

Rewarding Career Opportunities for Teachers

Across North America there is an urgent need for teachers of students who are blind or visually impaired and for teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Children who have sensory impairments are a low incidence population in Canada. Their educational needs are highly specialized. Beginning in the 1860s, services and programs for students with sensory impairment were provided at residential schools where teacher training was provided on site, often in an informal and unstructured manner. With the adoption of the philosophy and practice of inclusion across Canada and the United States, there is now a significant demand for teachers qualified in the education of students with sensory impairments to provide both instruction and consultation in inclusive settings, i.e., regular classrooms in the public school system.

What do teachers of students who are blind or visually impaired and teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing do?

While each of these domains of sensory loss require instruction in different disability-specific skill areas, the model for service and program delivery is usually similar. These teachers may be itinerant or travelling teachers assigned to a given region and travel to schools where students with sensory disabilities are enrolled to provide direct instruction to students and consultation to members of the student's school team (e.g., classroom teachers, principals, parents). Sometimes in large urban areas, this specialist may be assigned to a resource room to work with all the students with a specific sensory impairment attending a designated school. In some school districts, teachers of students with sensory impairments work with children from birth to high school graduation. This ensures great diversity in job responsibilities and skills. Usually teachers of students with sensory impairments receive the same benefits and salaries as other teachers employed in the province.

What are some examples of the day-to-day work of a teacher working with students who are blind or visually impaired or students who are deaf or hard of hearing?

The following activities are routine for most teachers in these speciality areas:

- one-to-one instruction with students in areas specific to the disability (e.g., for a student who has a visual impairment this might be activities designed to assist the student to use her remaining vision efficiently, read braille, or use a specific piece of assistive technology; for a student who is deaf, activities would focus on language, speech and audition).
- work collaboratively with members of the school team to routinely assess the student's learning needs and unique requirements for instruction and program modification.
- assist the classroom teachers to make adaptations which provide access to curriculum materials and classroom activities for the student.
- work to ensure the student's meaningful participation in all aspects of the school program, both academic and social.
- prepare special learning materials or order these from designated sources.
- participate as an active member of the student's school program planning team.
- provide assistance and training to educators and parents in relation to meeting the unique educational needs of students with a sensory impairment.
- advocate for students with a sensory impairment

Why would one want to be a teacher of students who are blind or visually impaired or a teacher of students who are deaf or hard of hearing?

There are many potential assets to being a teacher of students who are blind or visually impaired or a teacher of students who are deaf or hard of hearing including:

- diversity within the job
- opportunities for ongoing professional development and growth
- focus on a very specialized but multifaceted area of instruction
- job satisfaction derived from making a positive difference in the lives of students and their families
- professional autonomy
- active participation on multidisciplinary teams
- excellent employment opportunities throughout North America.

How do I become a teacher for students who are blind or visually impaired or a teacher for students who are deaf or hard of hearing?

We are fortunate to have a well-recognized, teacher preparation programs available in Atlantic Canada. Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) and the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA) work collaboratively to provide the essential qualifications for teachers of students who are blind or visually impaired and for teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Through part-time, online study, graduate students complete the majority of their coursework. A three-week, onsite session is required during each summer of the two year, MEd program. As well, there is a supervised practicum arranged to meet the particular needs of each graduate student. This allows teachers to continue to be employed as regular education teachers while they complete their degree. Many graduate students qualify for some financial support to help offset the cost of the program. For more information on this MEd program at MSVU, visit their website: www.msvu.ca under Educational Psychology Graduate Studies or contact Dana Bennett at dana.bennett@msvu.ca (902-457-6716).