

# Pioneering conference for the blind in Mexico has CPD ties

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*Dr. Sachin Pavithran at the registration table*

Last summer, blind children and their families and teachers attended a pioneering conference in Mexico. And while the 300 attendees learned about daily living skills and using a cane for orientation and mobility, the most powerful message may not have been spoken at all.

Instead it was demonstrated by the 14 *Cambiando Vidas* conference team members who are blind, said Conchita Hernández, METAS chair. METAS (Mentoring, Engaging and Teaching All Students) is a nonprofit organization formed to bring education and services to children in Mexico, and to Spanish-speaking families in the United States.

The Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University has collaborated with METAS since its inception in 2016. Dr. Sachin Pavithran, the CPD's policy director, has played a key role in the work being done to improve the quality of education for the blind in Mexico through this collaboration. He worked with METAS to make the conference a reality for children, families and service providers for the blind, introducing them to ideas that could literally change lives.

"Parents [at the conference] had not ever met independent blind people who have careers and families, so that was a big impact," said Hernandez. "Parents had no idea of the possibilities. ... More than sharing expert practice, it was that, 'There is hope for my child,'" Hernandez said.

The three-day conference took place in Guadalajara, Mexico in late July.

"One of the biggest needs we've been hearing about is to get parents and teachers and family members what they need to know," Pavithran said. "There's never been any kind of professional setting for people to go to... We didn't realize how much interest there would be."

Workshops were provided in Spanish, free of charge.

Mexico has one public school for the blind; all the rest are private. Sixty percent of blind children in Mexico don't attend school at all. While Mexico's laws require public schools to educate children with disabilities, the schools and teachers are largely unprepared to do so, Hernández said.

Pavithran said the parents and teachers at the conference learned a lot. "They realized they didn't know what they didn't have."

The conference offered lots of hands-on training, including a chance for blind participants to try out for sports. Free, donated white canes were handed out, and parents saw their children's mobility, confidence and social interaction increase once they used those canes to get around.

"By the third day, you could tell the change in people's attitudes," Pavithran said. "The whole idea is to plant seeds and let them know what the possibilities are."

The conference was funded through the Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired's [Holman Prize](#), and by private donations. Another event is set to take place in May.