November 17, 2026

Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board
Arkansas Division of Higher Education
423 Main Street, Suite 400
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Dear Members of the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board:

On behalf of the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind Board of Trustees, we respectfully request your support for the continuation of the Orientation and Mobility program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, as well as the establishment or restoration of Special Education preparation tracks in Deaf Education and Blind/Visually Impaired Education.

These programs are essential to Arkansas's ability to recruit and retain qualified professionals who can provide specialized instruction, direct communication, and independent-living skills to students who are Deaf, hard of hearing, Blind, visually impaired, or deafblind. The need is statewide and extends beyond students enrolled on the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind campus. Public school districts throughout Arkansas depend upon qualified Teachers of the Deaf, Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments, educational interpreters, and Orientation and Mobility specialists to meet students' individualized educational needs.

The Statewide Need

The supporting data indicate that approximately 145,000 Arkansans experience serious difficulty hearing. Arkansas also has approximately 73,000 school-age students receiving services through Individualized Education Programs across all disability categories, although available state documentation does not provide a readily identifiable total for students classified as hearing impaired, Deaf, or deafblind. Arkansas maintains an annual federally required census of children from birth through age 21 who are deafblind or have dual sensory impairments, including students whose primary disability classification may fall under another category.

For individuals who are blind or visually impaired, the supporting materials identify approximately 98,100 Arkansans with blindness or visual impairment. They also report 1,607 students in kindergarten through grade 12 and 45 prekindergarten students receiving special education services associated with blindness and concomitant or multiple disabilities. According to the same materials, Arkansas has only 27 Orientation and Mobility specialists certified by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education.

Based on these reported figures, Arkansas has approximately 59 identified school-age students for every certified Orientation and Mobility specialist. If the broader population of blind and visually impaired Arkansans is considered, the ratio is approximately 3,600 individuals for every certified specialist. Regardless of the precise ratio, the available evidence demonstrates an insufficient personnel pipeline.

The Importance of Orientation and Mobility

Orientation and Mobility instruction equips individuals who are blind or have low vision to understand their environment and travel safely, efficiently, and confidently. Specialists teach skills involving spatial awareness, safe travel, long-cane use, remaining vision, dog-guide orientation, and adaptive travel technology.

UA Little Rock's webpage states that the graduate Orientation and Mobility program is no longer accepting applications. The program began in 1975 and has played a longstanding role in preparing professionals for Arkansas and the nation. Its online coursework, combined with intensive summer instruction in Little Rock, has provided an established framework for students who may not otherwise be able to relocate for a specialized graduate program.

Without an in-state pathway, Arkansas professionals must seek preparation in other states, creating additional financial, travel, and logistical barriers. Continuing the Orientation and Mobility program would preserve an established Arkansas resource while directly addressing a documented shortage.

The Need for Deaf Education Preparation

Historically, UA Little Rock prepared Teachers of the Deaf who served the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind, local education agencies, and itinerant programs across the state. The Deaf Education program developed educators with both specialized instructional knowledge and the linguistic ability to communicate directly with Deaf students. The university's discontinuation of this teacher-preparation degree has left Arkansas schools with fewer opportunities to recruit appropriately prepared educators.

A general education or broadly prepared special education teacher, even when supported by an interpreter, does not replace a teacher who has specialized knowledge of Deaf education, language acquisition, accessible instruction, and direct communication. The supporting materials report that the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind has experienced difficulty hiring teachers appropriately credentialed in Deaf Education and that some instructors cannot communicate directly with students through sign language.

UA Little Rock continues to offer programs in Interpretation: ASL/English, American Sign Language Studies, and educational interpreting. These programs provide valuable institutional expertise and a potential foundation upon which a Deaf Education track could be developed. Interpreter preparation and teacher preparation, however, fulfill different professional roles. Arkansas needs both.

The Need for Blind/Visually Impaired Education Preparation

Arkansas also needs an accessible in-state pathway for Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments. These teachers provide specialized instruction in areas such as Braille literacy, assistive technology, sensory efficiency, compensatory academic skills, and access to the general curriculum. Orientation and Mobility specialists and Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments work in complementary roles, but one discipline cannot substitute for the other.

The supporting materials state that Arkansas educators currently must pursue Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments preparation outside the state. This requirement creates a significant barrier for working educators and school districts. An in-state Blind/Visually Impaired Education track, particularly one that includes accessible online coursework and supervised field experiences within Arkansas, would help develop professionals who are more likely to remain and serve Arkansas students.

Our Request

The Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind Board of Trustees respectfully requests that the Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board:

1. Support the continuation and renewed enrollment of the Orientation and Mobility graduate program at UA Little Rock.
2. Encourage the development or restoration of a Deaf Education teacher-preparation track within Special Education.
3. Encourage the development or restoration of a Blind/Visually Impaired Education teacher-preparation track within Special Education.
4. Work with UA Little Rock, the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind, school districts, and relevant professional organizations to create a sustainable enrollment and funding model.
5. Consider statewide workforce need, geographic access, and the specialized nature of these disciplines when evaluating program viability, rather than relying primarily on annual enrollment or completion totals.

Small, specialized programs should not be measured solely by the standards applied to high-enrollment academic programs. A relatively small number of graduates in these fields can have an extraordinary statewide impact because each professional may serve students across several schools, districts, age groups, or service settings. The absence of these preparation programs does not eliminate the need for their graduates. It simply transfers the cost to Arkansas school districts, families, agencies, and professionals who must seek qualified personnel or training outside the state.

The Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind is Arkansas's only public school dedicated specifically to students who are Deaf, hard of hearing, Blind, or visually impaired. We see firsthand the difference that appropriately

prepared professionals make in students' communication, literacy, independence, safety, and access to learning. Preserving and expanding Arkansas's preparation pathways is an investment in educational access, workforce development, and the long-term independence of Arkansans with sensory disabilities.

We respectfully ask the Coordinating Board to work with UA Little Rock and its state partners to preserve this area of institutional expertise and create a comprehensive, sustainable personnel-preparation pathway for Orientation and Mobility, Deaf Education, and Blind/Visually Impaired Education.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to meeting Arkansas's higher education and workforce needs.

Sincerely,

Dr. John McAllister
Chair, Board of Trustees
Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind

On behalf of the Arkansas School for the Deaf and Blind Board of Trustees