



Iowa Department for the Blind

A Blind Student's Story

The following story was written by a blind individual who attended both primary and post-secondary education in Iowa. He has also included direct quotations from his IEPs (Individual Education Program) during his time in elementary, middle school, and high school. Unfortunately, his story is all too common and continues to occur. The bias toward print and lack of knowledge of braille among teachers of the visually impaired has produced generations of high school graduates who are illiterate and unprepared for post-secondary education or employment. Ideally, this student should have received the education and training he needed during his primary and secondary education to go directly into post-secondary education, however, the education professionals failed to equip him with the skills he needed and he had to come to the Iowa Department for the Blind to learn these skills. While this story does have a happy ending, the unnecessary pain, struggle, and fear experienced by students who are forced to read large print inefficiently often leads them to abandon post-secondary education and waste their potential in low paying jobs or remain on public assistance.

Here is this individual's story:

When I was in kindergarten in the late 1990s, it was discovered that I had a form of macular degeneration. My parents were told by the Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) that print was the best solution as large print was easily available and it would take years to learn and build the needed skills to make braille useful in an academic setting.

At that time 14-point font was readable for me.

Moving from 3rd grade into 4th my vision drastically decreased.

My parents were reassured that 18-point font wasn't that much harder to obtain and braille was still unnecessary.

I started learning to type on a computer at this time as the idea was, I could complete schoolwork on the computer.

He has done well with his move to the middle reading group. His comprehension is good. The vision issue has slowed him down quite a bit, but he is making good compensation. (4th Grade IEP)

Middle school arrived and along with it, the 24-point font I needed.

I wheeled a cart around to transport the different magnifiers and large print books from class to class. I was unable to talk to friends between classes. After all, I had to have all my equipment set up before next period class started. I had 2 months of physical therapy because of injury to my back due to pulling the previously provided “box on wheels” behind me.

At this point I remained in the top 10% of my class with an hour of homework each night with some headaches brought upon by eye strain. Only a fifth of my schoolwork at this time was completed on my computer.

High school arrived and so did the 48-point font.

...visual disability is affecting his ability to read the same amount of material as his sighted peers within the expected time frames. (10th Grade IEP)

I had to use a magnifier on top of large print so I could read my textbooks and worksheets. I had daily headaches from straining my eyes, and would cry at night. I would tell my parents I didn't want to go to school. I didn't care about grades anymore and preferred to fail than continue. At this point we were told it was too late to learn braille and the goal was to make it through the final year of high school.

In the past, he was able to use large print books; however the print is no longer large enough for him to use without additional adaptive devices. Due to some visual changes, he has become more sensitive to light and glare and is revising some of his work practices in order to try to lessen the glare from his electronic devices.

Assistive Technology: hand held magnifier, a laptop, iPad.

(11th Grade IEP)

Questions about my future started to come up. I realized I wanted to attend college, but my senior year was filled with D's and F's finishing 50th of 155 with a GPA of 3.520. My overall ACT score was 23. My highest being Science at 30 and the lowest being English at 14. I had tears in my eyes as I took the reading portion of the ACT test. I was so frustrated that even with the accommodations I was unable to get through even one of the sections. Ultimately the last 10 minutes was spent reading the questions and trying to find any that seemed familiar.

... will need additional time to complete assignments as it takes him longer to locate, read, and transfer information. (10th – 12th Grade IEPs)

After graduating, I planned to attend Iowa State University in the fall. I decided to spend my summer receiving training in non-visual skills. I wanted to start college confident in myself. I was afraid of continuing my education using the same techniques I used throughout primary and secondary school. I decided to remain in training and defer college a semester to continue developing braille, access technology, and independent cane travel skills.

...has been working with his vocational counselor, through the Department for the Blind, to successfully receive training for and obtain an after-school job. He currently has a plan to continue to take advantage of the offerings through the Department for the Blind to increase his independent living, technology, and career readiness skills in preparation for college and working. (12th Grade IEP)

I entered Iowa State in the spring. I earned 3 A's and a B. I took notes in braille during class and afterwards typed up and expanded upon with them using electronic versions of my textbooks. With the addition of braille and screen reader skills, I was tackling my academics without headaches or eye strain. Unlike in high school, in college I had plenty of time to join clubs and do extracurricular activities that I was unable to attend previously due to homework taking 1–3 hours after school.

I was fortunate to have the support and training I did prior to college, but there were gaps I didn't fill in until the 6 months of training. When I left my training, I was able to read braille at 21 words a minute. This was equal to my ability to read print. Since then, my speed in braille reading has only improved and it is the faster way to read material. I was able to pick up the use of a screen reader very quickly because of the time spent teaching me how to touch type in primary school. No longer forced to slow down to read and search for print on screen at 1600% magnification (or 15x), I could use a computer fluidly.

Braille instruction needs if this student has a visual impairment

- Yes, Braille is needed and will be addressed in this IEP
- No, Braille is not needed

I do wish I was given the opportunity to be part of all the same things my sighted peers got to experience in primary and secondary school and didn't have to endure so much pain. I will continue to be a firm advocate for braille and work on breaking the myth braille is too hard and time consuming to be taught unless it is the only option.