

TAESE Project Eases Braille Transcriber Shortage

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A project from the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice aims to ease a shortage of certified Braille transcribers in three states.

The K-12 Braille Transcriber Project was developed by the Center for Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education, an initiative of the Institute for Disability.

Braille readers enjoy the benefits of literacy that are experienced by sighted readers. But a Braille transcriber shortage complicates the use of Braille in schools.

While it's true that anyone—blind or sighted—can access audio books, studying is different, said Leah Voorhies, Utah's state director of special education. For example, students who want to understand photosynthesis will jump between a table of contents and the book's index. That's hard to do using audio.

Utah draws on a pool of Braille transcribers from all over the country, but there are not nearly enough, Voorhies said, and learning materials are often delayed as a result. In Utah, textbooks are made available to Braille readers, but too often the student will not receive the whole book at once. Instead it is doled out a chapter or two at a time, because transcription of the rest of the book is still going on. Unlike their counterparts, Braille users often don't have access to the whole book when school starts. And sometimes teachers change their minds and select a different text, causing even more delays.

And then there are articles, worksheets and other written materials.

Sergio Enriquez, a young Utah man who uses Braille, said worksheets and written materials were made available when he was in school, but the teacher had to submit them for transcription weeks in advance. "When the teacher changes it, they can't get you the materials."

Voorhies wants better for Utah's Braille-reading students. "I want to get to the point where Utah could produce Braille on demand."

For now, that's a dream. But she took her dream a step closer to reality when she approached TAESE Director Norm Ames, asking if the organization could help train certified Braille transcribers. Utah already participates in the [TASK12 program](#), which trains and assesses American Sign Language interpreters. She hoped TAESE could help train and certify Braille transcribers, too.

"I don't have the economy of scale to do it in house," she said. But if a consortium of states could come together and contract with TAESE to make it happen, everyone would benefit. Today, Utah, Arizona and North Dakota participate in the K-12 Braille Transcriber Project. It launched in August of 2023 and should produce its first certified transcribers in August of 2024. There are 16 people in that first cohort.

Kelly Pritts is a Braille coach with the project. While technology has brought the world some incredible things, it has not yet produced an automated system that pulls in text (a Word document, for example) and produces error-free Braille transcription, Pritts said. "There's not a lot of investment, I think, from large tech companies into finding ways to solve these problems."

So Pritts and her partner, David McCollam, teach Braille transcribers how it's done. The two coaches run open coaching sessions and moderate a community forum. They also respond to questions via email, drawing from their own expertise. In addition to her role with TAESE, Pritts is also the Braille programs coordinator for the Foundation for Blind Children in Phoenix, Arizona. McCollam is an Exceptional Student Education teacher in Titusville, Florida.

"It's been very successful so far," Pritts said.

"We're so much better off than we were two years ago," said Voorhies. She can tell job seekers that they can be trained for free (or at least, the cost of their training is paid for by the state) and become certified in a skill that is very

much in demand. They can work from home, and school children can have access to accessible materials. "It's a win-win."

State education administrators can find out more about enrolling in the project by contacting [Norm Ames](#).