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Comparative Review of Washington State Schools for Students With Sensory Disabilities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Washington State School for the Blind (WSB) and Washington School for the Deaf (WSD) have provided educational and residential services to students with sensory disabilities since 1886. Both schools are independent state agencies with campuses located in Vancouver. As of the 2004-05 school year, WSB enrolled 70 students and WSD enrolled 96 students on-campus; each school also operates an outreach program that provides support services to students and teachers in local public schools. WSB and WSD students who live more than an hour away from Vancouver reside on campus during the week and travel home each weekend.

In recent years, declining per-capita enrollment, concerns about student safety, and capital funding requests have contributed to increased attention to WSD by state policymakers.

Study Direction

The 2005 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to:

- compare governance, financing, and service delivery at WSB and WSD.
- recommend how the schools could configure service delivery to complement and support school district programs.
- examine which state agency should have responsibility for governance and oversight of the schools.

Background: Students With Sensory Disabilities

Sensory disabilities are considered “low incidence”: fewer than 2 out of every 1,000 students have a hearing or vision loss. Local school districts have difficulty grouping students for instruction due to this low incidence rate. Sensory disabilities impact learning, and students with hearing and vision losses often require specialized instruction.

Federal law requires school districts to make a range of educational placements—e.g., mainstream classroom, special education classroom, or residential school—available to special education students. An appropriate educational placement is defined as being

“least restrictive,” which is often interpreted as placing children in mainstream classrooms in local schools when possible. Student learning needs vary widely, however, and the need for intensive, expert services sometimes leads to placement in a residential setting. While not required by federal law, 46 states have at least one school for the deaf and 40 have at least one school for the blind.

Washington State School Trends and Student Characteristics

Students with sensory disabilities are sparsely scattered throughout Washington state, except for small concentrations in the populous Puget Sound region and Vancouver area. In the 2004-05 school year, 1,387 deaf and hard of hearing and 362 visually impaired special education students attended Washington State public schools. Six percent of deaf and hard of hearing students were enrolled at WSD, and 14 percent of visually impaired students at WSB. Special education students are placed at the schools if their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) conclude such a placement is needed.

Enrollment Trends. Student enrollment at WSD has declined steadily over the last few decades, while WSB’s enrollment has remained level. On a per-capita basis, fewer students with both types of sensory disability attend the two schools compared with 25 years ago. Small school districts—those with fewer than ten deaf/hard of hearing or visually impaired students—more frequently send students to WSD and WSB, in comparison with larger districts.

Student Characteristics. Most students at the state schools are in middle or high school, and a majority reside on campus during the week. Students remain at WSD for about four years and at WSB for three and a half years, on average. WSD has a more ethnically diverse student population than WSB, but in terms of disabilities, most WSD students are deaf with no additional disabilities. WSB students range from partially visually impaired to blind and deaf-blind, and over half have disabilities besides vision loss.

Connections With Local Schools. WSB has provided outreach services for over 15 years and its more extensive program is primarily funded by contracts with local school districts and private grants. WSD began providing outreach services within the last five years and primarily uses state funding to support its smaller program. Both schools’ outreach programs have expanded since their inception. WSB provided a monthly average of about 10 services in 1990 and nearly 600 by 2005; WSD provided a monthly average of about 30 services in 2001 and 75 by 2005.

Costs Associated With WSD and WSB

Operating Budgets. Washington State currently provides approximately \$5.1 million to WSB and \$8.4 million to WSD for annual operating expenses. Local school districts do not pay for tuition or transportation when students are placed at the statewide schools. On a per-student basis, WSD and WSB are both more costly to operate in comparison with the average cost of services for special education students in local public schools. These

higher average costs are driven by enrollment of students with cost-intensive learning needs, operation of a 24-hour residential program, provision of weekend transportation, and relatively small student populations. While on average local programs are less costly, there is a wide range of student learning needs and associated costs; local school students who have severe disabilities can cost more to educate than the annual per-student cost at WSB and WSD.

Residential per-student costs at WSD are higher than at WSB due to stricter staffing requirements.

Capital Plans. The recent history of capital requests for the two schools has varied, with more uncertainty about WSD's capital plans. In 2002, as part of a series of studies on WSD, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) found that WSD's campus needed substantial capital investment. The JLARC study noted, however, that administrators were planning a campus for up to 300 students, more than double the school's enrollment level. State funding for those campus plans was never provided. WSD has since scaled back the planned capacity and is designing a campus for 100 to 120 students.

In the 2005 legislative session, state funding for construction of new buildings on both the WSD and WSB campuses was withheld pending the outcome of this study. Over the next decade, anticipated capital requests total \$12.9 million for WSB and over \$15 million for WSD.

Governance History

Historically, the Department of Social and Health Services and predecessor agencies provided oversight of WSD and WSB. Increasing emphasis on their educational role (rather than viewing them as "institutions") led to the establishment of the schools as separate state agencies in 1985, each with an advisory board of trustees. The schools remain independent state agencies under oversight of the governor's office. The most recent governance change occurred in 2002, when the Legislature authorized the WSD board to direct, and not simply advise, school policies and procedures following a series of student safety incidents.

Comparison Data Summary

Exhibit 1 summarizes the comparison data presented in this report.

Exhibit 1
State Residential Schools Comparison Summary

	WSB	WSD
Unique student learning needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orientation and mobility • Braille • Social interaction and independent living • Specialized technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language acquisition and literacy • Deaf culture • Social interaction and independent living • Specialized technology
Enrollment trend	Level (70 students in 2004-05)	Declining (96 students in 2004-05)
Per-capita enrollment	Declining	Declining
Geographic range	Statewide	Statewide
Student grade levels	Primarily middle/high school	Primarily middle/high school
Student gender	More boys than girls	Evenly split
Student ethnicity compared with statewide student population	Proportionately more white and American Indian students	Proportionately more Asian and Hispanic students
Student residential status	Majority live on campus during the week, but declining	Majority live on campus during the week, but declining
Student additional disabilities	Over half have disabilities in addition to vision loss	About 13 percent have disabilities in addition to hearing loss
Student length of stay	Three and a half years, remaining steady	About four years, recently declined
Outreach program	Operated for 25 years and expanding; currently nearly 600 services/month. Mostly self-sustaining via fees-for-services.	Operated for about five years and expanding; currently about 75 services/month. Mostly supported by state general funds.
State funding	\$4.6 (FY 2005) to \$5.1 million (FY 2006)	\$7.7 (FY 2005) to \$8.4 million (FY 2006)
Per-student expenditures	\$24,228 (instruction) \$26,449 (residential)	\$23,271 (instruction) \$42,205 (residential)
Anticipated capital funding requests	\$12.9 million through FY 2015	Over \$15 million through FY 2015
Governance structure	Independent state agency with board of advisors	Independent state agency with board of directors

Policy Options

As noted above, the 2005 Legislature directed the Institute to examine service delivery, financing, and governance of WSD and WSB. In December 2005, the Board of Directors of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy reviewed preliminary study findings and requested staff to examine the full range of policy options, including school closure under various scenarios. Based on this direction, policy options for the schools fall into two broad categories, as described below.

- 1. Maintain the schools' instructional, residential, and outreach programs while considering capital funding requests and changes in governance structure.** In addition to the option of maintaining the current governance structure, six governance alternatives were identified including: assigning responsibility of school oversight to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, State Board of Education, Department of Social and Health Services, or local school district; combining school administrations and boards; or recreating the schools as nonprofit entities with the state continuing to provide funding.
- 2. Scale back school operations with partial or full closure of one or both schools.** Five alternatives envisioning closure of one or more of each school's programs were identified under this array of options, including: closing the residential program(s) but maintaining instruction during the day; closing everything but the outreach program(s); shuttering the Vancouver campus(es) but opening regional centers around the state; closing the school(s) entirely; and closing the school(s) while apportioning supplementary special education funding for students returning to local schools.

Under the first set of alternatives, the state would achieve no or minimal cost savings by shifting some administrative functions to other agencies. While oversight may or may not improve, governance changes would not substantially impact either school's service delivery, operating budgets, or capital plans.

The second set of policy options could have significant fiscal and educational impacts. Closing some or all of WSD's or WSB's programs could save the state operating and capital expenditures, but the full extent of impacts on local schools and individual students is unknown. If there were no state residential school(s), local districts would have to take on the cost of educating students who would otherwise be placed at WSD or WSB. Potential expenditure savings could be offset by requests from local districts for supplemental funding if students require exceptionally cost-intensive services or an out-of-state residential placement.

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