Issue Brief: The Blind and Language Policy

Key terms: Blind, vision loss, system of communication, Braille

Description: This brief focuses on the American blind population, their use of Braille, and the policies surrounding that usage.

Key Points:

- A significant portion of the American population is blind, numbering over 20 million.
- Blind Americans span the racial spectrum, including multiracial Americans.
- Braille textbooks and other publications are used widely to educate this population.
- There is a growing effort to standardize through legislation laws surrounding Braille publications and usage.
- Congress is currently considering additional legislation to provide access to video/telecommunications products for the blind.

Brief:

Braille is often best classified as a communication system, if not a language per se, but it serves as a language for the blind. 25.2 million American adults, according to the National Health Survey Provisional Report, report experiencing significant vision loss from birth or over the course of their lives. Blind adults number over 18 million, and an additional 6.5 million experience enough vision loss to necessitate the use of Braille communication. The term “vision loss” refers to individuals who cannot see even through glasses, contact lenses, or other devices.

Blindness affects a broad cross section of the American ethnic population. A relatively small proportion (only about half a million) report being multi-racial; still, 3 million are black, 2.8 million are Hispanic, nearly a million are Asian. The majority is white, numbering over 15 million. They also represent a wide variety of socioeconomic groups. About a quarter of the blind population has a high school diploma, another less, another a college education, and the smallest percentage, somewhat less than a quarter, has a bachelor’s degree. Of Americans who have vision loss and are 25 years of age and over, 5.0 million have less than a high school diploma, 6.3 million have a high school diploma or a GED, 6.5 million have some college education, and 4.8 million have a bachelor’s degree or higher.

An effort has been underway in the United States to establish rights, procedures, and standards relating to Braille instruction for elementary and
secondary students who are blind. The centerpiece of this effort is a national Braille literacy campaign which was launched by the National Federation of the Blind on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. USA Today and MSNBC, among others, reported that the Federation is deeply engaged in a lobbying campaign to standardize Braille literacy laws in all 50 states. The policy objectives include redefining the term “Blind student,” assessing blind or nearly blind students, designing individualized education programs and providing appropriate educational materials in concert with those used by others.

Alabama and Michigan provide a good example of the need for standardization. In Alabama, all textbooks and supplements, literary and nonliterary, are required to be digitized so that they can be reproduced in Braille. In Michigan, a publisher is forbidden from selling the Braille version of a book for a higher price than its printed counterpart.

Despite legislation like the Americans with Disability Act, blind Americans often find themselves handicapped by current societal standards. Lobbying efforts continue in an effort to shift legislated prejudice. Currently, the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility is a key legislative goal for the blind community. The goal of the bill is to provide those with vision or hearing loss access to video programming and the tools associated with it, like remote controls, video players, and more. Lobbyists from manufacturers in the technology industry have successfully defeated certain portions of the bill, because it requires more of them in research and development (in creating and producing the product).

Images:

Left: the Braille alphabet. Right: Massachusetts Congressman Ed Markey meets with blind and deaf advocates lobbying on Americans with Disability Act-related legislation.
Websites:

National Federation of the Blind:
http://www.nfb.org/nfb/Braille_literacy_background.asp?SnID=2

American Federation of the Blind:
http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=44&TopicID=192&DocumentID=2986
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29882719/ - MSNBC News Story
http://www.juniorblind.org/site/ - Junior Blind of America

General References:

(Chapter 6 is on Blind Americans)

Union Catalog of Hand-Copied Books in Braille by Library of Congress, Division for the Blind

Toward Making Braille as Accessible As Print, by John K. Dupress, Dwight M.B. Baumann and Robert W. Mann.

Braille in the United States: its Production, Distribution, and Use by Louis Harvey Goldish.