equipment to the LRC at the end of the school year for routine servicing by LRC staff over the summer. When requested by schools, the LRC also repairs equipment throughout the school year.

Q: What improvements will come with the sustainable funding?

A: The sustainable funding will improve timely access to equipment. Rather than responding to requests for funding on an ad hoc basis, we will be able to plan for scheduled purchases of equipment and develop our online services to increase efficiency of delivery and provide training modules on equipment use.

Q: How will the loan service work in the future?

A: A new position will be established for timely delivery of student special equipment to schools. The LRC will also develop an online database, including online coordination of equipment delivery and training on how to use the equipment.

Input from school authorities and parents' is needed to review the *Services for Students with Visual Impairments Policy* in recognition of the sustainable funding for the special equipment loan service.

Q: Who can answer my questions on the service review?

A: Email questions to: toni.hafso@gov.ab.ca.