

## Best Practices:

### Orientation & Mobility (O&M) Lowlight/Nighttime Assessments For Students With Low Vision

As part of the comprehensive Orientation & Mobility (O&M) assessment process, older students who have low vision would benefit from receiving a lowlight/nighttime travel observation/evaluation as part of their comprehensive O&M assessment. This is particularly important for students preparing to transition to post-secondary education or begin working outside of the school setting. This is because, unlike students who are totally blind, students with low vision often experience significantly reduced visual functioning when traveling in low light/nighttime conditions, which may impact their confidence & safety when traveling at night.

Since O&M assessments & lessons typically take place during regular school hours under daylight conditions, this approach of assessing students only during the school day does not provide a complete picture of a student's functional vision or their travel needs across all environments. After-school activities, extracurriculars, sports, & part-time jobs often require older students to travel during dusk or nighttime hours, & they must be prepared to navigate safely in these common, real-world scenarios. Assessing the safe & independent travel skills of college-bound or work-ready students only in daylight environments overlooks crucial information about how a student's vision may change when navigating in lowlight or dark conditions.

Many eye conditions, including retinitis pigmentosa, albinism, & Stargardt disease, have characteristics of night blindness, reduced visual fields, and/or poor contrast sensitivity. A student who functions relatively well in daylight may experience dramatic challenges when traveling in dark/low light conditions, such as disorientation due to glare or difficulty visually spotting obstacles, making the ability to travel even familiar routes a challenge.

O&M instruction is meant to build safe & confident travelers who can navigate all environments. Without understanding how a student visually functions in low light situations, IEP teams cannot make informed decisions about a student's safety, accommodations, or other supports, such as the use of reflective gear, flashlights, route modifications, or other considerations. A full understanding of a student's needs, including while traveling in nighttime conditions, allows the IEP team to develop appropriate goals, services, & other supports, even though regular O&M lessons may continue to take place during daylight hours.

Since this is a critical area for older students with low vision to be evaluated in, I am offering Night Travel Assessments to districts around the Puget Sound area during the fall semester. Below are some basic criteria I consider when evaluating students' night travel needs. Students would be eligible for my Night Travel Assessments if they meet the following criteria:

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\*The student must currently be receiving direct instruction in the area of Orientation & Mobility (O&M) as part of their IEP

\*The student must be a junior or senior in high school

\*The student must have low vision & an eye condition with characteristics of reduced visual fields or visual acuities when lighting is decreased

\*The student must also have at least one of the following needs:

an immediate need for traveling in low light/night travel (i.e., participating in school-sponsored sports or other extracurricular activities)

upcoming short-term travel circumstances which will involve low light or nighttime conditions (i.e., will begin working a part-time night shift & need to learn a new route when lighting conditions are not optimal) and/or

long-term travel needs for navigating in low light settings (i.e., plans after high school will require the student to travel from evening classes across a college campus to a dorm room)

It is **not** a requirement that the student be a long white cane user to receive a nighttime travel evaluation, however, it may be recommended that the student learn some basic white cane skills when traveling in low light environments.

Limiting a student's O&M assessment to daylight hours creates an inequity for students with low vision. All students should be given the tools and training to fully participate in academic, recreational, and social aspects of school life—many of which extend beyond regular daylight hours. Including nighttime or lowlight travel as part of the student's comprehensive Orientation & Mobility evaluation or transition plan is not just best practice, it is essential for ensuring student safety, fostering their independence, and supporting equitable access to the full educational experience & beyond.

If you have any high school students with low vision who meet the above criteria, I encourage you to reach out to me about scheduling a time for this unique but essential component of the O&M evaluation. These assessments will take place in the fall/winter when daylight hours are shorter.

You can learn more about my services from my O&M website ([www.longwhitecane.com](http://www.longwhitecane.com)) Please let me know if you have any questions about this unique but essential assessment, & I look forward to connecting with you soon!

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