A Future View

Quality Education for All Students Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired

The Report of the California Blindness Advisory Task Force

California Department of Education
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Publishing Information

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A Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Helen Keller once noted, "I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble." Most of us will never become as famous or inspirational as Helen Keller. She truly accomplished great and noble tasks, but she correctly suggested that we can be proud of each task we master.

To help all children achieve their goals and realize their dreams—great and small—we must provide them with the quality education they deserve. Leave no child behind, as Marian Wright Edelman reminds us. We must be in awe of children and their achievements—whether it be learning to cross the street independently, reciting a poem, or making a groundbreaking scientific discovery.

In 1975 the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) enacted a system to provide children who have disabilities with full access to public schools. This system often implied a separate place for special education students, with a separate set of expectations.

Before Congress reauthorized IDEA in 1997, it considered a vast body of research and found that educating children with disabilities is more effective if there are high expectations and access to the core curriculum. As a result, California now recognizes that special education's role is not only to teach children special education skills. Instead, special education must provide children with services, skills, adaptations, and support they need to access the core curriculum.

I established the 20-member California Blindness Advisory Task Force to develop recommendations to support the education of children who are blind and visually impaired. While these students face tremendous challenges, they—like all our students—are capable of enormous triumphs and great accomplishments as well as those small tasks that are essential to everyday living.

California has made strides in recent years on many fronts to improve our education system and our core curriculum. We must make sure that children who are blind and visually impaired have access to the same rich curriculum as all other students, with timely adaptations as necessary. Students with visual impairments should have well-trained, high-caliber teachers as well as accessible schools, instructional materials, and technology. Our goal is to provide these students with the tools and the skills they need for future education and employment, for living independently, and for becoming successful members of our society.

I want to thank the task force members for all their hard work on behalf of California's children who are blind and visually impaired. Their meetings were spirited and their commitment unsurpassed. I appreciate the many hours that task force members spent crafting these recommendations, and I pledge to share this document with educators and policymakers throughout the state and to push the recommendations. There is more that can and should be done to ensure that California has a world-class education system that helps ALL children to achieve at their highest levels.

Our students deserve no less.

DELAINE EASTIN
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Education must aim at giving the blind child knowledge of the realities around him, the confidence to cope with these realities, and the feeling that he is recognized and accepted as an individual in his own right.

—**Berthold Lowenfeld**
Superintendent of the California School for the Blind, 1949–1964

Vision is the most complex of the human senses. It is useful for helping to gather and interpret an endless stream of impressions, to find and establish patterns, to organize messages made with light and shadows, and to give form to sensory input. When scientists seek a better understanding of that illusive and abstract concept "consciousness," they turn to the mechanics of the visual system. When poets need a metaphor to describe mental perception, they refer to the "mind's eye." When unimaginative speakers need a cliché to illustrate obtuseness, they may revert to the phrase, "We turned a blind eye to . . . "

Still it does not follow that a loss or reduction of sight will unfailingly lead to a lesser quality of life, or a diminished ability to engage in and enjoy the possibilities that life offers. Vision can be as misused as it is useful, encouraging snap decisions on appearance alone. The eye can be easily fooled, and the very idea of blindness itself is often misunderstood.

What exactly is a visual impairment? Blindness? For the purposes of this document, the phrase "all students who have vision impairments" includes infants, toddlers, and pupils of school age. These students may also have disabilities in addition to visual impairment.

The term visually impaired includes, for educational purposes:

- Functionally blind students (who because of the severity of their visual impairment rely basically on senses other than vision as their major channels for learning)
- Low vision students (who use vision as a major channel for learning)

A visual impairment does not include visual perceptual or visual motor dysfunction resulting solely from a learning disability.

For a child with a visual impairment, the challenges that come with this condition are set against a backdrop of issues ranging from access to educational curricula to the ability to travel safely in an environment primarily designed for sighted people.

Public education for students with visual impairments in California has developed over more than 140 years, beginning with the establishment in 1860 of the California School for the Blind in San Francisco. The School for the Blind moved to Berkeley in 1869, and it remained there until 1980 when it moved to its present location in Fremont, California. This special school with residential options provides concentrated instructional services as part of the required continuum of placement options.

The first local public school program in California for students with visual impairments was established in 1915 in Los Angeles. Blind and visually impaired students were educated in a self-contained classroom located on a school site where nondisabled students attended, but instructional services remained primarily separated.

Nine years later the first resource rooms were established for blind and visually impaired students. These programs provided the first opportunity for these students to be enrolled in classrooms containing nondisabled peers for much of the school day. Some instruction was provided in the standard classroom while specialized equipment and instruction relating to the unique needs of the visually impaired were provided in the resource room. This instructional model still exists today in some high-density population areas as part of the continuum of services for students with visual impairments.

During the 1930s improved roads and transportation systems allowed teachers to travel greater distances in less time, and the first itinerant programs were established to provide instruction to students with visual impairments. Today, itinerant programs provide specialized instruction to almost 90 percent of the students with visual impairments in California.

In 1950, Los Angeles voters passed the first school bond to construct the Frances Blend School, a special school for students who are blind and partially sighted. In the mid-1950s, the California Department of Education established the Clearinghouse Depository for the Blind to provide state-adopted textbooks and other special materials and equipment for students with visual impairments. In the 1970s, the name was changed to the Clearinghouse Depository for Handicapped Students when it became clear that books on tape were of value to students with learning disabilities. Today, this unit is called the Clearinghouse for Specialized Media and Technology (CSMT). Its current mission is to make learning resources accessible to students who are blind and visually impaired or who have other disabilities that make accessing the core curriculum difficult. CSMT is unique in the nation for its reach and breadth and for its commitment to cutting-edge technology.

In 1967 orientation and mobility instruction was initiated to teach students to travel safely and independently in Los Angeles. In 1970 the first preschool and the first vocational education programs were established for students with visual impairments.

How successful have these programs been? What has worked? What has not worked? What is needed? In May 2001 State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin established the California Blindness Advisory Task Force to develop recommendations "to improve the quality of educational services and programs for students who are blind and visually impaired." This task force is composed of consumers, educators, parents, and administrators.

The task force addressed six areas of focus with specific needs and issues. They are:

1. Education and curriculum
2. Service delivery
3. Support
4. Institutions of higher education

5. Transition
6. Research and policy development

Blindness is a very low incidence disability in children. As a result, the many local schools and agencies typically do not have the experience and expertise to provide appropriate educational services. This situation creates the need for collaboration beyond traditional boundaries. California must assume a leadership role in encouraging such collaboration on a local and regional basis as well as to provide a central resource of expertise, technical assistance, and outreach.

Furthermore, some issues cut across the primary areas of focus. Accessibility stands out as an immediate and unanimous concern for children who have visual impairments. The notion of success has no boundaries when people have access.

All students deserve access to:

- The core curriculum
- The expanded core curriculum for students with visual impairments (a curriculum to meet the disability-specific needs of visually impaired students)
- The school and community environments
- Instructional materials in appropriate learning media (such as Braille, large print, tapes, and electronic media)
- A certificated educator
- Technology
- The skills they will need to further their education, get fulfilling jobs, and be contributing members of society
- The ability to live as independently as possible

In addition, all students deserve emotional access—to feel that they too have skills, gifts, wisdom, and friendship to contribute.

The task force came to consensus concerning key issues to be addressed in California. These include:

- A full continuum of program options for all students with visual impairments, including special schools, resource rooms, special day classes, and itinerant services to fully included students
- Permanent staff in the California Department of Education (CDE), one in Southern California and one in Northern California, as part of a Low Incidence Unit that can address the educational and orientation and mobility needs of students with visual impairments, including students with multiple disabilities

- A fully recognized, expanded core curriculum that meets the unique needs of students with visual impairments from birth to age 22, including those with multiple disabilities
- Accessibility to technology-based learning resources incorporating designs that are used for sighted students in California's public schools
- Establishing mechanisms to solve the shortage of Orientation and Mobility Specialists and Teachers of the Visually Impaired
- Representation of professionals, consumer advocates, and parents from the blindness field on appropriate CDE commissions, committees, and task forces
- Continuation of the California Blindness Advisory Task Force as an advisory board to CDE

Many of the unique educational needs of students with visual impairments are already described in the *Program Guidelines for Students Who Are Visually Impaired*, published by the California Department of Education.

In an age of furious change and drastic threats to the principles that we hold most dear, some things remain constant. Of utmost importance among these is a quality education for all our children so that they may be among the leaders of the future.

Finally, where our children with visual impairments are concerned, it is helpful for us—whether consumers, parents, teachers, administrators, or community members—to respect what one person who is blind referred to as "the opportunity to be equal and the right to be different." In doing so we will once again succeed in meeting the challenges of our time, as we build on the successes of the past to realize Helen Keller's dream that " . . . every blind child have an opportunity to receive a quality education."

I. Education and Curriculum

The population of students with visual impairments is diverse in many respects; as a result unique educational strategies and curricular materials need to be used.

Students with visual impairments and blindness have a range of visual functioning and unique needs. In addition to these students, students who have visual impairments along with other disabilities have specific educational needs. All students who are blind and visually impaired must have fully qualified personnel in the field of visual impairment and blindness as members of their educational teams and programs. Students who are blind and visually impaired, including infants and toddlers, must have access to a full range of placement options throughout their educational years.

Recommendations

A. State and local educational agencies should acknowledge, endorse, implement, and monitor the expanded core curriculum for students of all ages who have vision impairments. Disability-specific skills include a student's needs for:

- Alternative learning media, such as Braille
- Visual efficiency skills and use of low vision devices
- Orientation and mobility
- Instruction in the use of assistive technology
- Social interaction skills

- Independent living and recreation and leisure skills
- Vocational skills

B. California should ensure that students who are blind and visually impaired should be provided the same accommodations and modifications for high-stakes core curriculum assessments that are required for all other students. Local and state contracts with assessment publishers should identify key appropriate accommodations and modifications to students' individualized education plans (IEPs) and 504 plans. Such contracts should also highlight the need for timely delivery of tests in special media with equitable scoring strategies and processes.

C. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction should continue to monitor policies and procedures that establish the use of appropriate functional vision assessments (how a student uses his or her vision in an educational setting); orientation and mobility evaluations; reading medium assessments (including Braille, large print, and electronic media); and assistive technology assessments that are performed in compliance with California's *Education Code* and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) by teams of qualified individuals. All assessments, particularly learning media and literacy assessments, should be conducted in partnership with parents before developing IEPs and evaluating placement options. Assessments of infants and toddlers, including those with additional disabilities, must also be conducted by a professional in the area of visual impairment and blindness.

D. The State Superintendent should continue to monitor policies and procedures to ensure that additional assessments, such as psychological, speech, hearing, and language evaluations, are conducted in collaboration with fully credentialed professionals in the field of visual impairment and blindness.

E. Local and state educational agencies must ensure that learning resources are available to their students in all appropriate media options, including Braille, large print, recordings, and other electronic formats. These materials should meet existing state specifications.

F. The California State Board of Education (SBE) and CDE should create guidelines, agreements, and contracts with publishers and providers of technology-based learning tools that require accom-

modations for students who are blind and visually impaired. When adopting learning resources, SBE and local boards of education should give preference to those technology-based learning resources, such as compact discs (CDs), videos, digital videodiscs (DVDs), Internet sites, and computer networks, that are universally designed to also accommodate students who are blind and visually impaired.

G. California should enact legislation requiring publishers of instructional materials to provide computer files that are well structured, are compatible with existing Braille translation software, and facilitate the production of books in digital media to accommodate students who are blind and visually impaired. The files should be downloadable on the Internet from a national repository, such as the American Printing House National Repository.

H. California should enact legislation to establish policies and procedures to provide blind and visually impaired students alternative formats of textbooks used in the core curriculum at the same time sighted peers receive the textbooks in print.

I. The State Superintendent should encourage ongoing communication and collaboration between teachers of the visually impaired and general education staff to create learning environments that accommodate students who are blind and visually impaired.

J. Extended school-year or other alternative programs should provide services for students to meet expanded core curriculum needs, including alternative communication modes, assistive technology skills, use of low vision devices and visual efficiency, orientation and mobility, social interaction skills, independent living, and recreation and leisure skills. The State Superintendent should establish policies and procedures assuring that instruction for students who are blind and visually impaired will extend beyond the boundaries of the school and the school day.

K. The California Department of Education, California Department of Rehabilitation, Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, and institutions of higher education must provide seamless transition processes between education, rehabilitation, higher education, and the workplace with a process for devices and equipment to transition with the student.

II. Service Delivery

All students who are blind and visually impaired and their families should be provided access to a full array of service delivery options, including those provided in resource rooms, specialized programs, self-contained classrooms, itinerant programs, and special schools.

Due to the low prevalence of blindness and visual impairment, partnerships must be established among private, public, local, regional, state, and national agencies to ensure that an array of appropriate services are available. Students who are blind and visually impaired, including infants and toddlers, have varying strengths and needs, and the type of service options will differ as the students' needs change. The presence of additional disabilities also impacts the educational program. The degree to which students require instruction in disability-specific skills (an expanded core curriculum to meet the needs of visually impaired students) strongly influences what services are required.

Recommendations

A. California should ensure that a full array of service options is available for every student who is blind and visually impaired, including infants and toddlers. These services may be provided by one agency or by multiple agencies working in collaboration.

B. All local educational agencies should comply with recommendations regarding class sizes and caseloads set forth in CDE's *Program Guidelines for Students Who Are Visually Impaired*.

C. California should enact legislation to establish a statewide system of support for outreach, technical assistance, staff development, and assessment in collaboration with the California School for the Blind and local educational agencies.

D. California should ensure that the California School for the Blind has adequate staffing, with salaries competitive with other teachers' salaries in the surrounding area.

III. Support

Information regarding blindness should be available to the education community as well as the general public.

Visual impairment is one of the lowest in incidence of all disabilities; approximately 4,500 students from birth to age 22 are served in California's public schools. It is often the disability least understood and most often misunderstood by the general public. Parents of visually impaired children sometimes know little about their children's disability. They need access to information, support systems, and training to learn how to meet their children's needs and to participate fully in planning and implementing the individual family service plans, individualized education plans, and individualized transition plans.

The community at large, including the education community, also needs access to information about visual impairment so that educational planning and implementation are based on a firm foundation of understanding about these unique students and their specialized, often costly needs.

Recommendations

A. Each region and program should develop guidelines and procedures to ensure that families receive information about vision loss, available services, program options, and methods for educating children with visual impairments, from birth to age 22. Parents should have access to support organizations and

training, including parents' rights and advocacy. District, regional, and state school programs should collaborate to provide support services and involve parents as trainers.

B. California should expand professional development opportunities for education administrators and program specialists who supervise and support Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Orientation and Mobility Specialists to learn about the specific needs of students with visual impairments. This professional development should include, but not be limited to, information about assessment, accommodations made within the core curriculum, the expanded core curriculum, alternative media, assistive technology, and orientation and mobility instruction.

C. California should enact legislation to provide funds to actively recruit and train professionals—including Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Orientation and Mobility Specialists, Braille transcribers, and instructional assistants—to work with students who are blind and visually impaired.

D. California should enact legislation to create and implement a staff development program for educators outside the field of visual impairment about the unique needs of students who are blind and visually impaired, including those with additional disabilities.

E. Students who are blind and visually impaired should have access to educational technology comparable to that made available to their sighted peers.

F. The State Superintendent should oversee the design and implementation of a program that ensures information and resources are shared between California public schools and the California Department of Rehabilitation, through the individualized transition plan for students who are blind and visually impaired, by age 14 or earlier, as mandated in IDEA.

IV. Institutions of Higher Education

Providing quality education to students with visual impairments requires administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals who are familiar with instructional methods that address the students' typical and unique curricular needs.

California has a severe shortage of personnel trained to work in educational settings with students with visual impairments. There are not enough fully credentialed teachers of students with visual impairments, Orientation and Mobility Specialists, Braille transcribers, and paraprofessionals with knowledge of visual impairments to serve the increasing population of students. In addition, administrators and related services personnel may not be aware of these students' specialized needs. To address these problems, California must develop a coordinated and collaborative network involving alliances among institutions of higher education, local educational agencies, state agencies, consumer organizations, and professional organizations.

Institutions of higher education with programs in visual impairments are graduating quality teachers but not in sufficient quantity to meet the needs of students with visual impairments throughout California. Most credential candidates in these programs are employed through emergency permits and are serving children in the state without full qualifications.

Currently, only two California programs issue educational specialist credentials in visual impairments or rehabilitative services credentials in orientation and mobility. One program is at San Francisco State University; the other is at California State University, Los

Angeles. Each institution has one full-time, tenure-track faculty member in visual impairments and one in orientation and mobility. In addition, no formal programs exist in community colleges to train Braille transcribers in California, and formal training programs for administrators, related services personnel, and paraprofessionals who work with students with visual impairments are nonexistent.

Recommendations

A. California should enact legislation to provide recruitment, personnel preparation, professional development, and employment incentives to attract, train, support, and retain qualified staff. Institutions of higher education must utilize traditional and innovative recruitment, training, and retention techniques to prepare qualified personnel to serve students with visual impairments in the schools.

B. California should enact legislation to provide incentives to recruit and retain graduate students and employed professionals in the field of visual impairment. These incentives would include providing tuition waivers and "forgivable" loan programs for credential candidates with a service obligation requirement to work with students who are visually impaired. Another incentive is to expand and maintain the professional support program for credential candidates and newly credentialed teachers, such as participation in preintern, internship, and Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment programs. Also, partnerships should be strengthened among local educational agencies, state agencies, and institutions of higher education to coordinate and enhance personnel preparation options.

C. Institutions of higher education should implement an innovative plan to augment Personnel Preparation Programs in Visual Impairments to address the increased need for teachers of students with visual impairments and Orientation and Mobility Specialists. This plan should include the use of interactive television, Web-based courses and other distance learning techniques, and a collaborative system that facilitates communication among the two university programs and key educational agencies. Also, this plan should institute a cohesive, statewide mentoring program for Teachers of the Visually Impaired and

Orientation and Mobility Specialists to improve systems for recruitment and student support. It also should increase the number of faculty assigned to each California State University as well as other personnel to implement these proposed changes.

D. School districts should establish career ladder programs to recruit personnel. These programs should include community college Braille transcription programs and expanded paraprofessional training with course work in educating students who are visually impaired. Recruitment of Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Orientation and Mobility Specialists should include individuals who are blind and visually impaired and individuals who are from culturally diverse backgrounds. High school and undergraduate college courses that specifically relate to blindness and visual impairment should be developed and should include instructional aides who serve in programs for the visually impaired in local paraprofessional programs.

V. Transition

Blind and visually impaired students, from birth to age 22, require coordinated support to transition successfully through the education system.

In California's public education system, "transition" traditionally refers to the process of helping students who have disabilities to prepare to move from high school into adult life. For children who are blind and visually impaired, transition starts when a toddler moves from an early start program to a preschool program. This transition process continues throughout the student's educational years.

Students should develop self-advocacy skills, expressing their own dreams, interests, and preferences. Planning for transition includes interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration at several levels, including family, school, district, region, and state.

A transition services requirement was added to IDEA at its reauthorization in 1990 in response to a U.S. Office of Special Education Programs-sponsored study that found two-thirds of special education students were underemployed and did not pursue further education or training.

The California Department of Education provides technical assistance on transition services through its publication *Transition to Adult Living: A Guide for Secondary Education*, through its WorkAbility Program, and through various other resources, many of which can be found on the Department's Web site at <*http://*

www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/sed/resource.htm>. However, resources that are specific to blindness transition issues are difficult to find.

For a child who has a visual impairment, the transition process may involve other complexities. For example, the process of "job shadowing" for a child with blindness or low vision requires a different system of acquiring information than for a child who has sight. Access to information and meeting the demands of the adult world, from finding the right forms to properly filling them out, also involve the acquisition and use of additional skills or techniques. Developing these skills must begin long before the formal transition process.

Many students who are blind and visually impaired need training in techniques and special adaptations and equipment to acquire independent living skills as well as recreation and leisure skills. This need may become especially apparent as students prepare to leave the education system. Often, the opportunities to learn these skills must compete with the high school's academic demands for the students' time and energy. Skills in independent living, leisure, and recreation should be taught throughout students' schooling, and time and resources must be provided within the school day for this instruction.

Specialized skills that students with visual impairments might need as they enter the various phases of transition, and which differ from those of their sighted peers, often include the acquisition of orientation and mobility skills. Finding, arranging for, and utilizing this specialized training is often a job in itself, due to the limited availability of orientation and mobility specialists, especially in rural areas, as well as the lack of coordination between various agencies responsible for providing this training. Another resource is the use of dog guides; nonprofit dog guide schools provide transportation and training with the animals at no cost.

Also, many technological advances, from low vision optical devices to highly sophisticated screen reading software, could help ease the transition process, but they remain inaccessible to consumers.

Recommendations

A. The Legislature and Governor should appropriate funds to support a professional staff member at CDE knowledgeable in teaching the visually impaired. The staff should gather, coordinate, and disseminate transition resources to provide a

seamless transition process within the school system and between agencies, such as CDE and the California Department of Rehabilitation.

B. Early intervention and family support services are critical for children with visual impairments. A regional system is needed to share information among parents, medical staff, and school districts so that students with visual impairments will be identified before they enter kindergarten and be referred for services.

C. California should enact legislation to fund a study to learn what happens to the state's students with visual impairments when they leave the school system. The study's findings should be utilized to improve programming and transition services.

D. The California Department of Education should provide support so that educators, families, and all stakeholders develop a transition curriculum specific to students with visual impairments.

E. Orientation and mobility services should be made available to all students throughout the transition process from one agency to another.

F. To help define, create, and realize these recommendations, a committee of consumers, educators, administrators, and parents should continue as a Blindness Advisory Task Force.

VI. Research and Policy Development

California should create a statewide system to determine more effectively the level of compliance with existing statutes and regulations related to students who are visually impaired.

Recommendations

A. California should establish a mandatory data system to analyze the statistics regarding programs that serve students who are visually impaired. These statistics should include, but are not limited to, the number of teachers serving students who are visually impaired, the number and diagnosis of functionally blind and low vision students, the number of orientation and mobility specialists, the number of transcribers, and the size of caseloads in various service delivery models. This data system can be incorporated as part of the California Special Education Management Information System that is used by special education local planning areas, county offices of education, and state-approved programs to submit student level data.

B. The California State Board of Education should establish regulations making it mandatory to monitor low incidence funding and other fiscal issues pertaining to programs serving students with visual impairments as part of every school district's independent annual audit.

C. California should enact legislation to adopt a policy that individuals who represent the interests of students with visual impairments will be on as many commissions, boards, committees, and other entities pertaining to general education and special education issues as possible.

Resources

Publications

Blind and Visually Impaired Students: Educational Service Guidelines. Edited by Gaylen S. Pugh and Jane Erin. Developed in cooperation with the Hilton/Perkins Program. Alexandria, Va.: The National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1999.

Communication Access and Quality Education for Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Children: The Report of the California Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Education Advisory Task Force. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1999.

Program Guidelines for Students Who Are Visually Impaired (Revised Edition). Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1997.

Internet Resources

American Council of the Blind <*http://www.acb.org*>

American Foundation for the Blind <*http://www.afb.org*>

American Printing House for the Blind <*http://www.aph.org*>

California Department of Education <*http://www.cde.ca.gov*>

California Department of Education, Special Education Division <*http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/sed/*>

California laws <*http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html*>

California School for the Blind <*http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/State_Spec_Schools/for_the_Blind/*>

Clearinghouse for Specialized Media and Technology <*http://www.cde.ca.gov/csmt*>

IDEA <*http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/Policy/IDEA/index.html*>

National Federation of the Blind <*http://www.nfb.org*>

National Library Service <*http://www.loc.gov/nls/*>

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic <*http://www.rfbd.org*>

Transition to Adult Living: A Guide for Secondary Education <*http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/sed/trnsgde.pdf*>

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