

# The Case for Wider Access to Braille in Schools

By Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

**Summary:** Students who do not have vision should have the same access to braille as children who are sighted have to print materials. Labeling familiar objects with braille and giving children access to basic braille books can be provided at little or no cost and does not require training in teaching braille or even previous knowledge of the braille alphabet.

Classrooms are full of access to print for students who have sight. From bulletin boards on the walls that surround the student desks to the print in picture books that are passed around small groups of students so that children can see the graphics and words, sighted students are constantly immersed in letters and words. Some students may choose to look at all of this print and study it over and over to try to make sense of what it means and to tie it to the letters and words that are part of their instructional activities. Conversely, some students might ignore all of this print access or at least avoid it when these students' attention and arousal levels aren't consistent with paying attention to the environment. Regardless of whether or not it captures the attention of all students, this access to print is based on a single, fundamental truth:

**Print is provided to sighted children regardless of whether or not anyone thinks they may someday be readers.**

Many sighted students who receive special education services do become readers and use this skill for everything from reading for pleasure to using print as an important life skill to read signs or perform work tasks. Others may not ever be readers in the print sense, but might develop effective literacy skills around alternative modes such as picture symbols, photographs, and/or concrete objects of reference.

For children who do not have the vision necessary to read print, this same level of access to letters and words can be provided with braille. It is not necessary to determine whether a specific child has the potential to someday be a braille reader, or to assess children to determine whether or not they have acquired pre-braille skills. Students who are deaf-blind and do not have functional vision can be provided the same level of access to braille as sighted students are provided with print.

## How to Provide Braille Access

One of the easiest ways of providing braille access is to label familiar items and places throughout the school environment. I learned about this from an amazing teacher named Bil Hawkins when I was doing fieldwork back in 1981 as part of my teacher-training program. Bil would surprise students with braille all over the classroom by placing braille labels where students would likely find them when going about their everyday activities. For example, he would braille the word "door" on the inside of the door handle, so that every time someone used the handle to open the door, they would feel that word. Braille words were always in uncontracted braille, so that the braille letters spelled D-O-O-R. There was one-to-one

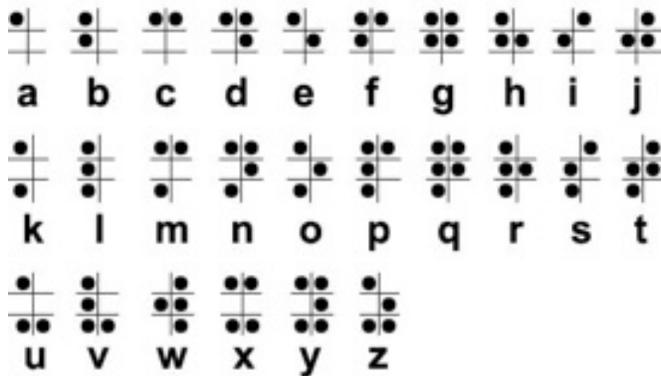
correspondence between the letters of a word and the brailled word. No contractions were used (e.g., contractions for common words, consonant and vowel blends, etc.). Here are some other examples of places Bil would hide braille:

- Along the rim of a pot for an indoor plant
- On the trunk of a tree
- On the inside handle of the classroom refrigerator
- Under the railing on a set of steps
- On condiment bottles
- Under the students' desks

You can see that the placement of the braille wasn't the same as where sighted children would see print, but rather where students who are deaf-blind would naturally come in contact with these objects.

### But I Don't Know Braille!

If you are using uncontracted braille, you just braille words by using each letter in the word. For example, the word chair is brailled C-H-A-I-R (without the dashes, of course). You don't have to learn the braille alphabet. Just use a "cheat sheet" like the one below:



You can see that each braille letter is a combination of one or more dots that make up a six-dot braille cell: The letter "a" is just dot one. The letter "b" is made up of dots 1 and 2. The letter "c" is made up of dots 1 and 4. If you end up memorizing the braille alphabet, that's great, but it is certainly not required for brailing basic words.

### But Wait! I Don't Even Have a Braille Writer!

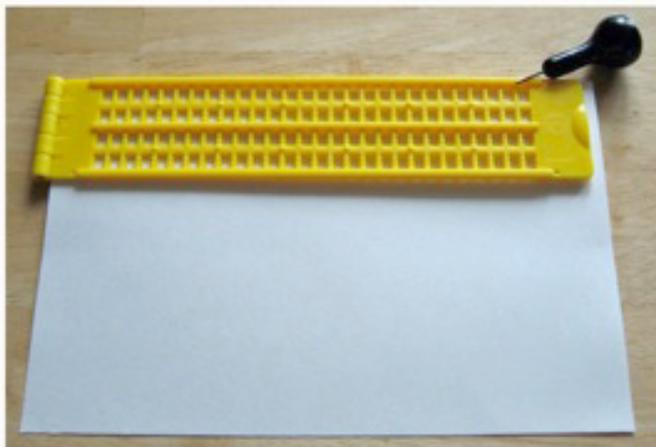
While it is easier to braille labels with some kind of braillewriter or embosser, braille labels can be made simply and quickly using a no-tech device: an old-fashioned slate and stylus: You place the label material in the slate and then use the stylus to punch the braille dots to make the words. There are special adhesive-backed braille sheets that are available, but if you don't have access to these, just use laminating sheets available at office supply stores or if you can't find those, just use sticky back contact shelving paper sold at most home stores.

### A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

- Heather Walsh: Teacher of the Visually Impaired, Contra Costa County

*Children and youth who are deaf-blind should be exposed to braille for several reasons. One is that it is very difficult to know the potential abilities of children who are deaf-blind, so students may have "hidden" potential to learn braille, at least to some degree. Also, they deserve to have exposure to as much typical education experience as possible, and access to braille for a blind student is part of that.*

*I like to use braille name tags for my students on their cubbies, chairs, etc. I think many students who may not be readers still understand that the braille name tag means that something is theirs. The APH books with raised images and braille are also popular with a lot of students because they are really interesting tactilely, and some of them have some bright color which is appealing for low vision students.*



The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) sells plastic adhesive labeling sheets for \$1 apiece, so you can get a lot of labels from a single sheet. And NFB, along with a number of other manufacturers or distributors, sells all kinds of slate and stylus sets. Just enter “slate and stylus sales” in a search engine and you’ll find many low cost options for getting a set.

When using a slate and stylus, it’s important to remember that you are punching braille dots on one side of the paper, to be read on the other side of the paper. Therefore, start at the top right corner of the sheet you are brailleing on and write the individual braille letters backwards. This sounds more complicated than it is. For example, a braille letter “a” is dot 1 when reading, but a dot 4 when writing with a slate and stylus. To practice, write with the slate and stylus and then turn the paper over to see if you did the letters correctly.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) also sells a braille Label Writer for \$20 so if you don’t want to use a slate and stylus, this is an affordable option for making labels:  
<https://nfb.org/independence-market>

There are other free or low-cost options for providing access to braille. The Oakmont Visual Aids Workshop in Santa Rosa, California, produces hand-made concept books that include braille and textures and/or raised images: <http://www.teachersaidsforblindchildren.org/products.html>



Their products are offered at no cost!

An act of the U.S. Congress established the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) as the official supplier of educational materials for school-age students who are blind or visually impaired. APH offers simple braille books with corresponding tactile features and these can be purchased with APH quota funds: <http://www.aph.org/federal-quota/>

Your student’s teacher of the visually impaired will know how to order these materials.

Finally, many libraries, including specialized libraries for children who are blind or visually impaired, have Twin Vision books available for loan. Twin Vision books are familiar children’s books that have clear Braille overlays over each page so the child can feel the Braille while the other children can still see the printed words and graphics:



## But Shouldn't Students be Assessed for Braille Readiness?

It's important not to confuse access to braille with teaching braille in the same way that we don't confuse access to print with teaching reading with print. A teacher of the visually impaired (TVI) will be the team member to lead the educational team in making the decision of when and how to teach braille. This assessment will consider many factors, including the level of a specific student's vision or the degree to which a student's vision might decrease over time as a result of a diagnosed eye condition. But no assessment is needed to simply provide access to braille.

### So in a Nutshell...

Go ahead and provide access to braille. It doesn't take any specialized training and it doesn't take an assessment. For children who can't access print, it allows multiple opportunities throughout the day to come in contact with braille. Will all children who have this level of access become braille readers? Probably not. But many of the children we serve surprise us every day, despite their complex sensory needs and learning styles. It can't do any harm, and it just might open a door that could have profound consequences for communication, learning, and self-worth.

### Tips From the Field -

Jennifer Hirsh and Roberta Williams: Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Monterey County

*Children and youth who are deaf-blind should be exposed to a rich, tactile environment, including braille as appropriate, regardless of whether they may or may not be braille readers someday. With limited sensory channels, the sense of touch becomes critical to understanding, interpreting and organizing one's world. Even though a child may never acquire an understanding of written language (braille), it is possible that he or she could develop functional tactile literacy.*

*Exposure to tactile experience begins as early as possible through exploration of a variety of textures, shapes, and real objects. If a student has vision, texture can be added to pictures to promote and encourage touch.*

*For example: Real (3-D) objects are paired with (2-D) raised line tactile images to create an understanding of symbolic representation. For instance, a child learns to match shape blocks to raised-line shapes. The raised line shapes are progressively reduced in size until the child can discriminate tactile shapes the size of a braille cell. This level of symbol discrimination allows functional literacy. Symbol stickers (available through APH) can be utilized for labeling, choice making and organization. If the student demonstrates this level of tactual discrimination, braille can be introduced and explored.*

*Although a child may never develop individual braille letter recognition, with repeated exposure he or she may be able to recognize certain patterns or shapes, such as the brailled shape of a name.*

*For a student that is at risk of losing both vision and hearing, braille could likely become the primary mode of communication and literacy.*