

Putting a Face on Blindness/Visual Impairment in Colorado

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This article was published in Inside Exceptional Student Services Unit (Spring 2005).



If asked to think of a blind person, most of us will conjure up a handful of famous faces: Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Eric Weihenmayer, or Tom Sullivan. Or the face of an aging parent may come to mind or a child or a teacher in one of your schools. You may also think of someone who is not totally blind, but who has significantly limited vision. The term visual impairment includes a host of terms such as blindness, legal blindness, and low vision, each describing different levels of visual loss that cannot be corrected with eye glasses, surgery, or other medical interventions.

Visual impairment can happen at any time of the human life span. It is a low incidence disability in the early years of life, with a prevalence of about 1-2% in the population under the age of 18 years. Colorado has 1,069 children ages birth through 21 years of age who are blind/visually impaired: 59 are infants and toddlers; 186 are preschool age, and 824 are kindergarten through high school age.

Visual impairment in the early years can be caused by a number of factors. The leading cause of pediatric visual impairment in Colorado and the United States is a condition called cortical visual impairment or CVI, which occurs when there is neurological damage to the visual pathways and/or visual cortex. The second and third most prevalent causes include retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) and optic nerve hypoplasia. These conditions fall into the category of ocular visual impairment or problems to a specific part of the eye such as the retina or the optic nerve.

Most students with visual impairment will need to have their instructional materials adapted. About 10 percent of Colorado's children with visual impairment are braille readers. Many students use large print and/or magnification tools such as handheld magnifiers or screen enlargement software on their computers. Other common adaptations might include the use of a slant board to bring reading material closer to the student's eyes, increased contrast between the item being viewed and its background, the use of task lighting, use of color or tactile highlights to equipment and instructional material, and/or tactile maps or graphics.

Colorado has two infant/toddler programs that specialize in visual impairment: the Anchor Center for Blind Children in Denver that offers a state outreach program and the Colorado School for the Blind Infant/Toddler Program, which serves Colorado Springs and the southeastern part of the state. The majority of school age children, preschool through high school, are educated in their home schools. Sixty-three school-age students attend the Colorado School for the Blind on the campus of the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind.

Statistics aside, the face of a child with visual impairment should be the same as any child who is intent on mastering the daily teaching activities at school, the lessons of friendship on the playground, and the routes to and from school and home and everywhere in between. With proper accommodations, a prepared educational team, and high expectations, it is the face of educational success.

