

Information is power

How the education system can empower blind and partially sighted people

“ At school, my son Brandon doesn't get access to the same choice of books as sighted children. It's not the fault of the teachers, who are trying to help; it's the fact that many of the books he likes to read are simply not available in braille or audio. My local library in Hucknall, Nottingham, are fantastic and very helpful in trying to provide us with books for Brandon, but they are also limited by a lack of supply. I'd like the Government to act now and help tackle this problem, because if this situation doesn't improve soon, I'm very worried that my son as he gets older, won't receive the important books he needs to develop his education. We're already having problems finding what he needs as he enters secondary school. ”

Davina, 42, Nottingham

Inaccessible information is a major barrier facing blind and partially sighted people, massively restricting life chances and quality of life.

Approximately two million people in the UK have a sight problem, of whom approaching 400,000 are registered as either blind or partially sighted. This number is set to rise as the population ages, emphasising the need to include people with sight problems in the planning and provision of services at the national, regional and community level.





Accessing information in the school curriculum

A good education is a vital start to life in today's society. But for the 24,000 blind or partially sighted children in the UK, making the most of their education can be a real struggle due to a lack of adequate reading materials.

Just a fraction of children's books are available in a format children with sight problems can read. RNIB research shows only a small percentage of maths and science textbooks and no dictionaries or atlases are available in alternative formats.

Schools are required by legislation to ensure disabled children are not disadvantaged. However, schools are unable to obtain school books in alternative formats for their blind and partially sighted pupils who need them because they are not available.

New Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance for schools makes it clear that schools have a duty to make information, including curriculum materials,

available in a variety of different formats for pupils who need them. It also emphasises that schools with pupils who use more specialised formats, such as braille, need to ensure materials are provided to the relevant support services in time to be transcribed into the appropriate format before lessons.



But the reality often falls far short of this ideal. Teachers and support staff typically have to rely on their own resources and time spent cutting, pasting and photocopying textbooks to get the alternative formats to their pupils in time. Despite their best efforts, delays are common.

Nine out of 10 teachers say the delays, and the larger issue of the shortage of books in large print, audio and braille are having a real effect on the educational and social development of children with sight loss.

The DfES guidelines also fail to address the need for a coherent, cost-effective national scheme to help schools supply accessible textbooks to their pupils.

This is in stark contrast to the situation in other countries. Unlike the UK, the US Government provides millions of dollars to produce school textbooks in alternative formats.

To prompt the government to act, RNIB and other campaigning organisations formed

the Right to Read Alliance and launched the Right to Read campaign, which asks the government to provide funding for more publications in alternative formats. So far, the government has declined to act.

In the meantime, the responsibility for ensuring textbooks and recreational reading materials are available for children with sight loss has been left to RNIB and other charities. One of these charities, ClearVision, which is a national lending library, provides children's books that combine both braille and print text. Another, the National Blind Children's Society, produces a limited number of books in a format suited to individual children.

But the best efforts of RNIB and the other organisations can only make a small difference in the larger problem of putting learning materials in the appropriate format.

Ultimately, it will be up to the government to solve the problem, and to ensure young people with sight loss have the same chance to a good education, and all that it brings, as everyone else.



5 ways to make things better

- The government should implement a properly resourced national plan to modernise the production and delivery of materials in accessible formats.
- The government should establish a central portal through which educational publishers can make electronic copies of their textbooks available for sale or licensing to teachers and specialist agencies.
- Schools should put the provision of accessible textbooks at the heart of new Disability Equality Duty priorities.
- Specialist and mainstream teachers and support staff should ensure ample planning time for the acquisition or preparation of accessible material for students with sight or reading problems.
- The publishing industry should work with the government, teachers and the voluntary sector to develop the market for the sale and licensing of electronic copies of titles and aim to make them readily available to all at the same time and price.



To find out more contact RNIB on **0845 702 3153**, email **seeitright@rnib.org.uk** or visit **www.rnib.org.uk**