



## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES: TEACHING ENGLISH TO BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS

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### History

According to the statistics of the “Society of the Visually Impaired People of Russia” there are more than 20,000 BVI (blind and visually impaired) students in Russia: some of them study in one of 110 specialized (boarding) schools, some are home-schooled, and some study in mainstream schools. New Russian legislation stipulates that schools should be more accessible for students with disabilities and is attempting to promote inclusion. Most teachers and administrators are not prepared for inclusion at all; materials and equipment are scarce. The project **Equal Opportunities: Teaching English to BVI Students** was developed to address some of these issues.

### Goals

The project aims at expanding possibilities for students with vision loss. The project goal is to develop a framework through which students with visual impairment can better access English language learning opportunities in Russia and acquire opportunities to study abroad or via online learning. The project focuses on developing and describing methods of teaching BVI students, taking into account their psychological and cognitive issues, identifying online resources and developing guidelines for teachers, parents and students; collecting teaching materials and creating a manual for teachers and parents of such students.

### Project Participants

Currently 19 teachers of blind and visually impaired students from 9 regions in Russia are participating in this project. They work together to select appropriate materials, develop creative teaching strategies for reaching this population of students, and have created a strong network. To date ten teachers have visited the United States, observing classrooms and meeting with organizations dealing with the blind and visually impaired. We anticipate that approximately 600 BVI students have benefitted from this additional training of these teachers to date.

### Response from the Teaching Community

The English language teaching community has shown great interest in this project. For the first time the methodological issues of teaching blind and visually impaired students English have been raised at a number of seminars and conferences. Significantly, a major shift has occurred in the mentality of the Russian English language

The English Language Office, part of the Public Affairs Section at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia, works with the Russian educational community to improve English language education at all levels throughout Russia. By our work with local and national teachers' associations, we are able to reach a broad audience of English language teachers and learners, sharing information about updated teaching practices, motivating teachers, and spreading more information about the United States.

teachers participating directly in this project: instead of waiting for governmental support, these teachers have started to think more creatively about reaching blind and visually impaired students. These teachers now feel empowered to experiment in the classroom, using an arsenal of new techniques to reach their students.

### Materials Development

From the very beginning of the project all teachers involved complained about the lack of teaching materials and resources: in the history of teaching foreign languages to BVI students in Russia, only one Braille textbook dating back to 1961 was published. However, this Braille text was published without any adaptation – the textbook for sighted learners was simply translated into Braille, without taking into account any specificities of BVI students. Traditionally, the English Language teachers working in boarding schools for blind and visually impaired students have simply created their own materials for each class with no coordination across the curriculum. In an attempt to develop a more unified system, the members of this project have worked together to chose a textbook series (officially approved and recommended by the Ministry of Education), “Forward,” for adaptation for a blind and visually impaired audience. They are working with the main author, Professor Mariya Verbitskaya, (Moscow State University) to adapt the material. This is a unique attempt which will provide BVI students with quality up-to-date materials and will allow them to have equal access to quality education. The first seminar devoted to the adaptation of the existing textbook was held in Lipetsk in December 2012.

### Results to Date

- Team of English language teachers from 9 regions of Russia (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Stavropol, Chelyabinsk, Izhevsk, Lipetsk, Rostov-on-Don, Kirov ) was formed
- Two websites on project developed: <http://www.english4blind.ru> and [www.bviproject.syktsu.ru](http://www.bviproject.syktsu.ru)
- Ten teachers have participated in U.S. exchange component
  - Working relationships established with the Hadley School for the Blind
  - New collections of books and textbook series have been purchased for BVI schools in Russia
  - English Language Access students are developing tactile materials to be used in BVI classrooms





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