

Date of Hearing: March 22, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
Al Muratsuchi, Chair  
AB 497 (Quirk-Silva) – As Introduced February 7, 2023

**SUBJECT:** Special education: braille instructional aide: notice of teacher credentialing programs

**SUMMARY:** Replaces the requirement that local educational agencies (LEAs) provide braille instructional aides with information about an eliminated teacher training program with a requirement that LEAs provide these aides with information about the California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Replaces the requirement that local educational agencies (LEAs) provide braille instructional aides with information about the Wildman-Keeley-Solis Exemplary Teacher Training Act of 1997 with a requirement that LEAs provide these aides with information about the California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Requires, through state and federal law, that children with exceptional needs between the ages of three and 22 be provided with a free and appropriate education, and establishes visual impairment, including blindness, as one of thirteen qualifying disabling conditions. (20 U.S.C. Section 1401)
- 2) Establishes education specialist credentials and an authorization to teach students who are visually impaired, aged birth to age 22, to be issued by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), which authorizes holders to provide services either in orientation and mobility.
- 3) Requires that students who are visually impaired be taught by teachers whose professional preparation and credential authorization are specific to that impairment.
- 4) Requires that braille instruction be provided by a teacher who holds an appropriate credential, as determined by the CTC, to teach students who are functionally blind or visually impaired. (EC 56352)
- 5) Requires LEAs to provide opportunities for braille instruction for students who, due to a prognosis of visual deterioration, may be expected to have a need for braille as a reading medium.
- 6) Requires LEAs and Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) to provide students with opportunities for instruction to master the braille reading and mathematics standards.
- 7) Authorizes an LEA to reinforce braille instruction using a braille instructional aide, under the supervision of a teacher who holds an appropriate credential to teach pupils who are functionally blind or visually impaired. (EC 56351.5)

- 8) Requires that an LEA that employs a braille instructional aide provide the aide with information regarding teaching credential programs, including the Wildman-Keeley-Solis Exemplary Teacher Training Act of 1997 and the Teacher Education Internship Act of 1967. (EC 56351.5)
- 9) Establishes the California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program for recruiting classified school employees to participate in a program designed to encourage them to enroll in teacher training programs and to provide instructional service as teachers in the public schools. (EC 44393)

**FISCAL EFFECT:** This bill has been keyed a possible state-mandated local program by the Office of Legislative Counsel.

**COMMENTS:**

*Need for the bill.* According to the author, “Over the last two decades, California has been experiencing a severe teacher shortage. Budget cuts and layoffs as a result from the last recession as well as the recent pandemic has contributed to a steep decline in the number of teachers in California. However, the worst teacher shortages are in special education and where a number of teachers have substandard credentials.

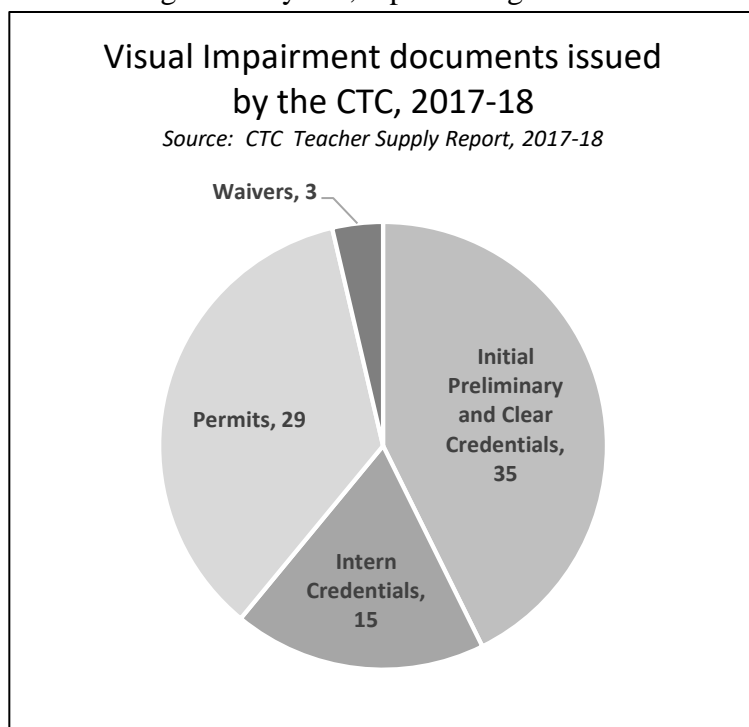
We need to continue to fund programs that provide a path for braille instructional aides to become quality teachers through grants as well as academic and personal support and make sure that Local Education Agencies are providing correct information on these programs as they are required in current in law."

*Visually impaired students in California.* Current law defines “visually impaired” students as those who have a visual impairment that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. This term includes both partially seeing and blind children.

The California Department of Education (CDE) reports that as of as of the 2022-23 school year, there were 2,581 visually impaired students in California aged 0-22 years, representing about 0.3% of all students with disabilities in California. . This represents a significant decline over prior years. CDE reports that in the 2006-07 school year there were 4,697 visually impaired students in the same age range.

Because state assessment scores for students with disabilities are not disaggregated by disability category, there is no published state data about the performance of these students (or any other group of students with disabilities) on state assessments of English language arts, mathematics, or science.

*Shortage of teachers of the visually impaired.* Current law establishes



Education Specialist Instruction Credentials, which authorize teachers to teach students served in special education programs. These credentials are specific to an area of specialization, such as teaching visually impaired students. The Visual Impairment (VI) specialization authorizes teachers to teach students who are blind, visually impaired, and deaf-blind.

According to the CTC, there are two approved educator preparation programs which offer the VI authorization: California State University (CSU), San Francisco and CSU, Los Angeles.

According to the CTC, of the documents issued by the CTC in 2017-18 which authorize teaching of visually impaired students, 57% were substandard (intern credentials, permits and waivers), meaning less than half were issued to individuals fully qualified for their positions.

In 2017-18, at CSU, San Francisco 18 candidates completed their preparation program and 11 graduates of that program received their teaching credential. In the same year, at CSU, Los Angeles 19 candidates completed their preparation program and 15 graduates of that program received their teaching credential.

***Recent budgets provide support for the California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program.*** This bill proposes to require that braille instructional aides be provided information about the California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program.

The California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program provides financial assistance to classified school employees, such as instructional aides, to pursue teaching credentials. The CTC competitively awards grants of \$4,000 per participant per year for up to five years to LEAs. The Legislature appropriated \$20 million in the 2015-16 budget, \$25 million in the 2016-17 budget, and \$125 million in the 2020-21 budget for this program.

The CTC reported that over the six year course of this program, 1,625 former classified employees are now serving as teachers. Credentials issued by year are shown below:

Credential Areas	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	Total
Multiple Subject	0	25	107	148	161	77	518
Multiple Subject: Bilingual Education	0	2	6	17	41	8	74
Single Subject	0	8	39	37	50	16	150
Single Subject: STEM	0	3	11	26	22	5	67
Single Subject: Bilingual Education	0	2	3	14	11	0	30
Education Specialist	4	29	127	245	229	131	765
Education Specialist: Bilingual Education	0	1	3	17	0	0	21
<b>Total Credentials Earned</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>1625</b>

(Source: CTC)

***Development and use of braille.*** Braille was invented in 1824 by Louis Braille, who was blinded at the age of three. His system was inspired by the “night writing” system used by the military to read messages on the battlefield at night without the use of light.

Braille is a system of raised dots that can be read by people who are blind or who have low vision, using their fingers. Braille is not a language, but an independent writing code which

allows many languages to be written and read. Braille symbols are formed by one to six raised dots which appear within cells, which can produce sixty-four combinations. A cell can be used to represent a letter of the alphabet, a number, a punctuation mark, or a whole word. While braille can be written as a letter-to-letter match of English words (known as the “uncontracted” form), braille makes use of many “contractions” which function like abbreviations for words or parts of words, allowing braille to be read more quickly and easily. According to the American Foundation for the Blind, contracted braille is considered the standard in the United States, and it is used on signs in public places and in general reading material. There are grades of braille use, ranging from basic one-to-one letter correspondence (grade 1), to the frequent use of contractions (grade 2), to an individualized shorthand form (grade 3). Braille can be read and written in several forms. It can be manually written using a slate and stylus or by using a braillewriter which has six keys, and can be read using a refreshable braille display which turns text on a computer screen into braille using raised pins.

***Braille associated with better educational and employment outcomes.*** Proficiency in braille is important for college and career readiness, as it is the means by which blind students achieve literacy.

Research indicates that adults who learned to read using braille have higher employment rates and educational levels, were more financially self-sufficient, and spent more time reading than did those who learned to read using print (Ryles, 1996). According to the National Federation of the Blind’s report, *The Braille Literacy Crisis in America* (2009), however, nationally only 10% of blind children are learning braille, and as many as 50% of blind students drop out of high school.

***Braille Reading Standards Task Force raises concerns regarding declining braille use among California students.*** Current law requires the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) to form an advisory task force to develop standards for the mastery of the braille code. The SPI established the Braille Reading Standards Task Force, which produced standards adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE) in 2006. In this document, the Braille Reading Standards Task Force convened to develop these standards expressed concerns about the declining use of braille:

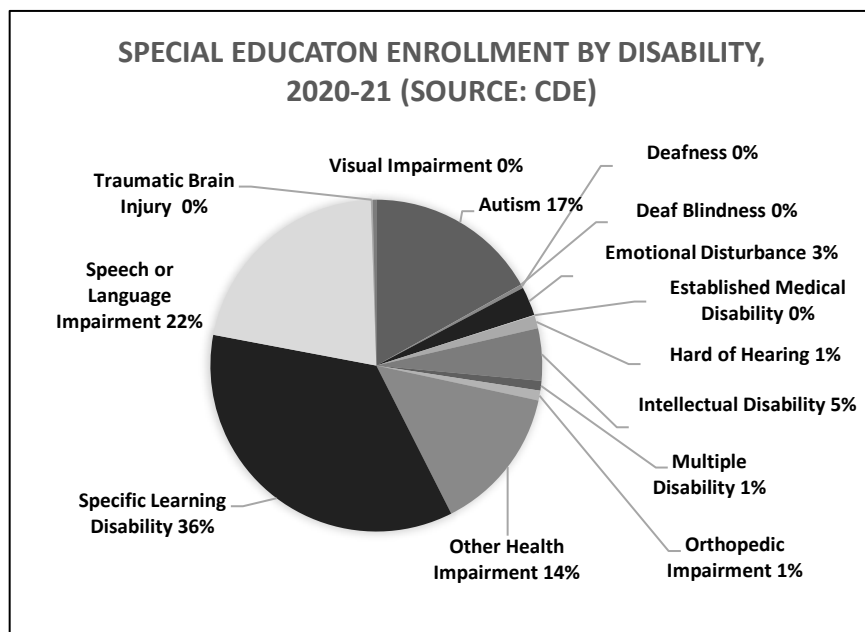
Braille, the obvious method of reading for people who are blind, has been de-emphasized throughout the past several decades. Reading and writing for the student who is blind are becoming lost skills. Success depends upon the ability of a child to read and write, be it in print or braille. It is the conclusion of this task force that the child who is blind, in most cases today, is not offered the same opportunity as his or her sighted peer to become a successful and productive citizen. The task force believes that the student who is blind is being denied a basic education right—the right to literacy.

Many reasons have been given for the de-emphasis of braille instruction, including the growing number of multidisabled blind children, audio materials, computers with speech, electronic magnification devices, the shortage of teachers qualified to teach braille, and increased student caseloads for teachers of students who are visually impaired.

Braille instruction for the student who is blind is equivalent to literacy instruction for the sighted student. The teaching of braille is not the teaching of some exotic code or language or extracurricular class. Braille is the most critical and powerful literacy tool in the life of a person who is functionally blind (Ryles, 1996; Schroeder, 1989).

**Special education in California.** Federal law (IDEA) mandates that states provide students with disabilities with access to special education services, and organizes disabilities into thirteen classifications that cover a broad range of conditions: specific learning disabilities; speech or language impairments; autism; other health impairments (includes students with chronic or acute health problems, such as heart conditions or diabetes); intellectual disability; emotional disturbance; orthopedic impairment; hard of hearing; multiple disabilities; visual impairments; deaf; traumatic brain injuries; and deaf and blind.

When children are three years of age and older, they may enter the special education system when LEAs determine that their needs cannot be met in general education programs. When this occurs, LEAs refer students for professional evaluation to determine if they qualify for special education. If the evaluation indicates that a student has a disability, and that the disability interferes with the student’s education, the LEA is legally obligated to provide the student with special education services. Students identified as qualifying for special education receive an individualized education program (IEP)—a written legal document developed by a team of stakeholders, including a student’s family—that outlines the students’ educational goals and the services that will be provided to meet those goals. For students requiring other special accommodations to facilitate their participation in school activities (e.g., wheelchair ramps or blood sugar monitoring), Section 504 plans may be added to, or replace, an IEP.



According to the CDE, in 2018-19 there were 795,000 children, aged birth to 22, who were identified as having exceptional needs. 720,000 of these children were enrolled in grades K-12, representing roughly 12% of K-12 enrollment. A 2016 report from the Public Policy Institute of California states that the composition of this student population has changed in recent years. Specifically, although the most common disabilities in 2015 were

specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, and other health impairments—which together constituted about 73% of all students with disabilities, the proportion of students with these disabilities has declined, and the proportion of students identified with autism spectrum disorder has increased. Autism spectrum disorder is now the third largest disability category in which students are identified.

Viewed as a whole, there is a significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers. The Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) notes that while performance on standardized tests (including those specifically designed for students with disabilities) has improved over the past several years, a majority of students with disabilities still fail to meet state and federal achievement expectations, that 60% of these students graduate on time with a high school diploma (compared to 83% of all students), and about two-thirds of are engaged

productively after high school (with about half enrolled in an institute of higher education and 15% competitively employed within one year after high school). As noted above, there is no published state data about the performance of these students (or any other subgroup of students with disabilities) on state assessments of English language arts, mathematics, or science.

***Related legislation.*** AB 1956 (Quirk Silva) of the 2019-20 Session was substantially similar to this bill. It was held in the Assembly Education Committee.

AB 947 (Quirk-Silva), Chapter 778, Statutes of 2019, established the Expanded Core Curriculum for visually impaired students in statute and required that orientation and mobility evaluations for students who are visually impaired be conducted by a person who is appropriately certified as an orientation and mobility specialist.

AB 3223 (Grayson), Chapter 85, Statutes of 2018, changed the definition of braille, as used regarding the individualized education programs (IEPs) for visually impaired students, from “Standard English Braille, American Edition” to “Unified English Braille.”

#### **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

##### **Support**

None on file

##### **Opposition**

None on file

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