Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Outreach Programs
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Who Are Proficient Communicators, and How Can We Support Them?

Why do we need to put some focus on Proficient Communicators?

- Identification
- Deafblind Child Count
- Resources

Proficient Communicators

Currently, we are seeing an increase in congenitally deafblind students who are proficient communicators. The majority of these students have different etiologies than Usher Syndrome and were deafblind from birth.

2024 Texas Deafblind Child Count

2024 Texas Deafblind Child Count = 873
(2025 Texas Deafblind Child Count - 899)

- 473 students STAAR tested
  - Regular State Testing w/wo accommodations = 170 (36%! More than ⅓ of our DB Count!)
  - Only 14 were identified with Usher Syndrome

Who are Proficient Communicators

Characteristics of Proficient Communicators:

- **Language/Communication**: The student primarily uses conventional language (asl, english, spanish, other sign systems- as opposed to modes typically used by emerging communicators (prelinguistic object cues).
- **Curriculum**: The learner uses the state adopted general education curriculum. The curriculum may be adapted in regards to scope, but is not an alternative curriculum.
- **State testing on state adopted curriculum**: The student takes state testing with or without accommodations.
- **Diploma track**: The student is working towards a high school diploma that meets state requirements for graduation with or without accommodations. *NOTE*: Be on the lookout for some proficient communicators that may be inappropriately tracked.
- **Social Skills**: The student may have a good understanding of social dynamics, be keenly aware of peers, and be able to compare themselves to others, but may still need support to interact with peers and make friends.
- **Intellectual ability**: Intellectual functioning and cognitive abilities indicate functioning in the normal range as opposed to an intellectual disability. *NOTE*: We have to be very careful with this, as cognitive testing is not normed for students who are deafblind; far too often our students are at risk for being labeled ID due to inappropriate testing.

1

Proficient Communicator Identification Tool

- [Tool for Identification](#)
- [ACCESSIBLE Tool for Identification](#)

Acknowledgements

In 2019 the National Center on Deaf-Blind helped to form a Proficient Communicators Workgroup Identification Subcommittee which consisted of individuals from the California, Texas and Utah state deafblind project. These individuals were:

- Maurice Belote, Project Director of California Deafblind Services (retired)
- Robbie Blaha, Educational Consultant, Texas Deafblind Project
- Debbie Sanders, Project Specialist, Utah Deafblind Project

Current Iteration

The tool that follows is the most current version of the Proficient Communicator Identification Tool as of 2025. Our hope is that many individuals around the state of Texas and other state deafblind projects will utilize this product. We would like to gather data on the product and foresee further refinements as we go forward.

Proficient Communicators…

…are faced with some of the same underlying problems as emerging communicators.

- They have issues with gathering important incidental information that can lead to missing or incorrect key concepts as they grow up.
- Additional time is required to gather information, process and respond.

How do proficient communicators fit in the federal definition?

Federal Definition again- "Deaf-blindness means concomitant hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they [the children] cannot be accommodated in special education programs designed solely for children with deafness or children with blindness (34CFR, Part 300, Subpart A, 300.7 (c)(2))"

- This means there is a need for specialized instruction that is unique to their dual sensory impairment. What does that look like?

Gathering Common Needs

Over time and across multiple on-sites, our Project compiled a list of 12 specific recurring needs for Proficient Communicators.

12 Considerations for Specialized Instruction for Proficient Communicators

[IEP Checklist for Proficient Communicators](#)

1. Concepts

Address Requisite Concept (foundational concept) development through assessment and instruction.

- Requisite Concept Evaluation Tool - target gaps and ceilings in conceptual understanding

2. Prioritize content

Prioritize the curricular content; develop standards-based IEP in core subjects

- Gathering information can take much longer for students who are deafblind than for hearing/sighted learners. Slow down the pace of instruction.

3. Comprehension Checks

Define comprehension checks and include an individualized description in the student's accommodations.

- We can gain insight into a student's understanding through effective comprehension checks. Instead of asking a Yes/No question such as "Do you understand?", a more effective comprehension check may be "Can you explain that word or concept to me?" or "What does that mean to you?"

4. Time

Build time into the day to intervene; add an elective or time in a resource classroom.

- An elective period can be created (i.e. Innovative Courses) to pre-teach, re-teach, provide targeted comprehension checks, and allow extra time for inquiry and investigation.

5. Adapt

Apply adaptations and modifications to homework assignments; shorten, provide additional time, allow oral responses. Consider assigning alternative projects, and/or reducing or eliminating homework.

- Students who are deafblind have to work much harder than their peers to gather information and often experience fatigue.

6. Technology

Consider the student's technology needs. Develop a technology plan in the ARD minutes or deliberations.

- Students who are deafblind often require technology to compensate for the varying degrees of combined vision and hearing levels.

7. Stress

Monitor indications of stress.

- Students who are deafblind are working harder than most of their peers to keep up with real time instruction over the course of a school day and well into the evening hours. This can result in extremely high levels of stress as well as feelings of inadequacy.

8. ~~Behavior~~ *Distress*

Consider the impact of being deafblind on behavioral issues.

- High levels of stress can lead to distress. Students who are deafblind have a unique learning style resulting from reduced or missing access to information through vision and hearing. Frequently, the behavior in response to this lack of information is interpreted as intentional "bad behavior", when in reality, it's just the body's natural response to stress.

9. Social Skills

Consider the unique social skills needed for a student who is deafblind; include these in the IEP and provide direct instruction.

- Being deafblind impacts the ability to form relationships and respond to interactions with others in typical ways. For example, a lack of environmental information makes it difficult to identify people, locate them, know what they are doing, or understand what they want.

10. Self-Advocacy

Consider the unique skills needed in self-advocacy for a student who is deafblind, include these in the IEP, and provide direct instruction.

- Being an effective self- advocate about communication and access to information is essential for success in higher education, employment, and other community settings.

  Note regarding advocacy fatigue: It is important to acknowledge that each child differs in their ability to be a self-advocate and that the demands of constantly having to advocate for basic needs related to access can be incredibly fatiguing for an individual.

11. Supplemental Services

The discussion for supplemental needs and services considers the need for additional resources, training and/or staff to provide in-class support.

- Certain related services and supports are designed for students with sensory impairments, and should be considered for all students who are deafblind. For example, an intervener is a paraprofessional with special skills and training who is designated to work individually with a student who is deafblind.

12. Transition

Consider the unique transition needs of a student who is deafblind and include these in the IEP.

- As a student enters the teen years and nears graduation, there are considerations for both educational programming (are they planning to go to college, get a job, live independently and what skills need to be targeted to help them be better equipped for these things), and do they understand and are they able to access community services, especially those designed for people are who are deafblind (community interveners, co-navigators, db job coaches and case managers).

- [Transition Resources](#)
- [ECC Considerations for Students who are Deafblind](#)

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Thank you for joining me!