

# New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

## **[Slide 1] Welcome**

Welcome to the New Mexico TEAM technical assistance module on making eligibility determinations under the category of visual impairment, including blindness, also called VI. Throughout this module, we will refer to this eligibility category as “visual impairment,” but teams should understand that this includes all degrees of visual impairment, including blindness. This module will review the guidance of the NM TEAM section on VI. During this module, you will sometimes be referred back to a different module or other resources for additional information. We encourage you to have a copy of the NM TEAM available and open to the section on VI for reference during this module.

## **[Slide 2] Learner Objectives**

After successfully completing this module, you will have the knowledge to use evaluation data effectively to make an eligibility determination under the category of VI. Specifically, you will be able to: understand the federal definition of VI, identify some common characteristics of VI and the associated educational impact, and recognize special considerations for assessment for children with known or suspected VI. Additionally, you will understand the highly recommended and potential components of an evaluation for VI, know the criteria required for eligibility under the category of VI, and understand how to document the team’s eligibility determination decisions.

## **[Slides 3-4 ] Definition**

[Slide 3] When teams are making eligibility determination decisions, IDEA outlines a two-step approach. Each of these steps involves responding to a specific question—the first question is “Does the child have a disability as defined by IDEA?” and the second question is “Does the child require specially designed instruction as a result of this disability?”

This module will walk you through answering those two questions. First, we’ll talk about the definition of VI, as defined by IDEA, to help you begin to better understand the disability itself. Next, we’ll talk about the impact of the disability on educational performance to help you understand when a child might require specially designed instruction as a result of VI. Later, after establishing this basic framework, we’ll talk more specifically about the evaluation components and the eligibility determination decisions.

IDEA’s definitions of disability terms are the cornerstones of eligibility determination decisions. The definition, combined with comprehensive assessment data, including detailed information about the child’s background, educational strengths and needs, and other pertinent factors, helps schools, educators, and parents determine if the child is eligible for and in need of special education and related services. Please take a moment to read the IDEA definition of VI and then we’ll take a closer look at it.

[Slide 4] Now let’s take a closer look at the definition. This definition of the disability will help teams answer the question: “Does the child have a disability as defined by IDEA?”

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

The definition of VI is fairly straightforward. To be identified as a child with a VI, the child must have an impairment in his vision. This definition includes children with partial sight, as well as those who are blind. It is important for teams to recognize that a child who has a visual impairment that is corrected to the point that it doesn't impact his educational performance would **not** be considered a child with a disability under IDEA and NMAC.

However, if the child's visual impairment, **even when corrected**, is significant enough to adversely affect the child's educational performance, he could be considered a child with VI. We'll talk about this second step to eligibility determination decisions by first talking about educational performance in general and then looking specifically at issues related to VI.

### [Slides 5-11] Educational Performance

[Slide 5] To determine the impact of a disability on a child's educational performance, the team needs to answer the question: "Does the child require specially designed instruction as a result of this disability?" If a child with a disability does not require specially designed instruction, then the child would not qualify under IDEA and teams should consider the implementation of a Section 504 plan or other classroom interventions to address the child's needs.

[Slide 6] According to IDEA, specially designed instruction means adapting, as appropriate, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to meet the unique needs that result from a child's disability. This includes special education.

[Slide 7] In New Mexico, services provided by a speech-language pathologist may also be considered special education, not simply a related service, if the services meet the requirements outlined in the New Mexico Administrative Code, typically referred to as NMAC.

[Slide 8] When evaluating a child for potential eligibility for special education and related services under the eligibility category of VI, according to IDEA, it is important that teams remember to consider three aspects of the child's educational performance. This includes the child's ability to: be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum, participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities, and be educated and participate with other children with and without disabilities.

[Slide 9] Teams are probably most familiar and most comfortable with the first of these areas: determining if a child's disability results in a need for specially designed instruction in order to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. While this includes academic progress, it may also include social skills, problem solving, communication, and other general curriculum areas.

[Slide 10] Second, it is also important for teams to consider whether a child needs specially designed instruction in order to participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities, such as recess, sports, choir, drama, and other clubs or school-related activities. For example, a child with VI may be performing satisfactorily in classroom activities because of the amount of supports inherent in the

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

classroom environment. However, this child may have difficulty with participation in extracurricular activities, like soccer or choir, because of the interaction between his disability and the nature of the activities. According to IDEA, this child may be found eligible for special education and related services because of the impact of his disability on his ability to participate in these activities. An example of this might be a child with VI who requires supplementary aids and services to participate in after-school clubs. It is important to recognize that IDEA doesn't guarantee children access to competitive teams or groups **because** of their disability. However, they should be permitted the same opportunity as other children to try out for the activities and/or teams. The New Mexico Activities Association provides guidance regarding academic eligibility for participation for children enrolled in special education programs.

[Slide 11] The third and final area for teams to consider is the child's ability to be educated and participate with other children, including those with and without disabilities. This is essentially a question of educational environment. For example, a child with VI may be able to access the general **curriculum** and participate in extracurricular activities, but because of his disability, it may be especially difficult for him to be educated in the general education classroom. This is not a discussion about where services will be delivered, but what services are necessary. For example, an eligibility determination team, or EDT, may determine that a child with challenging behaviors needs specially designed instruction in order to develop and support appropriate classroom behaviors and interactions. Other examples include a child with attention difficulties who requires specially designed instruction to learn strategies to improve his attention and focus in the classroom, or a child who needs specially designed instruction in the form of social skills interventions in order to participate in activities with peers. Where the first question teams ask relates to access to curriculum, this question addresses the educational setting for the child.

Now that we've talked in general about educational performance, let's look specifically at the possible adverse effects of VI on a child's education.

### **[Slides 12-17] Characteristics and Educational Impact**

[Slide 12] We're going to highlight some of the developmental areas that are commonly impacted by VI to help teams identify characteristics that may suggest that a child has VI. As we discuss the different areas, we will highlight characteristics and educational impact for both preschool-aged and school-aged children with VI. Although we're examining the same developmental areas for both age groups, the characteristics may be manifested in different ways depending on the developmental level of the child and the demands of the environment. It is important to recognize that the effects of VI will vary considerably, depending in large part upon the interaction between the child's characteristics, and the school, family, and community supports.

To identify the educational impact for a child with VI, the EDT must examine the demands of various settings and environments and the child's abilities to meet those demands by addressing the question of "How do the characteristics of the disability manifest in the child's natural environments (including

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

home, classroom, recess, and others)?” This determination needs to be made at a very individual level for each child and must be based on comprehensive information about the child and his environments, including information gained from observing a child’s functional and academic performance across a variety of settings.

[Slide 13] The characteristics of under the category of VI are organized around four domains: physical/motor, social/emotional, learning opportunities, and pre-academics or academics. These domains each include a range of skills that may be impacted by VI.

[Slide 14] When we are looking at the domain of physical/motor skills, children with VI may display deficits in fine motor skills, gross motor skills, or both. Vision plays an important role in early learning opportunities, as it is one of the primary means through which children learn to imitate behavior (such as getting dressed, playing with toys, and moving through the environment). In addition, young children develop their skills through exploring their environment. Depending on the severity of the impairment, children with VI may not explore their environments in the same ways or to the same degree as children without VI. Collectively, these differences in behavior may lead to deficits in gross motors skills, such as crawling and walking for younger children, and transitioning between and navigating within less familiar environments for older children.

[Slide 15] Children with VI may also demonstrate difficulties with social/emotional skills related to their impairment. A large part of communication and interpersonal relationship development is related to receiving and responding to non-verbal cues. Many young children with VI will be unable to respond to certain non-verbal cues because of their inability to see those cues. This may impact their ability to appropriately respond to other people’s emotions or to do things that aren’t explicitly stated. Older children may also have difficulty learning from environmental cues and understanding social dynamics between other people.

[Slide 16] Learning opportunities for children with VI will also often be impacted by the child’s vision. As mentioned previously, children with VI may have difficulty learning from incidental learning opportunities, such as by watching others, by observing activities in their environment, or by initiating engagement with toys and objects. In addition, children with VI may have limited participation in home and community activities, including recreational activities.

[Slide 17] Finally, children with VI may have deficits in pre-academic or academic activities. They likely may have difficulty learning visual concepts. Young children may have difficulty with concepts like colors, shapes, and sizes. Older children with VI may have difficulty with academic subjects such as geometry and science, due to the high visual requirements of these activities. In addition, young children with VI may have delayed pre-academic skills, such as in early reading and early math. Older children with VI may exhibit academic achievement delays across subject areas due to difficulty accessing educational materials.

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

Please refer to the “Characteristics and Educational Impact” section of the NM TEAM and remember that the characteristics presented in NM TEAM are not meant to be exhaustive nor is the NM TEAM suggesting that all children with VI will demonstrate all of the presented characteristics. It is important for teams to recognize that these characteristics may lead to limited opportunities for engaging in age-appropriate activities, opportunities to be educated with peers, and the learning that accompanies these activities.

### **[Slides 18-19] Special Considerations for Assessment**

[Slide 18] It is important for EDTs to be aware of issues related to evaluating young children and children with known or suspected disabilities, regardless of the eligibility categories being considered. For example, when evaluating young children, it is imperative that the impact of the family, home environment, home language, and developmental history be considered. Specifically, EDTs must determine that a possible lack of exposure to developmentally appropriate activities is not the *primary* reason for the child’s difficulties. In addition, for a child with a known or suspected disability, Evaluators must ensure that the assessment results accurately reflect the areas being assessed. For example, be careful that you are not measuring the child’s sensory, motor, or speaking skills, unless those are the skills you *wish* to assess. Please review NM TEAM section 6 for more information on these issues.

Like all of the eligibility categories, VI has unique characteristics that can influence the evaluation process. Assessment results must accurately reflect the child’s abilities being measured, rather than other skills, is particularly relevant for children with suspected VI. It is important that the evaluators take steps to ensure that the child’s vision difficulties don’t inadvertently impact the assessment results.

[Slide 19] In addition, teams should ensure that their evaluation of the child includes information that will guide the development of an educational program that is appropriate for the child. This includes evaluating the child’s skills and needs related to alternative methods of presenting written material, including Braille, large print, or books on tape; using tactile materials; using manipulatives for math or science; and adjusting environmental lighting to support the child’s visual abilities.

### **[Slides 20-23] Initial Evaluation: Visual Impairment, including Blindness**

[Slide 20] To answer the questions on the eligibility determination worksheets and make eligibility decisions, it is important to discuss the evaluation components that are outlined in the NM TEAM. A number of the components are the same across most, if not all, of the eligibility categories. These components are outlined and discussed in the Conducting Initial Evaluations Module.

Highly recommended evaluation components for VI are listed on the screen in front of you and in the NM TEAM under the VI section. All of the highly recommended components are important and should be addressed in an evaluation, but some of the elements need to be discussed in a bit more depth to help evaluators more clearly understand the component within the context of VI.

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

Please remember that the assessments chosen must be tailored to assess specific areas of suspected disability and educational need. Assessment of children for whom VI is suspected should be multidisciplinary and comprehensive and conducted by individuals experienced in evaluating individuals with VI. There is no single definitive assessment for suspected VI. Thus, the use of multiple tools, as well as the professional judgment and skill of the professionals who conducted the evaluation, will ensure accurate findings. Please remember that the NM TEAM provides information about common characteristics of children with VI—this information can help EDTs identify if VI may be an appropriate eligibility category for consideration.

Let's start by talking about the information gathered during a review of existing data, the child's history, and direct observations of the child's behavior. When evaluating a child for suspected VI, EDTs should look for information regarding the interaction between the child's visual skills and his performance and participation in activities at home and at school.

[Slide 21] In addition, EDTs must obtain an eye examination from a licensed eye specialist. A complete evaluation for a child with a suspected VI must include a written report from this specialist that includes a diagnosis of an eye condition, the child's level of visual acuity, and recommendations regarding glasses or other forms of correction.

In addition to this medical examination, a functional visual examination and learning media assessment must be conducted. In general, these assessments must be conducted by a licensed Teacher of Students with Blindness/Visual Impairment, although the functional visual examination could be conducted by a certified orientation and mobility specialist, if deemed appropriate by the EDT. These assessments will help the EDT in documenting and evaluating the child's functional use of his vision and in determining the most appropriate learning materials to use to support the child in accessing learning materials, including literacy materials.

[Slide 22] EDTs should recognize that the academic performance of children with VI may or may not be impacted. Some children with VI may perform well on standards-based assessments, standardized academic achievement tests, and other assessments, but may have significant difficulty participating in learning activities with their peers and adults. Evaluators should consult with licensed Teachers of Students with Blindness/Visual Impairment regarding test materials and methods to use in assessing a child's academic achievement skills in order to obtain the most accurate representation of the child's academic skills without inadvertently placing too much emphasis on the child's visual skills. In addition, EDTs must understand that a child does not need to demonstrate academic achievement deficits to be found eligible for special education and related services under the category of VI, but they do need to show significant educational impact.

[Slide 23] Finally, it is important to recognize that decisions regarding transition assessments need to be highly individualized for each child and situation. In New Mexico, transition planning must be documented on the first IEP in effect when the child turns 14 or during their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, whichever comes sooner. This type of transition planning specifically relates to the child's progression from the

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

public schools to post-secondary settings. However, EDTs should recognize first that this planning may need to start earlier for some children and second, that transitions occur throughout a child's school tenure. For example, children transition from preschool to elementary school, from elementary school to middle school, between schools, and so on. EDTs should ensure that they have the information necessary to support children through all of these critical transitions, as appropriate for each individual child.

### **[Slide 24] Potential Additional Components**

It is the responsibility of the team to answer any questions that may arise throughout the evaluation process, including what eligibility category best describes the child's primary disability and what supports and services the child needs. The highly recommended evaluation components that we've discussed should help teams answer many of the questions that they might have, but in some situations, teams may require additional information. NM TEAM presents a list of potential additional components that can be found in the Initial Evaluation section of the NM TEAM category of VI. This list may be helpful as teams make eligibility determination decisions, but should not be considered as the only additional areas that the EDT may wish to explore. We will talk about a few of those components now.

One of the potential additional components for an evaluation under the category of VI is an assessment of cognitive abilities. This assessment must be conducted in such a way that it is truly measuring the child's cognitive abilities, not his visual skills. The evaluator should consult with a licensed Teacher of Students with Blindness/Visual Impairment. This assessment may provide the team with information that will help them decide whether VI is the most appropriate eligibility category for the child and may assist with educational programming.

Other potential additional components for an evaluation under the category of VI include assessments that are specific for children with VI, including a Braille assessment and orientation and mobility skills assessment. The EDT will need to determine if these assessments are necessary based on the child's specific needs.

Please refer to the NM TEAM for a complete list of potential additional components.

### **[Slides 25-37] Eligibility Determination Process for Visual Impairment**

[Slide 25] Before we examine criteria that are specific to the eligibility determination decision for VI, we would like to remind you that general information regarding the eligibility process and use of the eligibility determination worksheets is presented in the module, "Eligibility Determination and Use of Eligibility Determination Worksheets." We encourage you to listen to that module and to review the information presented in the NM TEAM in "Section Six. Essential Components of Eligibility Determination."

For this discussion, you will find it helpful to refer specifically to the "Eligibility Determination" and "Eligibility Determination Worksheets" sections within the VI chapter of the NM TEAM.

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

To determine that a child is eligible for special education and related services as a child with VI, an EDT must first determine that the child is a child with a disability, and second that the child demonstrates a need for specialized instruction as a result of his disability.

[Slide 26] The Eligibility Determination Worksheets are structured to guide the EDT in making these decisions. They provide a detailed road map to guide teams not only in working through the process, but also in documenting their decisions. We will use the VI worksheet as a guide for the rest of this discussion.

[Slide 27] First, the EDT must document relevant identifying information and the assessment and evaluation data they have collected and will be using in the eligibility determination process. This information should reflect data collected from multiple data sources.

[Slide 28] Second, under the “Determine the presence of a disability” section, the EDT will address four questions that specifically relate to determining if a child has VI.

[Slide 29] The first two questions, questions 1 and 2, which are consistent across almost all of the eligibility categories, require that the EDT discuss determinant factors related to the child’s performance, specifically the lack of appropriate instruction in reading and math, as well as limited English proficiency. Essentially EDTs must consider all of the factors contributing to the child’s difficulties and decide which factors are the primary cause or causes of the child’s difficulties. Like all decisions, these decisions must be made based on comprehensive evaluation data and with the input of all of the members of the EDT. It is important that EDTs recognize that a child may have experienced a lack of appropriate instruction and/or have limited English proficiency, but if these factors are not the primary reasons for the child’s difficulties, they would not be considered determinant factors. Once the EDT has ruled out either of these factors, they check “Yes” on the Worksheet. This communicates that “Yes, they have eliminated the possibility that one of these factors is a determinant factor.” If the EDT is considering more than one potential eligibility category, these first two question would be answered the same and use the same documentation across all of the categories. EDTs may find it useful to complete multiple worksheets simultaneously if they are considering more than one eligibility category. Additionally, EDTs should remember that lack of appropriate instruction for preschool-aged children is considered to be a lack of opportunities to participate in developmentally appropriate activities. It is important to remember that the lack of opportunities must be due to a reason other than the nature of the child’s disability in order for it to be considered a determinant factor. For example, it may be that a young child has significant behavioral challenges that make it difficult for the family to involve the child in family and community activities. In this situation, even though the child has had a lack of opportunity to participate in these activities, EDTs should not consider this as the determinant factor for the child’s learning difficulties. Rather, this information might be helpful and used as further documentation to support a decision that indicates that a child is eligible for special education and related services.

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

[Slide 30] The third question, questions 3, is unique to VI. To respond to this question, the team must determine that the child is a child with VI, as defined by IDEA based on assessment and evaluation data collected by the EDT. EDTs should remember that medical information provided by parents and outside agencies, including the eye examination, may help answer this question, but it would only answer the question, “Does this child have VI?” The medical information would not necessarily support that the child also requires specially designed instruction as a result of the VI. That question will be answered by the EDT later.

[Slide 31] The fourth and final question to be addressed is also consistent across all eligibility categories, like the questions related to the determinant factors. In this case, the EDT is determining if any other eligibility category better describes the child’s disability. It is possible that a child demonstrates more than one disability, but if the EDT determines that VI **best** describes the child’s disability, they would respond “Yes, we’ve determined that no other category better describes the child’s disability.” On the other hand, if the child has VI but also has another disability and the other disability better describes the child, the EDT would answer “No, we’ve determined that another category better describes this child’s disability.” In either case, it is likely that the EDT will need to complete the “Determine the presence of a disability” section on one or more worksheets for the other eligibility categories being considered.

In addition to answering each of the questions “yes” or “no” in this section, it is critical that the EDT briefly describe the documentation that supported each of their decisions.

[Slide 32] Each of the four questions serves as a stopping point in the process if the EDT answers “no.” Once the EDT has answered “no” to any of the four questions, they have determined that the child is not a child with VI. If this occurs, the EDT should stop moving through those four questions. If the EDT either is not considering another potential eligibility category or has already completed the “Determine the presence of a disability” section for other potential categories, the EDT should move to the “Determination of eligibility for special education and related services” section of the worksheet. At this point, the EDT will document the determination that “The child is not eligible under the eligibility category of VI.” They also need to indicate why that decision was reached by indicating either that the child doesn’t have VI or that a different category best describes the child’s disability. The process then stops for this eligibility category.

The response to all of the four questions in this section of the worksheet must be “yes” in order to proceed to the section of the worksheet, “Determination of the need for specially designed instruction.” Remember, if you have even one “no” response, you skip over the “Determination of the need for specially designed instruction” section.

[Slide 33] To determine the need for specially designed instruction, using the assessment and evaluation data collected, the EDT must determine if, as a result of VI, the child requires special education and related services in one or more areas outlined in IDEA.

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

[Slide 34] These areas include: being involved in and making progress in the general education curriculum or developmentally appropriate activities; participating in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and/or being educated and participating with other children with and without disabilities. The EDT must answer “yes” to at least one of the questions in this section of the worksheet to say that the child requires specially designed instruction because of needs resulting from VI.

[Slide 35] After answering these three questions, the EDT moves into the final phase of the eligibility determination process—documenting the final eligibility determination decision. This section of the worksheet, “Determination of eligibility for special education and related services,” allows EDTs to document that either the child is eligible for special education and related services under the category of VI, is not eligible under the category of VI, or that more information needs to be collected to make a determination.

[Slide 36] If the EDT determines that the results of the evaluation indicate that the child requires specially designed instruction as a result of VI, the child would be eligible under the category of VI.

[Slide 37] If the EDT determines that the child is not eligible under the category of VI, they must indicate the rationale for that decision by checking one of the four options within that decision. These options allow EDTs to document either that the child doesn’t have VI or any other disability, that the child does not have VI, but is eligible under another eligibility category, that the child has VI but another eligibility category better describes the child’s primary disability, or that the child has VI, but doesn’t demonstrate a need for specially designed instruction. This section allows for the documentation that a different eligibility category better describes the primary disability.

EDTs should clearly read the questions presented on the worksheet and determine which situation most accurately describes the child being evaluated. Any child who is found to be “not eligible” for special education and related services must be referred to the SAT.

Finally, if the EDT is unable to make an eligibility determination, they may identify additional information that need to be gathered. They would then reconvene later to make the final eligibility determination decision.

### **[Slide 38] Reevaluation and Discontinuation of Services**

The Reevaluation worksheets in the NM TEAM will support the EDT through the documentation and decision-making process during reevaluations.

A child with VI should be considered for discontinuation of special education and related services only when they demonstrate the ability to function independently, access and perform adequately in the general curriculum, and no longer demonstrate a need for special education services. The LEA must evaluate the child before determining that the child is no longer a child with a disability. Any child whose special education supports and services are discontinued should be referred back to the SAT at his

## New Mexico TEAM Professional Development Module: Visual Impairment, including Blindness

---

school to ensure that the child is supported during the transition and a Section 504 Accommodation Plan should be considered, as appropriate.

### **[Slide 39] Closing**

Thank you for participating in this NM TEAM training module. We hope this information has been helpful in clarifying and expanding on the information presented in the manual.