



Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired  
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## Proficient Communicators who are Deafblind: A Tool for Identification

### Disclaimer:

This document is a final **draft**. We welcome your input to help us perfect it for optimal use. Please email your feedback to [collinsr@tsbvi.edu](mailto:collinsr@tsbvi.edu)

### Purpose of Tool:

Each student who is deafblind has unique needs that must be honored in the development of an effective individual education program (IEP). The majority of students on the Deafblind Child Count are emerging communicators so the field has focused significant efforts in the development of assessments, evaluations, and intervention strategies for this segment of the deafblind population. These resources assist families and local IEP teams in designing successful programming. Students who are emerging communicators will continue to demand and inspire efforts for deeper understanding and improved responses to their needs.

In addition to emerging communicators, proficient communicators who are deafblind have distinctly different needs that must be appreciated and addressed. These students are increasing in numbers and the sharper focus on this group is so new that this population lacks a communal name. For purposes of this tool, these students are called proficient communicators. Currently, there are few resources available to support the needs of proficient communicators. By identifying these students appropriately, new assessments, evaluations, strategies, and accommodations can be developed so that IEP teams will be better equipped to design programs that promote success for these students.

It is important to note that the majority of proficient communicators are congenital because they are born deafblind rather than becoming deafblind later in development. (e.g. Usher syndrome). While there are definitely shared needs between the congenital and acquired subgroups, there are differences that should also be recognized and respected within the deafblind student community. By acknowledging those differences, students will have resources that aid in their educational achievement as well as emotional well-being.

Because of their strengths in areas associated with academic rigor, our field may not view these students as having high needs for support associated with being deafblind. However, when state deafblind projects responded to requests for technical assistance, needs were identified from families, school personnel, and the students themselves at each site. The needs found were surprising. These students had significant difficulties accessing vital academic information. Their struggles could be effectively addressed by devising appropriate strategies, supports, and accommodations.

Unfortunately, there was a lack of resources for project staff and teams to draw upon. This scarcity of resources presented a challenge to our field. We must take action on behalf of proficient communicators in the same spirit that we have with emerging communicators. We ask you to join us on this journey. The first step on the road to effective resources is the process of identifying these students. It is our hope that Proficient Communicators who are Deafblind: A Tool for Identification will aid in that process.

## **Acknowledgments**

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

These individuals developed a draft version of the Proficient Communicator Identification Tool just before the COVID pandemic. COVID put the project on hold.

## **Contributors:**

In the fall of 2023, individuals from the Texas Deafblind Project resumed their efforts to finalize this tool for use in Texas and to test the efficacy of the tool with a number of students. Individuals who contributed to these efforts included:

- Robbie Blaha, Educational Consultant, Texas Deafblind Project
- Rachel Collins, Deafblind Education Consultant, Texas Deafblind Project
- Kate Moss Hurst, Educational Consultant, Texas Deafblind Project
- Hillary Keys, Early Childhood Deafblind Consultant, Texas Deafblind Project
- Heather Withrow, Deafblind Transition Specialist, Texas Deafblind Project
- Deanna Peterson, Deafblind Education Consultant, Texas Deafblind Project
- Matt Schultz, Residential Program Director, Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired
- Debra Sewell, Education Consultant, TSBVI Outreach Programs

## **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.

If you have any questions or are interested in learning more about this topic and product, please feel free to contact Erica Cairns, Director of TSBVI Outreach Programs at [cairnse@tsbvi.edu](mailto:cairnse@tsbvi.edu).

# Proficient Communicators who are Deafblind: A Tool for Identification

This screening tool is intended for the use of families, other IEP team members, and state deafblind project staff to aid in the identification of students who are proficient communicators. The intent of this tool is to flag these students for more in-depth needs assessment. The tool screens for characteristics often associated with this segment of the deafblind population, in some or all of the following six areas:

- Language and communication
- General curriculum on grade level
- State testing on adopted curriculum
- Completion of an approved academic graduation plan
- Social skills
- Intellectual ability (Note: testing may indicate students are within the average range although individuals who are deafblind are at risk for being labeled as intellectually disabled due to inappropriate testing.)

To assess a student, read the categories below and respond to the descriptions with a yes or no. The identification tool requires a team process. Input from core team members will be useful in carefully considering each item. Core team members might include the student, families, teacher of students who are deafblind (TDB), interveners, general education teachers, and related service providers, as well as extended team members such as school administrators and diagnosticians. Next, indicate whether the student meets the criteria for each area and write a short description explaining your answer. If the team finds it helpful, they may decide to attach supporting documents.

If the student has a “yes” in some or all of these, then a more in-depth needs assessment should be conducted to identify which strategies and accommodations should be included in the student’s IEP to ensure appropriate access to instruction. The in-depth needs assessment should include but not be limited to:

- Classroom observation of each subject in the school schedule.
- Interviews with the qualified personnel for each subject.
- A student interview.
- Review of assignments.
- Assessment of requisite underlying concepts needed to understand and apply the state adopted curriculum at grade level.

We have developed a companion product, the *Requisite Concept Evaluation Process for Proficient Communicators Who are Deafblind (RCE)* to help IEP teams assess underlying concepts the student has and will need to be successful in Science and Social Studies.



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## Proficient Communicators who are Deafblind: A Tool for Identification

### Language and communication

The student communicates primarily using conventional language (e.g., English, Spanish, ASL or other sign systems) as opposed to non-symbolic communication modes typically used by emerging communicators (e.g., pre-linguistic object cues).

Select **yes** or **no**

Comments:

### General curriculum on grade level

The student uses the state-required education curriculum (TEKS). This curriculum may be modified in scope but is not an alternative curriculum.

Select **yes** or **no**

Comments:

### State testing on adopted curriculum (STAAR)

The student takes the regular state achievement tests, with or without accommodations. This information may be obtained from your state's deafblind project child count.

**Caveat:** Some IEP teams (which include the family) may decide to opt out of state testing.

Select **yes** or **no**

Comments:

### Completion of an approved academic graduation plan

The student is working towards a regular high school diploma that meets state requirements for graduation with or without accommodations.

**Caveat:** For a variety of reasons, some proficient communicators may not be appropriately tracked by their IEP teams to graduate with a regular high school diploma. This factor alone does not necessarily mean that they should not be considered a proficient communicator.

Consider:

Some students will graduate under [The Foundation High School Program](#); The Foundation High School Program identifies the requirements that all Texas public school students need to satisfy to earn a high school diploma. Others may customize their high school experience beyond the Foundation High School Program by completing requirements for additional components such as endorsements, the distinguished level of achievement, and performance acknowledgments.

Select **yes** or **no**

Comments:

### **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 still need support (e.g. from interpreter, intervener, artificial intelligence, etc.) to interact with others and make friends. The student has the skills to generalize social skills to new/unfamiliar people.

**Caveat:** *A student may have challenging behaviors but can still be considered a proficient communicator.*

Select **yes** or **no**

Comments:

### **Intellectual ability**

Assessments indicate functioning in the average range as opposed to an intellectual disability. The student engages in critical thinking demonstrated by the ability to problem-solve and benefits from analogies to understand new information.

**Caveat:** *Students who are deafblind are at risk for being labeled as intellectually disabled due to inappropriate testing.*

Select **yes** or **no**

Comments:



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