

# Do Students with Visual Impairments Need a Computer at Home?

Consider this alarming statistic. A recent survey found that 99% of sighted youth use the internet to complete homework assignments and research compared to 47% of youth with visual impairments. How can that be? According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students who are blind should be able to use accessible computers. Well, perhaps they do for a few hours at school, but the vast majority of schools do not provide an accessible device for students to take home with them.

You might ask, "Why can't they use their parent's computer? Good question. I believe there are several reasons why they can't. The parent's computer probably does not contain screen reader or screen magnification software and they are likely not wanting it on there. Next, it is their computer and who wants their child using their computer? Another reason is that accessibility software and gaming software sometimes do not play nicely together, causing one or the other to crash.

Although these are valid reasons, I believe the biggest reason is affordability. Many parents cannot afford a computer for their child, much less the software required to make it accessible. Speech software can cost \$1,000 or more and screen magnification software can cost \$300 or more. Add that to the cost of a computer and monitor and you are talking about a lot of money.

Few students cannot afford to buy their own accessible computer. In fact, many visually impaired adults can't afford it either. According to the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), 30% of working age adults who are blind fall under the poverty level.

So, what is the big deal? Can a student who is visually impaired compete with their sighted peers if they do not have equal access to the internet to do homework and research papers?

Consider the following recent statistics from NFB. Only 25% of students who are blind or visually impaired finish high school and less than 15% earn a bachelor's degree!

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It is my firm belief that not having an accessible computer with internet access is a significant factor in these staggeringly low statistics.

Listed below are three possible sources for obtaining free or low cost accessible computers.

- Since education is the responsibility of the local education agency (LEA), most vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies will not purchase one for a student. However, it does not hurt to ask. If they say no, ask them if they will purchase a refurbished computer that is accessible. The cost is substantially less. \$110 - \$130 compared to several hundred dollars to over \$1,000 for a new computer and the software needed to make them accessible.
- Local Lions Clubs may be willing to purchase a new or refurbished computer. Their main focus is serving the blindness community. Find a local lion that can propose it to the board of their club or attend one of their meetings. You might be able to find them in your community by searching the internet, checking with your public library, or the nearest local Chamber of Commerce.
- Computers for the Blind, a non-profit organization, provides accessible computers for a small processing fee of \$110 for a desktop & monitor, and \$130 for a laptop. The computers ship for free throughout the US and have a 2 year warranty. They come with two screen readers, NVDA and a demo of JAWS. They also come with a fully licensed copy of a screen magnification software called MAGic, which is donated by VFO. It is valued at \$395. A demo of Talking Typing Teacher (TTT) is also installed. A licensed copy of TTT can be obtained for \$10 from MarvelSoft for use on a CFTB computer thanks to a generous grant. It retails for \$100. Nearly half of the state agencies for the blind purchase CFTB computers, for some of their consumers, so you should ask your VR or Transition Counselor if he can purchase it. For more information contact CFTB.

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Please note that almost all students with visual impairments can benefit from computers, even those who are blind with other multiple disabilities. If a student can press the space bar then the computer can be adapted to the student's special needs.

For more information on preparing for college look up [College Guide for Students with Visual Impairments](#) on the Internet.

Statistics for this article are taken from National Federation of the Blind website, [www.nfb.org](http://www.nfb.org), and the [College Guide for Students with Visual Impairments](#). Other valuable information can be found on the American Foundation for the Blind website, [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org).

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