International Council on English Braille

President’s Report to the 8th General Assembly

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This report covers the quadrennial period from the conclusion of the 7th General Assembly which took place virtually from the 18th to the 22nd of October 2020 until the 8th General Assembly which takes place from the 25th to the 30th of May 2024 in Auckland, New Zealand.

The work of ICEB has moved along at a fairly steady pace for the last four years. In 2020, when I began my term as President, I told you that I had three goals for the next four years. They were:

1. Increase visibility

2. Expand capacity

3. Grow the financial base

These are not the kind of goals where we can look at one thing and say “We did it, we’re done.” These goals are much more incremental. But they are goals that we can work toward and think about as we undertake our activities. Let’s have a look at ICEB’s accomplishments for the past four years and see how close we came to advancing those goals.

* We began the term by co-opting two additional members onto the Executive Committee. Mary Schnackenberg from New Zealand and Natalie Martiniello from Canada graciously accepted the invitation to join the Executive Committee. Both have been extremely helpful and have contributed greatly to the work of ICEB.
* After a three-month trial period, the Executive Committee agreed to begin holding meetings monthly instead of quarterly. This has proven to be very beneficial toward accomplishing our goals. The meetings are now held via Zoom instead of telephone which has also been very helpful. We no longer have to either pay for teleconference calls or prevail upon one of our members to provide this service for us.
* Since no delegates from Nigeria participated in the 2020 virtual General Assembly and we had been unable to contact anyone from the country, the Executive Committee agreed that the membership of Nigeria would be suspended. We would happily welcome them back should circumstances change.
* After the 7th General Assembly, an immediate task was the revision of the Constitution. In 2020, the recommended Constitutional amendments were not distributed 60 days prior to the GA as the ICEB Constitution requires. To deal with this, we created a listserv for ICEB delegates only; We called for a vote from each country on the proposed constitutional amendments on Monday, 30 November 2020.
* The 7th General Assembly passed eight resolutions and the ICEB Executive Committee has made great progress on most of them. You will be hearing more detail about the progress we’ve made on the 2020 resolutions a bit later.
* During the quadrennium, the ICEB Executive Committee had several invited guests to update them on activities of interest. They included Greg Stilson and Willow Free from the American Printing House for the Blind in the United States to talk about the new eBraille format; and Robert Englebretson, Simon Fischer-Baum, and Cay Holbrook from the U.S. and Canada to talk about their research on contracted phonemes. A smaller group met with Sam Dooley from Pearson in the United States to discuss his Accessible Equation Editor (AEE) project that translates math into Nemeth code. Sam is interested in expanding the project for UEB as well.
* Technical Committees. ICEB currently has five code-related committees. They are: Code Maintenance Committee, UEB Technical Materials Committee, Braille Technology Committee, Music Committee, and Research Committee. Each of these committees will report during this conference. The UEB Technical Materials Committee was formed in 2021 to give better focus to the technical guidelines. They work collaboratively with the Code Maintenance Committee. The only committee accomplishment that I will report on here is the publication of the third edition of the UEB Rulebook. Huge thanks go to Kathy Riessen, former Chair of the Code Maintenance Committee, Matthew Horspool, current Chair of the CMC, and Jen Goulden who assisted greatly with this effort. This edition contains an index which was created by Phyllis Landon. This was an enormous task which took several years. A huge thank-you to her for this.
* Administrative and Other Committees. In addition, there are four administrative and other committees. They are: Finance, Bylaws, Public Relations, and Nominations. You will also hear from each of these committees during this General Assembly.
* The mid-term Executive Committee meeting was held virtually from June 5-9, 2022 hosted by Braille Literacy Canada. It was a very successful and well-organized conference. In addition to our usual committee and other reports, we had a keynote speech from Debbie Gillespie on the importance of braille and two special presentations, one from an historian, Philippa Campsie, whose focus was on Charles Barbier and that the traditionally held beliefs about how Louis Braille learned about Barbier’s code are not true. There is no evidence for the idea that Barbier created a dot-based code so that soldiers could read in the dark. She said that historical evidence shows that Barbier never came to the school when Louis Braille was young and Barbier’s system was only demonstrated to students by the headmaster. The other presentation was from a librarian, Catherine Rodda, in the Music Section of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled in the United States who made a presentation on scanning hardcopy braille. Audio recordings from this conference are available via podcast.
* In early 2023, Kathy Riessen resigned as Chair of the Code Maintenance Committee. The Executive Committee appointed Matthew Horspool, who has chaired the committee for the rest of the quadrennium.
* Membership. During the last two years we have been contacted by both Zimbabwe and Nepal, expressing interest in becoming full members of ICEB. Both countries expressed difficulty paying ICEB dues. In April 2024, the ICEB Executive Committee changed the bylaw on membership support of developing countries to waive the membership fee for those countries who meet the criteria of developing country set forth by the World Bank. This is also the criteria that is used by the World Blind Union.
* Codes for Indigenous Languages. Jen Goulden coordinated the creation of a document about the development of braille codes for other languages. This was in response to news of braille code development being done by persons with no knowledge of braille nor linguistics. The document stresses the importance of considering issues specific to the particular language.
* Braille Types and Files. The UEB Braille Technical Materials Committee coordinated the creation of a document about braille types and files. It provides details about how braille is typically stored and processed by today's computers and summarises the file formats commonly used to store braille documents. This document may help sort out some of the confusion that exists around different types of files and formats.
* Website. For many years, the ICEB website was hosted by the American Council of the Blind (ACB) in the United States. In 2021, ACB decided to discontinue hosting the websites of outside organizations. I moved the website to a hosting service called Hover, where we now pay a nominal fee to have our website hosted.
* Social Media. ICEB maintains a presence on Facebook and X, formerly Twitter. Natalie regularly posts to Facebook where we have about 750 followers. Jen posts to X where we have about 450 followers. In October 2023, Jen created an ICEB account on Mastodon.
* ICEB Newsletter. Since its inception in 2018, 16 issues of the ICEB newsletter have been published. Many thanks to Mary Schnackenberg who has been compiling the newsletter during the past four years.
* ICEB Archives. In March 2024, FM and I met with the archivist at the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Kentucky in the United States. We received a box of documents from Joe Sullivan which contains many documents from the early days of ICEB. I have created an ICEB Archives Roadmap which is on your flash drive. Please have a look at that and send me any feedback you may have.
* In April 2024, the ICEB Executive Committee adopted a revised set of bylaws. Changes from the previous version include renumbering and reorganizing sections, an updated membership clause, and provisions for funding officers who do not represent their countries at ICEB meetings.
* At this General Assembly, we will have papers delivered by experts on braille and lots of time for discussion about issues that are important to us. Since our primary reason for being is to maintain UEB, we will be devoting an entire session at this General Assembly to a discussion. I am calling this “UEB at 20.” This will be an opportunity for everyone to bring their thoughts about what is working and what is needed and to help set priorities for the next quadrennium.

I have a few recommendations for the next four years:

1. Incoming Executive Committee. I would recommend that a high priority for the incoming Executive Committee would be to seek ways to encourage Committee members to be more engaged and to seek additional individuals who want to perform tasks on behalf of ICEB.
2. I also suggest that committees hold regular meetings and not just have discussion by email. I would recommend that these meetings be at least quarterly.
3. We need to ramp up our activity on technical materials. It had been suggested that we hold a round table with users of the UEB technical code. If there is interest, this is something we can organize in the next year or so.

I am pleased to have been your President for the past four years. If I am elected President for the next term, I am a much wiser person now and hope that my second term would be even more productive than the first. Thank you.