

Policy #: 442
Title: Braille Competency/Blind Awareness Training
Date of Initial Approval: 04-08-2003
Revision/Re-authorization Dates: 09-04-2011; 11-21-2013; 01-24-2019
Reviewers: MSA Superintendent; MSAB/MSAD Directors; MSA Human Resources Director

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of the Braille Competency/Blind Awareness Training policy at the Minnesota State Academies (MSA) is to provide a fair, consistent and systematic process for teaching new employees about blindness and developing their functional knowledge of braille so that they have appropriate knowledge and skills required to support the educational program for students who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind, as well as supporting continuing education for employees about best practices and new developments within the field of Blind/Visually Impaired (B/V) Education.

II. GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY

Staff who are employed at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind and/or have contact with students who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind have a legal and professional obligation to understand the disability of blindness, to be respectful to individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind, and to have the expertise necessary to provide the best education possible to blind/visually-impaired/deafblind children who attend classes at MSA. This includes knowledge and skills in braille and blind awareness that matches the requirements of their positions at MSA. Employees must maintain up-to-date proficiency and knowledge of current braille codes (i.e. Unified English Braille - UEB) for implementation in their daily duties.

III. HISTORY

The Minnesota Legislature passed statute language to address the need for braille skills for staff who work at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. MS125A.67 Subd.5 (Braille Skills) states “A staff member at the Academy for the Blind must be knowledgeable in braille communication as appropriate for the staff member’s job.” MS125A.67 Subd.6. states that “An employee hired after August 1, 1985 cannot get permanent status until the employee is proficient in sign language if employed at the Academy for the Deaf or knowledgeable in Braille if employed at the Academy for the Blind.”

MSAB has provided informal workshops and in-service training in the past and formalized the process that addresses the statute language through this policy, enacted in 2003.

IV. STANDARDS AND TIMELINES

- A. All classroom teachers on the MSAB campus must possess licensure in the area of blind/visually-impaired which presumes proficiency in the use of braille as a written code of communication and competency in blind awareness. Exceptions to this must follow the Minnesota licensure guidelines for alternative licensure until B/VI licensure is obtained. Although classroom teachers may be hired with other types of teacher licensure, they must still demonstrate proficiency in braille and blind awareness.
- B. Other direct service or related service employees who either support braille reading/instruction, prepare materials in braille, or work with blind, visually impaired, or deafblind students on either campus must obtain required braille skills and blind awareness for their position.
- C. Options to demonstrate braille competency are:
 - i. Successful completion of a college course in braille (intended to meet the braille requirement to become certified as a teacher of the blind/visually impaired)
 - ii. Successful completion of the beginning uncontracted and contracted braille course offered by the Hadley Institute distance education program
 - iii. Demonstrate a passing score on the National Braille Competency Test offered by the National Library Service
 - iv. Other options must be pre-approved by the MSAB Director or the Human Resources Office.
- D. Options to demonstrate competency in blind awareness are:
 - i. Successful completion of college course(s) in B/VI instruction and methodology
 - ii. Successful completion of the Blindness Basics course offered by the Hadley Institute distance education program
 - iii. Successful completion of relevant courses approved by the MSAB Director or the Human Resources Office
 - iv. Successful completion of coursework offered at the MSAB campus on braille and blind awareness (12-hour seminar)
 - v. Other options must be pre-approved by the MSAB Director or the Human Resources Office.
- E. The Minnesota State Academies have established braille skills standards for each position at the Academies. If positions are added the superintendent, in conjunction with the Human Resources Department and the MSAB Director, will determine the appropriate standard for that position. If the expected standard is changed for a specific position, individuals that are already serving in that position will not be subject to termination for failure to achieve

the new standard but will be required to continue taking classes and training until they achieve the new standard.

- F. In general, positions that have direct and frequent contact with blind, visually-impaired, or deafblind students have the highest expectations for braille skills. Positions that have occasional or infrequent interaction with blind, visually-impaired, or deafblind students have lower expectations. When establishing standards for each position, MSA took the following factors into consideration.
 - a. Amount of contact a person in the position has with blind/visually impaired/deafblind individuals (students, staff, and/or parents/family members).
 - b. The type of contact (one-on-one contact and/or group contact) and the subject matter involved (i.e. counseling, storytelling, academic instruction, giving directions/explanations for specific activities, etc.)

- G. Each new employee will have a designated timeline to achieve the braille skills required for their position. It is preferred that MSA hires individuals who already possess braille skills required for their positions but employees who are hired without the appropriate braille skills will be provided with opportunities to attend classes to improve knowledge and skills. It is the employee's responsibility to complete coursework before the end of the first year of employment.

- H. Generally, the expectations for teachers, special education program assistants, and other professionals who work directly with blind, visually-impaired, and deafblind students and are involved in instructional activities will be expected to meet the following expectations:
 - a. **Advanced:** Completion of a college course as shown on an official transcript. Able to read uncontracted and contracted braille (tactilely or visually) and produce documents, and other relevant informational items with in-depth elaboration for both social and work topics with little or no errors in braille. Utilizes braille for instructional purposes in a variety of situations, or.
 - b. **Basic:** Completion of MSA-provided training sessions. Understands the foundation behind different braille systems and utilizes technology or other supports to produce necessary braille materials in class. Learns about the difference between contracted and uncontracted Braille. Able to read (tactilely or visually) braille with support.

(See Appendix 442A for specific expectations for each position)

- I. All new employees will be provided a copy of this policy at the time of hire as part of each employee's position description review. Supervisors and employees will develop a plan for completion of required coursework or assessments during the first year of employment. Employees who do not complete and pass coursework within the first year of hire will be dismissed

from their positions. Employees who do not successfully complete coursework within this time frame may request an extension, if desired, in writing to the superintendent. This should be accompanied by supporting documentation showing activities that employees have taken towards improving their braille skills.

V. BLIND AWARENESS# TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

A. New Employee Training

All new employees who have contact with blind, visually impaired, or deafblind students as a part of their job assignment will be provided with 12 hours of Braille and Blind Awareness Training within the first year of employment to understand blindness and be able to provide the necessary expertise for the best education possible for blind/visually-impaired/deafblind children on our campuses. Teachers who have completed B/VI teacher training programs are exempt from this requirement. The training sessions will include but are not limited to such topics as:

- i. Appropriate knowledge of braille (a minimum of 2 hours)
- ii. Etiquette and cultural norms
- iii. Technology and assistive technology
- iv. Orientation and Mobility
- v. Social skills protocol
- vi. Tactile/Pro-Tactile Communication for deafblind individuals
- vii. Daily living skills
- viii. Expanded Core Curriculum for blind/visually impaired students#
- ix. Discrimination/discriminatory practices that blind individuals may face in their lives.

B. Staff Development Refresher Sessions

Throughout the school year, instructional staff will be provided with refresher sessions to review best practices of working with blind/visually impaired/deafblind children and/or to learn about new developments in the area of B/VI education.

VI. REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

A. Staff members who have disabling conditions which warrant reasonable accommodations may request reasonable accommodations and/or exceptions to components of this policy.

B. Requests for reasonable accommodations must be made in writing to the staff member's immediate supervisor or the human resources office, and must be made within 6 months of the date of hire or the date that the accommodations become necessary.

C. The staff member's immediate supervisor and the human resources office, in consultation with others as appropriate, will make recommendations

regarding reasonable accommodations to the Superintendent, who makes the final decision.

- D. If a staff member disagrees with the decision, they should follow the grievance procedure according to their respective union.

Appendices:

442-A: Braille Skills Required for MSA Positions/Classifications