

An Evaluation

# **Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired**

*Department of Public Instruction*

## **2003-2004 Joint Legislative Audit Committee Members**

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State Auditor - Janice Mueller

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April 29, 2003

Senator Carol A. Roessler and  
Representative Suzanne Jeskewitz, Co-chairpersons  
Joint Legislative Audit Committee  
State Capitol  
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator Roessler and Representative Jeskewitz:

As required by 1999 Wisconsin Act 9, we have completed an evaluation of the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired, which is a statewide educational resource for students with visual impairments and for their parents and teachers. Act 9 created the Center and directed it to continue to operate the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped, which is a residential school in Janesville; to offer youth and adult summer programs; and to provide outreach services to school districts statewide. In fiscal year (FY) 2001-02, the Center spent \$7.1 million and had 95.1 authorized full-time equivalent staff positions. Outreach activities accounted for \$1.4 million, or 19.7 percent, of expenditures in FY 2001-02.

Enrollment in the residential school increased from 62 students in the 1997-98 school year to 84 students in the 2001-02 school year; however, most students with visual impairments attend local school districts. Increasing short-term residential school enrollments is one of the Center's goals, but only 3.6 percent of students attended the residential school for 36 days or less in 2001-02.

The Center has made a number of the programmatic changes that were included in a May 2000 transition plan for implementing the provisions of Act 9, and it plans to make more. However, it does not expect to implement all of the plan's objectives, because the needs of students and educators have changed since the plan was developed. We include recommendations to assist the residential school in meeting its goal of providing more short-term enrollments and to make the Center's oversight of summer programs more effective. We also include a recommendation for the Center to provide the Joint Legislative Audit Committee with a strategic plan that sets program priorities and establishes quantitative measures by which progress can be assessed.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation extended to us by the Department of Public Instruction. Its response follows the appendix.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Janice Mueller'.

Janice Mueller  
State Auditor

JM/PS/ss



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## Report Highlights ■

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***Increases in the Center's expenditures primarily result from expanded outreach efforts.***

***Residential school enrollment has increased, but short-term enrollment has not.***

***The Center does not maintain basic information about its summer programs for youth.***

***The Center has implemented many, but not all, of the transition plan's outreach objectives.***

***Additional effort is needed to improve the Center's provision of services.***

The Department of Public Instruction operates the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired to serve as a statewide educational resource for children with visual impairments and for their parents and teachers. 1999 Wisconsin Act 9 created the Center and requires it to operate the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped, a residential school that was established in 1849, and to offer summer programs for youth and adults with visual impairments. Act 9 also allows the Center to provide statewide outreach services, including Braille and large-print materials and teacher training. In fiscal year (FY) 2001-02, the Center spent \$7.1 million, including \$4.6 million in general purpose revenue (GPR), and had an authorized full-time equivalent staff of 95.1.

In May 2000, the Department developed a transition plan to help the Center fulfill its statutory mission. The plan addressed 19 areas, including residential school enrollments, summer programs, the establishment of regional sites to provide outreach services, and increasing the availability of assistive technology to students with visual impairments. The Department anticipated completing these objectives by 2003.

1999 Wisconsin Act 9 directed the Legislative Audit Bureau to conduct a performance evaluation of the Center during FY 2002-03. We analyzed:

- staffing levels and expenditures from FY 1998-99 through FY 2001-02;

- enrollment at the residential school and in the youth and adult summer programs; and
- the extent to which the Department has implemented the objectives included in its May 2000 transition plan.

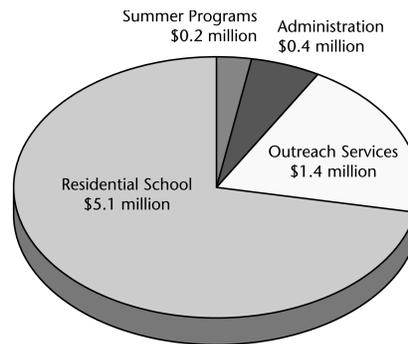
### Program Expenditures

Center expenditures increased from \$6.0 million in FY 1998-99 to \$7.1 million in FY 2001-02, primarily because of expanded statewide outreach efforts. Spending for outreach services was \$1.4 million in FY 2001-02, as shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1

#### Center Expenditures FY 2001-02



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### Residential School Enrollment

Enrollment at the Center’s residential school, which is located in Janesville, increased from 62 students in the 1997-98 school year to 84 students in the 2001-02 school year. The Center serves students 3 to 21 years old from throughout the state. However, in December 2001, 1,128 students with visual impairments attended local public school districts.

The residential school serves primarily students with multiple disabilities, many of whom are severely disabled. With the exception of weekend transportation, its services are provided at no cost to

local school districts. Overall, approximately 75 percent of students enrolled in the residential school have disabilities in addition to visual impairments. Consequently, many of these students require more special education services than those who have only visual impairments.

The Center's transition plan includes a goal of expanding short-term residential school enrollments in order to teach particular skills, such as orientation and mobility training, before students return to their local school districts. However, in the 2001-02 school year, only 3.6 percent of residential school students attended for 36 days or less. We include a recommendation for the Center to raise awareness of the opportunities for short-term enrollment.

### **Summer Programs**

From 1999 through 2002, the Center supported 20 summer programs to teach youth with visual impairments skills such as orientation and mobility techniques. The programs were targeted to the students' needs, and feedback indicates that students and their parents were satisfied with the programs. However, the Center was unable to readily provide us with complete information about program contents, costs, or participation. We include a recommendation for the Center to improve its oversight of the youth summer programs and to collect management information that could help it decide whether to expand specific summer opportunities.

The Center also does not have contact information for all parents of children with visual impairments, which prevents it from notifying these individuals about its summer programs and other outreach services. Local school districts have this contact information but are hesitant to share it with the Center because of confidentiality concerns. We include a recommendation that the Department ensure the Center obtains parental contact information to enhance its outreach efforts.

### **Outreach Activities**

Through December 2002, the Center made satisfactory progress in implementing many of the objectives associated with six transition plan areas we reviewed. For example, it:

- provided four Braille workshops that were attended by 88 individuals from throughout the state;

- loaned, purchased, or produced 1,637 Braille and large-print books in 2002; and
- created six regional staff positions to facilitate and coordinate outreach services statewide to students with visual impairments.

In addition, the Center has worked with Silver Lake College in Manitowoc to address a shortage of vision teachers, who provide educational services to students with visual impairments. In FY 2002-03, there were only 77 licensed vision teachers in Wisconsin's public schools.

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### Transition Plan Areas We Reviewed

1. Creating a vision teacher licensure program
2. Providing staff training in the use of Braille
3. Providing Braille and large-print materials
4. Providing regional services
5. Providing assistive technology services
6. Distributing assistive technology devices

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The Center does not expect to implement all of the transition plan's objectives because the needs of students and educators have changed since the plan was developed three years ago. Education officials with whom we spoke, however, are generally satisfied with the Center's outreach services.

Objectives of the transition plan included increasing the availability of assistive technology services and devices to students and teachers. The Center's expenditures for assistive technology devices increased from \$26,700 in FY 1999-2000 to \$170,400 in FY 2001-02. The Center loaned 1,025 assistive technology devices as of December 2002, and it hired an assistive technology specialist in November 2002 to provide technical assistance and training to students and educators. However, it fully completed only 1 of 13 specific objectives.

We identified other problems with the Center's implementation of the transition plan's objectives, including a lack of written policies for some outreach activities. We also recommend that more information about resources available to students and teachers be included on the Center's Web site.

## For Future Consideration

The Center has changed its focus from primarily serving students enrolled in the residential school to providing outreach services to students with visual impairments statewide. However, additional effort is needed to improve existing outreach services and to provide other services that are being considered but have not yet been offered. Later this year, the Center anticipates completing a strategic plan in order to build on the transition plan efforts to date. We include a recommendation to establish specific goals that will allow the Center to measure its progress in meeting the objectives included in its strategic plan.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations address the need for the Center to:

- ☑ raise awareness of short-term enrollment options at the residential school (*p. 27*);
- ☑ develop the capability to contact all parents of children with visual impairments (*p. 32*);
- ☑ collect basic programmatic and financial information on its youth summer programs (*p. 32*);
- ☑ develop written policies for its production of Braille and large-print materials, charge out-of-state requestors for production costs, and list available materials on its Web site (*p. 42*);
- ☑ develop written policies for lending assistive technology devices (*p. 49*); and
- ☑ provide to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, by October 2003, a strategic plan that sets program priorities and establishes specific goals against which the Center's progress can be assessed (*p. 53*).





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## Introduction ■

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In the late 1990s, there was considerable debate about how the Department should provide services to students with visual impairments. Wisconsin Administrative Code states that a child is visually impaired if, even after correction, his or her visual functioning significantly and adversely affects educational performance. Federal law requires each state to provide children with disabilities a free and appropriate education that meets the state's educational standards and requires a team made up of a child's parents and educational officials to develop an individualized education program for the child. The program must facilitate instruction in Braille for a student with visual impairments, unless the team determines this instruction is inappropriate. In addition, federal law stipulates that the team must also consider the extent to which a child can benefit from assistive technology, such as specialized computer equipment and software, and orientation and mobility services that allow him or her to navigate safely within the home, school, and community.

In August 1997, the Department recommended closing the State's residential school for children with visual impairments because of declining enrollment and substantial increases in per student costs. It proposed, instead, to increase its support of local school district programs and services for children with visual impairments. Legislation to close the residential school was introduced but not passed, and in September 1997, the Department created a task force to examine the statewide service needs of students with visual impairments.

In June 1998, the Wisconsin Legislative Council Special Committee on Services for Visually Handicapped Students was created and charged with presenting options on how best to provide services statewide to students with visual impairments. The committee's recommendations were incorporated into the 1999-2001 biennial budget bill the following year and enacted in 1999 Wisconsin Act 9, which created the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired and directed the Center to:

- continue to operate the residential school free of charge to any state resident 3 to 21 years old if the resident's individualized education program specifies the school as the appropriate placement;
- continue to provide an annual summer program for adults with visual impairments; and
- provide an annual summer program for youth with visual impairments.

***1999 Wisconsin Act 9 allowed the Center to emphasize the provision of statewide outreach services.***

Act 9 allows the Center to operate regional satellite facilities, to serve children with visual impairments under the age of two and their parents, and to provide training in independent living skills. In addition, it allows the Center to emphasize the provision of outreach services to school districts, Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs), county children with disabilities education boards, private schools, and teachers, including:

- providing testing, evaluation, assessment, technical assistance, and consultation services;
- training teachers, including providing them with instruction in Braille and other formats used by individuals with visual impairments;
- developing and disseminating curriculum and instructional materials;
- providing materials in Braille, large format, and other appropriate formats;
- loaning embossed, clear-type, and large-type books from the Center's library;
- serving as a clearinghouse of information about children with visual impairments;

- providing assistive technology services, which help individuals to increase, maintain, or improve their capabilities;
- lending, renting, or leasing technological materials and assistive technology devices;
- supporting educational programs that certify teachers to serve students with visual impairments; and
- coordinating and collaborating with public and private agencies and organizations that serve individuals with visual impairments.

Act 9 required the Department to create the 17-member Blind and Visual Impairment Education Council, which includes individuals interested in the education of students with visual impairments, such as parents, teachers, and other education officials. The State Superintendent appoints the Council's members and is required to consult with it on issues related to visual impairment. The Council proposes ways to improve the Center's services, teacher preparation, and coordination among agencies that provide services to individuals with visual impairments.

***A May 2000 transition plan described how the Center is to fulfill its mission.***

In addition, Act 9 required the Department to develop a transition plan that sets forth specific funding and staffing recommendations and the steps needed to phase in the program modifications needed for the Center to fulfill its mission. The Blind and Visual Impairment Education Council was to help prepare the plan and to review it. In May 2000, the Department submitted the transition plan to the Governor and the Legislature, as required by Act 9. The plan included detailed objectives in 19 areas, including youth and adult summer programs, regional sites to provide services throughout the state, and vision testing and evaluation services. The Department anticipated completing the proposed objectives in 2003. Table 1 summarizes the time line of events involved in the Center's creation.

Table 1

**Time Line of Major Events in the Creation of the  
Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired**

August 1997	The Department recommended that the Legislature close the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped.
September 1997	Legislation to close the residential school was introduced at the Department's request but was not passed.
September 1997	The Department created a task force to examine statewide needs of individuals with visual impairments.
June 1999	The Legislative Council's Special Committee on Services for Visually Handicapped Students issued recommendations, which were incorporated into the 1999-2001 biennial budget bill.
October 1999	1999 Wisconsin Act 9 created the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired.
May 2000	The Department established a three-year transition plan for the Center.

1999 Wisconsin Act 9 provided no additional funding for the Center's creation. As part of its 2001-03 biennial budget request, the Department asked for \$674,600 in FY 2001-02 and \$914,600 in FY 2002-03 to help fund the Center's new responsibilities. The Governor's 2001-03 Biennial Budget Proposal did not include those amounts but instead requested \$526,000 to upgrade and replace assistive technology devices and the Center's computer network. The Legislature approved these provisions as part of 2001 Wisconsin Act 16, the 2001-03 Biennial Budget Act.

To evaluate the Center's progress, 1999 Wisconsin Act 9 directed the Audit Bureau to conduct a performance evaluation of the Center during FY 2002-03. Materials prepared by the Legislative Council's special committee indicate that the evaluation was intended to focus on the success of changes the Department implemented during the Center's first years of operation, and on the Center's effectiveness in serving as a statewide educational resource for children with visual impairments. Therefore, we analyzed:

- staffing levels and expenditures from FY 1998-99 through FY 2001-02;
- enrollment at the residential school and in the youth and adult summer programs; and
- the extent to which the Department has implemented the objectives presented in its May 2000 transition plan.

In conducting our evaluation, we examined the Center's financial, staffing, and enrollment records and spoke with officials of the Department, including the Center. We also interviewed members of the Blind and Visual Impairment Education Council, educators at school districts and CESAs, and parents of children with visual impairments, and we discussed the Department's progress with groups representing individuals with visual impairments. In addition, we reviewed available financial and programmatic information on the Center's efforts to implement the outreach objectives in its transition plan.

### **Staffing Levels**

The Governor's 1999-2001 Biennial Budget Proposal would have eliminated 5.52 full-time equivalent (FTE) vacant positions at the residential school. However, 1999 Wisconsin Act 9, the 1999-2001 Biennial Budget Act that also created the Center, did not eliminate the 5.52 FTE positions. Instead, the Center was allowed to fill those positions with individuals who were expected to help it meet its new outreach responsibilities.

***In FY 2001-02, the Center had 79.4 FTE filled staff positions.***

The Center's current staff includes individuals who work at the residential school, such as teachers and teacher aides, as well as those who conduct the outreach activities required by 1999 Wisconsin Act 9. As shown in Table 2, the number of authorized FTE staff positions declined from FY 1998-99 through FY 2001-02, while the number of filled FTE staff positions declined and then increased, largely because the Center hired staff to provide additional services to students with visual impairments statewide. The Center has not filled a number of its positions in the past three years because of budget uncertainties.

Table 2

**Staff Positions at the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired\***

Fiscal Year	Number of Authorized FTE Staff Positions	Number of Filled FTE Staff Positions	Percentage of FTE Staff Positions Filled
1998-99	105.2	78.1	74.2%
1999-2000	99.1	72.5	73.2
2000-01	99.1	79.5	80.2
2001-02	95.1	79.4	83.5

\* Does not include limited-term employees.

As shown in Table 3, more than half of all filled staff positions at the Center are school instructional staff, which include residential school teachers and teacher aides, as well as staff responsible for outreach activities. Residential services staff include child care counselors, who oversee students in the dormitories, and food service workers; physical plant staff include custodians and power plant operators; administrative staff include the Center’s director, the principal of the residential school, and information systems staff; and medical services staff include nurses.

Table 3

**Filled FTE Staff Positions at the Wisconsin Center  
for the Blind and Visually Impaired, by Position Type\***

Position Type	FY 1998-99	FY 1999-2000	FY 2000-01	FY 2001-02
School instructional	42.7	40.0	44.0	44.7
Residential services	14.6	14.6	14.6	12.8
Physical plant	13.0	10.0	10.0	11.0
Administration	4.0	4.0	7.0	7.0
Medical services	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>78.1</b>	<b>72.5</b>	<b>79.5</b>	<b>79.4</b>

\* Does not include limited-term employees.

The Center also employs limited-term employees (LTEs). In FY 2001-02, the number of hours worked by the LTEs was equivalent to 9.1 full-time staff, and the Center paid \$239,700 in salaries and fringe benefits. The most common LTE positions at the Center are teaching assistants, teachers, and child care counselors.

2001 Wisconsin Act 109, the Budget Reform Act, reduced the FY 2002-03 GPR appropriation that funds the Center. The Department reduced the Center's GPR funding by \$278,200, and it reduced the Center's position authority by 7.27 FTE staff positions. To partially compensate for this reduction, the Department provided the Center with an additional \$237,100 in federal discretionary funds, which supported 5.63 FTE positions. As a result, the Center lost a net 1.64 FTE staff positions.

The Governor's 2003-05 Biennial Budget Proposal would eliminate 28.35 FTE staff positions in the Department in FY 2003-04. As of late February 2003, the Department had decided to lay off 11 staff, including a 1.0 FTE secretarial position at the Center.

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## Expenditures ■

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***The Center's expenditures have been consistent with its new responsibilities.***

The Center's expenditures have increased in recent years, primarily because of the expanded outreach responsibilities required by 1999 Wisconsin Act 9. In FY 2001-02, residential school-related activities, such as instruction, buildings and grounds, and weekend transportation, accounted for 71.5 percent of expenditures. Outreach services accounted for 19.7 percent, administration accounted for 5.4 percent, and the youth and adult summer programs accounted for 3.4 percent. Expenditure trends over the past five fiscal years appear to be consistent with the Center's new responsibilities.

### Expenditure Trends

***In FY 2001-02, the Center's expenditures totaled \$7.1 million.***

As shown in Table 4, the Center's expenditures in FY 2001-02 totaled \$7.1 million, which is a 19.8 percent increase over the \$6.0 million that was spent in FY 1998-99. Outreach expenditures increased 42.6 percent from FY 1998-99 through FY 2001-02. These expenditures increased 35.9 percent in FY 1999-2000, the fiscal year in which the Center's transition plan was created. Outreach services include providing student vision assessments, offering training to educators, and making Braille and large-print books available to school districts.

Table 4

## Expenditures for the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Type of Expenditure	FY 1998-99	FY 1999-2000	FY 2000-01	FY 2001-02	Percentage Change
<b>Residential School</b>					
School instructional	\$2,069,900	\$2,171,400	\$2,488,900	\$2,532,700	22.4%
Buildings and grounds	1,849,900	1,719,300	1,863,400	1,836,500	(0.7)
Medical services	215,700	240,100	276,800	277,300	28.6
Weekend transportation	177,600	151,600	226,800	261,700	47.4
Meals	210,800	191,800	207,600	200,800	(4.7)
Subtotal	4,523,900	4,474,200	5,063,500	5,109,000	12.9
<b>Outreach Services</b>	983,900	1,337,600	1,366,600	1,403,400	42.6
<b>Administration</b>					
Informational technology*	0	100	64,900	277,000	–
Business office	168,800	135,300	92,100	110,700	(34.4)
Subtotal	168,800	135,400	157,000	387,700	129.7
<b>Summer Programs</b>					
Youth summer program	127,300	110,600	88,400	138,600	8.9
Adult summer program	156,000	113,800	93,400	101,000	(35.3)
Subtotal	283,300	224,400	181,800	239,600	(15.4)
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$5,959,900</b>	<b>\$6,171,600</b>	<b>\$6,768,900</b>	<b>\$7,139,700</b>	<b>19.8</b>

\* Before FY 2000-01, informational technology expenditures were categorized as school instructional and outreach.

***In FY 2001-02, the Legislature provided \$526,000 for technological upgrades at the Center.***

In FY 2001-02, the Center received \$646,000 in program revenue. This is largely because 2001 Wisconsin Act 16, the 2001-03 Biennial Budget Act, dissolved the Wisconsin Advanced Telecommunications Foundation—a public-private entity that funded telecommunications projects, especially for schools—and provided the Center with the foundation's \$526,000 endowment. These funds were provided as a continuing appropriation to upgrade and replace assistive technology devices and related software and to complete an upgrade of the Center's computer network. Through August 2002, the Center had spent \$221,000 of these funds, which are categorized as informational technology expenditures in Table 4. Expenditures included:

- \$95,400 to purchase computers and printers for the Center's technology laboratory;
- \$40,200 to purchase technological devices;
- \$38,200 to purchase new software and to upgrade existing software;
- \$26,000 to plan a new fiber optics computer network;
- \$10,600 to set up remote access to the Center's computers and to purchase the required computers and software; and
- \$10,600 to purchase Web design services.

Youth summer program expenditures declined in FY 1999-2000 and FY 2000-01, compared to the prior fiscal years. This can be explained, in part, by a change in when the Center paid for some summer programs.

## **Weekend Transportation**

Students attending the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped may live in the school's on-campus dormitories or commute from their homes daily if they live nearby. During the 2001-02 school year, 63 students lived on campus, while 21 students commuted from home. Students living on campus at the residential school and at the School for the Deaf in Delavan are transported home every Friday afternoon and then back to the residential schools on Sundays. They travel in either privately contracted vehicles or state-owned airplanes, depending on cost and distance. Students are met by their parents at predetermined locations along the route.

***The Center's weekend transportation costs are reimbursed by students' home school districts.***

The Center pays the weekend transportation costs and is reimbursed by the students' home school districts, which can receive categorical aid from the State for these transportation expenses. However, local school districts do not receive equalization aid from the State for students who attend the residential school because they are not charged for educating these students at the residential school.

The residential schools contract with a private company to transport students on vans and buses along eight routes. The company hires chaperones to assist the students and provide supervision. The Department's current contract with the company runs from July 2002 through June 2003. The company bills the residential schools for each round-trip its vehicles make. In FY 2001-02, it was paid \$478,700 by the Center and the School for the Deaf.

The Center also pays the Department of Administration to use state-owned airplanes to transport students who live in northern Wisconsin. Airplanes are reserved in the same manner that state agencies reserve vehicles from the Department of Administration's central car fleet. In FY 2001-02, the Center and the School for the Deaf jointly paid the Department of Administration \$236,500 to transport students on airplanes.

The Center stated that the number of students transported on any given weekend is relatively constant throughout a given school year. As shown in Table 5, 51 students enrolled in the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped were transported during one weekend in October 2002, including 43 students transported by vehicles and 8 students transported by two airplanes. In addition, 92 students enrolled at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf were transported on the same vehicles and airplanes. Each vehicle and airplane made two to five stops along its route.

Table 5

**Number of Residential School Students  
Who Were Transported  
Weekend of October 26-27, 2002**

Route	Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped	Wisconsin School for the Deaf	Total
<b>Vehicle Routes</b>			
Milwaukee	13	18	31
Green Bay	8	16	24
Black River Falls	5	18	23
Kenosha/Racine/Milwaukee	5	18	23
Wausau	5	5	10
Appleton	4	10	14
La Crosse	3	2	5
Subtotal	43	87	130
<b>Airplane Routes</b>			
Northwestern Wisconsin	6	2	8
Northcentral Wisconsin	2	3	5
Subtotal	8	5	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>143</b>

# Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped ■

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***The Center operates a residential school, as well as summer programs for youth and adults.***

The Center operates the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped, a residential school in Janesville for students from 3 to 21 years old with visual impairments. Summer programs for adults are held at the residential school, while summer programs for youth are held at the residential school and throughout the state. The residential school has served students statewide, as it is required to do, and enrollment has increased in recent years. However, short-term enrollment has not grown, despite this being a transition plan goal. We also identified problems with the documentation of youth summer program expenditures and other programmatic information.

## **Location of Students with Visual Impairments**

***As of December 1, 2001, 1,128 students with vision disabilities attended public schools other than the residential school.***

As shown in Figure 2, half of the 1,128 Wisconsin public school students with vision disabilities who were not enrolled at the residential school in Janesville lived in CESA 1 and CESA 2, which include Milwaukee and Madison. Milwaukee Public Schools had the greatest number of students with visual impairments (164), followed by the Madison Metropolitan School District (61) and the Kenosha School District (34). For the five-year period from December 1997 through December 2001, 324 of the state's 426 school districts reported at least one student with a visual impairment.

Figure 2

Wisconsin Public School Students with Reported Vision Disabilities, by CESA\*  
As of December 1, 2001



\* Does not include 84 students enrolled in the residential school.

The residential school has met its statutory requirement to serve students statewide. From the 1997-98 through 2001-02 school years, residential school students originated from 91 school districts in 40 counties and 11 CESAs. The five school districts that had the most students enrolled at the residential school during this five-year period were:

- Milwaukee Public Schools (49 students);
- Janesville School District (44 students);
- Edgerton School District (11 students);

- Montello School District (11 students); and
- Madison Metropolitan School District (10 students).

## Enrollment

Typically, students do not enroll at the residential school for their entire education but instead return to their local schools after a few years. The Department's May 2000 transition plan states that the residential school is to focus on providing the specialized curriculum that students with visual impairments need in order to succeed in life, rather than on a core academic curriculum of English, mathematics, and science.

A student's individualized education program specifies the particular skills he or she needs to develop while enrolled at the residential school. In addition to general academic courses, the residential school offers instruction in Braille reading and writing; orientation and mobility skills, which allow a student to navigate his or her environment safely; and daily living skills, such as preparing meals, personal grooming, and housecleaning. The residential school also offers vocational education, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physical therapy, and counseling and psychological services. Students have an opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities such as track and field, cross-country, cheerleading, wrestling, swimming, forensics, and band.

***Residential school enrollment increased from 62 students in 1997-98 to 84 students in 2001-02.***

Residential school enrollment increased from 62 students in the 1997-98 school year to 84 students in the 2001-02 school year, as shown in Table 6. The school attributes the increase largely to the Center's outreach efforts, which have publicized the residential school to school districts and parents. As of September 1, 2001, enrolled students ranged in age from 6 to 21, with an average age of 13; 49 students were male and 35 were female. Approximately 17 percent of the students were minorities.

Students are organized into grade levels, but most do not work with the same level of educational materials as their peers in traditional public schools. For example, a fifth-grade student may be learning concepts that a typical third-grade student learns. In the 2001-02 school year, 31 of the 84 students at the Center were learning concepts at three or more grade levels below their typical grade levels.

Table 6

**Enrollment at the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped\***

School Year	Enrollment	Percentage Change
1997-98	62	-
1998-99	78	25.8%
1999-2000	75	(3.8)
2000-01	76	1.3
2001-02	84	10.5

\* Through February 2003, 81 students had enrolled in the residential school during the 2002-03 school year.

***Approximately 75 percent of residential school students have other disabilities.***

Because approximately 75 percent of students enrolled in the residential school have disabilities in addition to their vision impairments, some of which are quite severe, they require more special education services than those who have only visual impairments. For example, some students must be taught to explore objects within their reach. To accomplish this, residential school staff place the students in specially designed semi-enclosed structures that have various objects hanging from their tops and sides, which encourages the students to reach out, grasp, and manipulate the objects as a way of increasing their comfort in exploring different environments.

In contrast, other individualized education programs prepare students to enter into mainstream public schools or require academic courses that the residential school does not offer, such as French and calculus. Section 115.53(2), Wis. Stats., states that the State Superintendent may arrange for residential school students to take courses in the Janesville School District. The residential school provides and pays for these students' textbooks and transports them between the schools. As required by statutes, the students' local school districts pay the Janesville School District for tuition costs, which are based on the number of days the students attend the Janesville School District and the number of courses in which they enroll.

As shown in Table 7, fewer than ten students annually took courses in Janesville public schools from the 1998-99 through 2001-02 school years. In three of the four school years, these students represented 10 to 11 percent of the residential school’s total enrollment.

Table 7

**Number of Students Attending the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped  
Who Took Courses at Janesville Public Schools  
1998-99 through 2001-02**

School Year	Residential School Enrollment	Number of Students Who Took Courses in Janesville Public Schools	Percentage of Total Residential School Enrollment
1998-99	78	9	11.5%
1999-2000	75	2	2.7
2000-01	76	8	10.5
2001-02	84	9	10.7

Relatively few students graduated from the residential school in recent years:

- ten students graduated after the 1997-98 school year;
- seven students graduated after the 1998-99 school year;
- three students graduated after the 1999-2000 school year;
- four students graduated after the 2000-01 school year; and
- three students graduated after the 2001-02 school year.

We note that according to information maintained by the Department, 50 students with visual impairments graduated from Wisconsin high schools, including the residential school, in 2001.

### Short-Term Enrollment

***The Center has made limited progress in increasing the number of short-term enrollments.***

Students are not required to enroll at the residential school for the entire school year. They may, for example, enroll for short periods of time if their local school districts do not provide instruction in a skill required by their individualized education programs, such as orientation and mobility training, and then return to their local school districts after they learn these skills. The Center’s transition plan includes a goal of expanding short-term placements at the residential school in order to facilitate the provision of particular skills needed by students with visual impairments. We found that the Center has made limited progress in meeting this goal.

As shown in Table 8, only 3.6 percent of students attended the residential school for 36 days or less during the 2000-01 school year. In contrast, more than 80 percent of the students attended the residential school for at least 145 days of the school year.

Table 8

**Percentage of Students at the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped, by Number of Days Enrolled 1997-98 through 2001-02**

Days Enrolled	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02
0 to 36	1.6%	19.2%	13.4%	7.9%	3.6%
37 to 72	6.4	9.0	4.0	4.0	6.0
73 to 108	0.0	6.4	5.3	2.6	4.8
109 to 144	1.6	0.0	1.3	2.6	4.8
145 to 180	90.4	65.4	76.0	82.9	80.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The Center promotes the residential school’s programs through its Web site and through an informational brochure that is distributed to parents; vision teachers, who are licensed to provide instruction in Braille and other educational services to students with visual impairments; and other educators. However, as of January 2003, the Web site did not describe short-term enrollment options. The brochure does mention that short-term enrollment options exist, but it does not explain the options, which students might benefit, or the types of instruction available.

We attempted to interview 20 parents of children with visual impairments about the Center's services but obtained only 9 responses, even though attempts were made to contact them during both daytime and evening hours. Five of the nine parents with whom we spoke were unaware that short-term enrollment options were available at the residential school.

The Center is considering changes to the short-term enrollment options beginning in the 2003-04 school year. Currently, students who enroll at the residential school on a short-term basis attend ongoing courses with full-time residential school students and are removed from the courses throughout the day to work on specific skills, such as learning Braille, orientation and mobility, and daily living skills. In the future, the Center plans to offer separate short courses to address these skill areas. Short-term students would spend their mornings working on specific skills and their afternoons completing coursework from their local school districts. The Center plans to use existing staff vacancies and to hire two full-time teachers to teach the short-term courses.

***The Center should raise awareness of short-term enrollment options at the residential school.***

Regardless of the effectiveness of these proposed changes, the Center has raised awareness of short-term placement options to teachers and parents on only a limited basis. As a result, students who might benefit from the residential school's program may not be enrolling.

**Recommendation**

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*We recommend the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired:*

- *raise awareness on its Web site of the short-term enrollment options at the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped, describing the courses available, the types of students who might benefit from attending courses on a short-term basis, and the procedures necessary for enrolling on a short-term basis; and*
- *include more explicit information about the availability of short-term enrollment options on the informational brochures that it distributes to vision teachers statewide.*

## Youth Summer Programs

Many education professionals recommend that children with visual impairments be provided with explicit opportunities to acquire skills that sighted children obtain without assistance, and summer programs provide a forum to teach these skills. Statutes require the Center to provide youth summer programs, although the residential school had begun to operate such programs before the Center was created. Administering effective summer programs involves developing appropriate content, assessing the satisfaction of participants and their parents, monitoring information on expenditures and participants effectively, and informing families of children with visual impairments about the availability of programs. We found that the Center has not maintained basic expenditure and programmatic information necessary for overseeing its summer programs effectively.

***Summer programs teach special skills that students with visual impairments need.***

During the academic year, schools focus on academics, but students with visual impairments often need to develop skills in additional areas. For example, sighted students use visual cues to help them learn how to interact with others appropriately and according to societal norms, but students with visual impairments need to be taught these skills explicitly. Students with visual impairments also need to learn independent living skills and to have recreational activities. Summer programs provide these opportunities, particularly for students who do not enroll in the residential school during the school year.

The Center's transition plan includes four objectives to improve its summer programs, which the Center has largely completed:

- developing an ongoing comprehensive statewide assessment to determine the specific needs of children with visual impairments;
- using the assessment results to determine the best location and content for summer programs, and developing programs to teach skills that are difficult to learn during the school year;
- promoting summer programs in a timely manner to parents and school districts; and
- providing parents with opportunities to participate in summer programs.

***From 1999 through 2002, the Center supported 20 youth summer programs.***

From summer 1999 through summer 2002, the Center supported 20 youth summer programs, including 11 in Janesville, 6 in the Milwaukee area, and 3 in Wausau. The programs varied in length from three days to six weeks, although most were one or two weeks long. Some programs were intended for children younger than ten, while others were for older children or children of all ages. Nine of the programs were provided by the Center, while the remainder were provided by school districts, technical colleges, and private organizations that provide services to children with visual impairments, such as the Badger Association of the Blind.

In 1998, before the transition plan's creation, the Department conducted a statewide assessment to determine the services needed by students with visual impairments. Since then, the Center has not conducted a similar assessment. Instead, it has developed its youth summer programs based on suggestions from parents, staff, teachers, and students. It has also relied on work completed by a national organization—the National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Impairments—that has established priorities for improving the education of students with visual impairments. This organization recommends that students with visual impairments receive instruction not only in courses such as English and mathematics, but also in an expanded core curriculum that includes eight skill areas.

Brochures and other information that the Center provided us do not indicate the extent to which 4 of its 20 summer programs addressed the expanded core curriculum. However, they do indicate that the other 16 programs addressed at least one of the eight skill areas.

While the Center has largely completed the objectives in its transition plan for youth summer programs, it has not collected management information that would be useful in deciding whether to expand specific summer programs. For example, the Center provided us with information about the feedback it received from parents and children who participated in 9 of the 20 summer programs. The responses were generally positive and indicated that participants and parents considered the programs to be worthwhile and fun. The Center was unable to locate survey responses for the other 11 summer programs. Seven of 22 school districts and CESAs whose staff we interviewed had students who attended the summer programs, and the staff stated that the students were generally satisfied.

***The Center was unable to provide us with complete youth summer program information.***

The Center was unable to provide us with detailed information about program contents for 8 of the 20 summer programs. For example, three staff of the Center stated that one particular program had been held during summer 2001, while another stated that the program had not been held; none could find a brochure or other explanatory information about the program. Although the Center awarded small grants to six organizations that provided summer programs in summer 2001, the Center was unable to provide us with information that explained the selection criteria for awarding the grants or to locate brochures for any of the grant-funded programs. The appendix describes the content and location of each program.

Table 9 shows expenditure and participation information for the Center's summer programs. However, the Center was unable to readily provide information for a number of the summer programs and at times provided contradictory information. For example, the Center initially stated it spent \$13,300 for one 2001 summer program that was in fact funded and organized by a separate organization. The available information indicates that the Center spent \$530,100 on summer programs held from 1999 through 2002. The Center was unable to locate attendance information for three summer programs.

The Center's involvement of parents in the summer programs has been satisfactory. Parents are provided with information about the programs so that they can reinforce the skills that were taught, and teachers met with parents following the 2000 and 2001 programs. The Center has promoted its summer programs in a timely manner. Each spring, it mails brochures and registration materials for upcoming summer programs to its regional staff, vision teachers, and families that have asked to receive information. Thirteen of 22 school district and CESA staff we interviewed had received information about the Center's summer programs.

The Center does not have contact information, including names, addresses, and telephone numbers, for all families of children with a visual impairment. It stated that some school districts have cited confidentiality concerns and declined to provide it with this information. Without accurate and complete parental contact information, the Center is unable to notify families about its summer programs or other outreach services.

Table 9

**Summer Program Costs and Participation  
1999 through 2002**

	Costs	Number of Participants
<b>1999 Summer Programs</b>		
History of Wisconsin Native Americans	\$58,900	20
Northern Exposure	43,200	Unknown
Experiencing Summer	25,200	21
<b>2000 Summer Programs</b>		
On the Move	61,100	24
Northern Exposure	27,100	10
Experiencing Summer	22,500	22
Summer of Discoveries	*	17
<b>2001 Summer Programs</b>		
Pioneer Spirit	78,500	24
Janesville School District Day Program	30,000	Unknown
Sports Camp	23,800	37
Summer Theater	10,200	20
Summer of Discoveries	10,000	18
Rock Aqua Jays Water-ski Clinic	*	24
Northern Exposure	13,300	12
Career Exploration	**	Unknown
<b>2002 Summer Programs</b>		
Summer Employment Skills Experience	62,200	8
Independence Day	50,900	25
Intensive Technology	6,700	5
Bring on the Braille	5,200	3
Sports Camp	1,300	41

\* Outside sponsors funded these programs.

\*\* Program expenditures are included with those of the Pioneer Spirit program.

**☑ Recommendation**

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*We recommend the Department of Public Instruction request all public school districts statewide to either:*

- *provide the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired with contact information for all parents of students with visual impairments; or*
- *annually distribute information about the services that are available from the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired to all parents of students with visual impairments.*

We believe the content of the Center's youth summer programs is appropriate and targeted to the needs of students with visual impairments. However, the Center has not maintained the information necessary for overseeing its summer programs. It is particularly important that the Center collect such information when private organizations, school districts, and technical colleges provide summer programs. Without this oversight, public funds may be spent inappropriately, or students may not acquire the skills they need. Collecting more comprehensive and consistent expenditure and programmatic information would also allow the Center to assess the effectiveness of its summer programs, make needed improvements, and offer more useful programs in the future.

**☑ Recommendation**

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*We recommend the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired collect information about each youth summer program's costs, goals, activities, participants, and results.*

## **Adult Summer Program**

Although the Center's primary mission is to serve children, statutes require it to operate a summer program for adults with visual impairments. They do not provide guidance about the program's content or length. During the summers of 2001 and 2002, the Center operated a four-week adult summer program that included courses on Braille reading and writing, using computers, daily living skills, physical education, and orientation and mobility. The summer programs also provided evening craft and recreational activities such as ceramics, woodworking, basketry, rug weaving, and music.

***The Center spent \$101,000 to support the adult summer program in FY 2001-02.***

In contrast to the youth summer programs, the adult summer program has always been held at the residential school. Adult summer program participants are not charged for tuition, lodging, or meals, but they do pay for the actual cost of materials used to make craft projects. In FY 2001-02, the Center spent \$101,000 to support the adult summer program.

***Adult summer program enrollment declined each year from 1999 through 2002.***

As shown in Table 10, adult summer program enrollment declined steadily from 1999 through 2002, with large declines in 2000 and 2002. The Center attributes the large declines to two programmatic changes. Beginning in 2000, craft and recreational activities were removed from the main program that took place during the day and were instead offered only in the evening. Beginning in 2002, the program focused on serving adults who had recently become visually impaired. As a result, adults cannot enroll if they had attended the program during the previous ten summers.

Table 10

**Adult Summer Program Enrollment**

Year	Number Enrolled	Percentage Change
1999	70	-
2000	42	(40.0)%
2001	40	(4.8)
2002	28	(30.0)

The Center’s transition plan includes a goal for improving access to the adult summer program by exploring the possibility of providing adult education at other sites. The Center has reviewed this option and decided the adult summer program will likely remain at the residential school, because overhead costs of operating the program elsewhere are prohibitive.

The adult summer program is expected to continue in future summers because the Center is statutorily required to offer it. However, it will likely remain relatively small unless statutory changes are made.





## Outreach Activities ■

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***The Center has implemented many, but not all, of the transition plan's objectives.***

Minutes of the Legislative Council's Special Committee on Services for Visually Handicapped Students reflected concern that parents and educators often do not have access to information about educational issues related to vision impairment. The Department's May 2000 transition plan was intended to help the Center become a resource for the information and services needed to provide a high-quality education to students with visual impairments. We evaluated the Center's progress in implementing the objectives associated with six important transition plan areas and found that the Center has made satisfactory progress in implementing many objectives. However, it has not implemented others, particularly those associated with the provision of assistive technology.

The transition plan includes objectives for providing services and assistance to students with visual impairments, parents, teachers, special education directors and other education officials, and CESA staff. In addition, the Center provides services to county staff of the Birth-to-Three Program, which is overseen and funded by the Department of Health and Family Services and is Wisconsin's early intervention program for toddlers and infants with developmental delays and disabilities.

We interviewed 22 school district and CESA staff, as well as 9 parents of children with visual impairments, to determine their opinions about the Center's outreach activities. Seventeen of the 22 school district and CESA staff, and 6 of the 9 parents, had received outreach services from the Center. Respondents were generally satisfied with the amount and quality of services that the Center had provided.

## Vision Teacher Licensure Program

***The Center completed all four objectives related to establishing a teacher licensure program.***

In FY 2002-03, only 77 licensed vision teachers were in Wisconsin's public schools. The Department attempted to address a shortage of vision teachers by including four objectives in the transition plan. As shown in Table 11, the Center completed all four objectives as of December 2002.

Table 11

### Status of Transition Plan Objectives Related to the Teacher Licensure Program Through December 2002

Objective	Status
1. Collaborate with Silver Lake College to establish a teacher licensure program	Completed
2. Establish ongoing staff development and training for teachers	Completed
3. Explore the establishment of an orientation and mobility training program	Completed
4. Establish a state loan forgiveness program for teachers of students with visual impairments and orientation and mobility instructors	Completed

In March 2000, the Department signed a \$150,000 contract with Silver Lake College in Manitowoc to implement and operate a licensure program for vision teachers. The program, which is the only one of its kind in Wisconsin, lasts more than two years. It requires enrollees to attend classes at the college for several weekends each semester and to turn in weekly assignments via e-mail, which allows them to continue working while completing the program. Using federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funds, the Department made three \$50,000 payments to Silver Lake College, in April 2000, April 2001, and August 2002.

In August 2002, the Department entered into a second contract, for continued program support, which anticipates \$50,000 payments to Silver Lake College in FY 2002-03 and FY 2003-04. In addition, the Center plans to provide Silver Lake College with approximately \$5,000 annually, beginning in FY 2003-04, to be used to increase the salaries of the licensure program's instructors.

Silver Lake College is satisfied with the Center's support. Center staff teach some of the program's courses as one component of their outreach efforts. In addition, the Center has loaned each enrollee a Braille machine to use during the program's Braille class; enrollees can access materials in the Center's library; and the Center purchased reference books that the enrollees can use for their research assignments. The Center does not charge the program for this support.

***Ten individuals graduated from the vision teacher licensure program in spring 2002.***

Ten individuals graduated from the licensure program in spring 2002, including one staff person of the Center. Nine individuals enrolled in the program in fall 2002, including two staff of the Center. They are expected to graduate in summer 2004.

To complete the other three transition plan objectives, the Center has offered a number of training workshops and courses for teachers of students with visual impairments, and it has explored the possibility of establishing an orientation and mobility training program. However, the Center wants to develop the teacher licensure program further before setting up the orientation and mobility program. Finally, in FY 2000-01, the Higher Educational Aids Board established a loan program to defray the tuition, fees, and expenses for Wisconsin residents who are enrolled in a program to license them as vision teachers or as orientation and mobility instructors. A resident may receive up to \$10,000 per fiscal year, or \$40,000 in total, which will be forgiven if the resident works in a Wisconsin school district, CESA, or the Center for three years after graduation. Through January 2003, 14 individuals had received \$128,500 in loans. No loans have been forgiven yet because FY 2002-03 is the first year in which loan recipients have been employed.

## **Staff Training in the Use of Braille**

***The transition plan identified seven objectives to improve staff training in the use of Braille.***

In creating the transition plan, the Department concluded that training in the use of Braille was limited in Wisconsin, and most vision teachers who teach Braille came from other states. As a result, the transition plan identified seven objectives to improve staff training in the use of Braille, which are shown in Table 12.

Table 12

**Status of Transition Plan Objectives Related to  
Staff Training in the Use of Braille  
Through December 2002**

Objective	Status
1. Provide Braille workshops and classes for credit	Completed
2. Ensure the vision teacher licensure program includes Braille instruction	Completed
3. Ensure licensing requirements include instruction in the teaching of Braille reading and writing	Completed
4. Include in the Center's strategic plan ways to improve the teaching of Braille	Not completed
5. Establish a Braille training program at the Center or a technical college	Not completed
6. Develop a resource directory of Braille experts	Not completed
7. Make Braille classes available for credit in high schools	No plans to complete

Through December 2002, the Center completed the three objectives that appear most directly related to helping individuals achieve Braille competency. First, it has facilitated four Braille workshops and courses for credit:

- a one-day workshop in Amherst, Wisconsin, in June 2002, which taught 11 participants how to use Braille translation software and to format Braille; and
- three graduate-level courses that provided a total of 77 participants with training on strategies and materials for educating children with visual impairments. The courses were held at several Wisconsin locations in spring 2000, spring 2002, and fall 2002.

Second, Silver Lake College's licensure program requires vision teachers to complete a three-credit Braille course, which was offered in fall 2000 and fall 2002. Program graduates take a national literacy competency test to ensure they are competent in reading, writing, and teaching Braille.

The third objective had already been accomplished before the transition plan was completed. The Department's licensure requirements for vision teachers specify that applicants must have completed coursework in the teaching of Braille reading and writing.

As of December 2002, three of the remaining transition plan objectives had not been completed. The Center has decided not to implement the seventh objective, making Braille classes available for credit in high schools, in order to focus its resources on completing the others.

### Braille and Large-Print Materials

***The Center fully completed eight of nine objectives for Braille and large-print materials.***

Students with visual impairments need textbooks and other course materials in a timely manner so that they have the same educational resources and opportunities as their sighted peers. Obtaining Braille and large-print materials quickly has been a challenge because most school districts do not employ a Brailist, educators may be unaware of Braille and large-print resources, and school districts do not have a system for sharing materials. As a result, the transition plan includes nine objectives to address these needs, which are shown in Table 13. Through December 2002, the Center had fully completed eight of the nine objectives, but additional steps could be taken to enhance efforts in this area.

Table 13

**Status of Transition Plan Objectives Related to Braille and Large-Print Materials Through December 2002**

Objective	Status
1. Increase the use of current sites for ordering materials	Completed
2. Evaluate and change the system for ordering textbooks to ensure timely delivery	Completed
3. Train educators on the importance of providing students with visual impairments with timely access to materials	Completed
4. Develop and disseminate a resource catalog of materials	Completed
5. Develop a list of Braille resources that specialize in the production of tactile graphics, Braille music, and Braille mathematics	Completed
6. Inform teachers and parents of production sites and other resources for materials	Completed
7. Serve as a liaison with Braille and large-print production sites	Completed
8. Utilize and contribute to the American Printing House's repository system	Completed
9. Make the Braille and large-print resources mentioned in the other eight objectives available on the Web	Partially Completed

***The Center charges requestors the price it pays to purchase Braille and large-print materials.***

Educators and parents who require Braille and large-print materials may request them from the Center's lending library. If the Center does not have a book, it will attempt to borrow or purchase it from other sources nationwide. If a book is unavailable, the Center can produce it or contract to have it produced. The Center purchases or produces books only when they are requested, and it charges the requestor for the actual purchase price.

The Center sends its procedures and forms for ordering Braille and large-print materials to all vision teachers annually. As of January 2003, the forms needed to order materials were available on the Center's Web site, but instructions for completing the forms and the Center's procedures were not available on the Web site.

Under federal law, the American Printing House for the Blind is the official supplier of educational materials to students below college level with visual impairments. Each state is allocated federal credits, based on the number of legally blind children in the state, to purchase Braille and large-print materials from the American Printing House. The Center receives approximately \$130,000 in federal credits annually. In 2001, it charged requestors \$48,500 for the purchase of large-print materials and \$41,300 for Braille materials.

Three staff of the Center produce Braille and large-print materials, and a fourth helps distribute the materials. The Center charges school districts and others for the cost of paper and binding but not for staff production time. It does not maintain information about its production costs, but Braille and large-print materials are typically expensive to produce.

In total, the number of Braille and large-print materials the Center loaned, purchased, and produced declined by 11.4 percent from 1998 to 2002. However, as shown in Table 14, there were increases in loans and purchases of large-print materials, as well as in purchases and production of Braille materials. The Center stated that these numbers reflect its efforts to prioritize the provision of Braille materials.

Eighteen of 22 school districts and CESAs whose staff we interviewed had ordered Braille or large-print books from the Center. The staff stated that they are generally satisfied with the books' cost and quality and that they received the books in a timely manner.

Table 14

**Number of Braille and Large-Print Materials Loaned, Purchased, and Produced by the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired\***

	1998	2000	2002	Percentage Change
<b>Materials loaned</b>				
Braille	69	71	47	(31.9%)
Large-print	308	361	361	17.2
<b>Materials purchased</b>				
Braille	187	223	226	20.9
Large-print	312	330	393	26.0
<b>Materials produced</b>				
Braille	42	70	54	28.6
Large-print	929	811	556	(40.2)
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,847</b>	<b>1,866</b>	<b>1,637</b>	<b>(11.4)</b>

\* Before the Center's creation in FY 1999-2000, information reflects the residential school's efforts.

The Center does not have comprehensive policies that address Braille and large-print production issues, such as the formats and type sizes in which it will provide materials. Instead, it is awaiting passage of federal legislation that would create a uniform system nationwide for acquiring and distributing printed instructional materials. The legislation was introduced in Congress in April 2002 but did not pass before the end of the session.

***The Center changed the system for ordering Braille and large-print materials and hired a second Brailist.***

The Center evaluated and changed its system for ordering materials, which was a transition plan objective. It had noted that the staff person responsible for producing and distributing large-print materials had spent a considerable amount of time, and earned overtime pay, filling out-of-state orders, in part because the orders were processed in the order in which they were received. Currently, the Center has eliminated the use of staff overtime to fill out-of-state orders, and in-state orders receive priority. It does not charge out-of-state requestors for staff costs incurred in producing materials, and it is considering whether to cease filling out-of-state orders. In addition, the Center hired a second Brailist in September 2002.

During outreach conferences, the Center emphasizes to educators the importance of providing students with visual impairments with timely access to instructional materials. In 2003, two outreach staff plan to provide educators with literary workshops that will stress this issue.

The Center has resource catalogs that describe the materials available from its lending library and other organizations nationwide. It has a list of organizations that specialize in the production of tactile graphics and Braille music and mathematics. In addition, it distributes to educators an informational brochure that describes the availability of materials. However, as of January 2003, this information was not available on its Web site.

The Center's collection of Braille and large-print literary and recreational titles, but not its textbooks, are available through WISCAT, which is the on-line catalog for Wisconsin libraries. The Center is updating its data base of textbooks, which it plans to make available on line. However, the data base was not on line as of January 2003.

The Center has maintained relationships with organizations that produce Braille and large-print materials. For example, some staff of the Center are members of Wisconsin Braille, Inc., which is a private organization that coordinates Braille activities for students. In addition, the Center registers all Braille and large-print books that it produces with the American Printing House.

The transition plan includes an objective that the Center make its Braille and large-print resources available on the Web. As noted, the Center has included some resources on its Web site, but other information, such as the procedures for ordering Braille and large-print materials, was not available on the Web site as of January 2003.

### Recommendation

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*We recommend the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired:*

- *develop written policies governing the production of Braille and large-print materials, including the format in which materials will be made available;*
- *charge out-of-state requestors for the cost of staff time associated with producing Braille and large-print materials, if it continues to provide this service; and*

- *include on its Web site a comprehensive list of available Braille and large-print materials, as well as the policies and procedures necessary for ordering them.*

## Regional Services

***The Center fully completed seven of nine objectives related to its regional sites.***

Statutes allow the Center to provide services at any location in the state and to operate regional satellite facilities. In creating the transition plan, the Department determined that vision teachers are often the only resource available to parents and educators for information and training on visual impairment issues. However, these teachers often have high caseloads and serve multiple schools and school districts. Therefore, the Department divided the state into six regions and created six regional staff positions. Through December 2002, the Center had fully completed seven of the nine transition plan objectives related to the regional sites, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15

**Status of Transition Plan Objectives Related to Regional Sites**  
Through December 2002

Objective	Status
1. Hire staff to facilitate the provision of outreach services at the regional sites	Completed
2. Work as a team and with the Center	Completed
3. Form a statewide network to provide back-up for cross-training	Completed
4. Determine the expertise and training needs of parents, staff, and students	Completed
5. Develop and provide activities according to each region's needs	Completed
6. Help to develop the Center's youth summer programs	Completed
7. Communicate information about the regional sites	Completed
8. Use the Center's Web site to link the regional sites and the central office	Partially completed
9. Develop and disseminate a coordinated plan for the regional sites	No plans to complete

The six regional staff positions are assigned to four CESA offices (Portage, Tomahawk, Turtle Lake, and West Allis), Chilton, and the Center. As of December 2002, two positions were vacant, although the Center is trying to fill them. The Center has modified the areas served by the other four regional staff so that the entire state is covered.

Regional staff provide information and resources to educators and students in the school districts, attend meetings to share information about training the Center offers, and help to coordinate workshops. They have also worked together to provide outreach services, such as:

- a weekend trip to the Wisconsin Lions Camp in Rosholt in November 2002 for children with visual impairments;
- a training conference in Green Bay for vision teachers in February 2002; and
- vision clinics, which allow parents to bring their children in for visual assessments.

Beginning in the 2001-02 school year, the Center required regional staff to track attendance at meetings and training events they organized or in which they participated. In 2001-02, 445 educators, parents, and others attended 30 meetings and training events. The Center stated that additional meetings and training events were held, but attendance was not taken.

***Regional staff determine regional education needs and offer the appropriate services.***

Regional staff meet with educators to determine their regions' needs and offer the appropriate training, support, and services. For example, based on these meetings, one regional staff person is forming a support group for students with Stargardts Syndrome, which is a degenerative eye disease. Another regional staff person is developing a one-day event to provide information about college opportunities to high school seniors with visual impairments.

One regional staff person surveyed educators about their needs and then, in January 2002, coordinated a training event that included information about the anatomy of the human eye, strategies for adapting and providing materials to children with visual impairments, and best practices for educational strategies. During the 2002-03 school year, all regional staff plan to survey educators and use the results to schedule training events.

Regional staff have supported the Center's youth summer programs. For example, one regional staff person helped develop and staff the Northern Exposure program in 2000 and was on the committee that reviewed and selected 2001 programs. Another regional staff person coordinated and staffed the Summer Employment Skills Experience program held at the Center in 2002 and staffed programs in 2001.

Regional staff communicate information about available services to educators and parents. For example, they explain the various types of assistive technology devices that are available, youth summer programs that the Center offers, and training opportunities that are available to vision teachers.

Regional staff told us they are hindered in their ability to initiate contact with parents because they do not have accurate and complete contact information. The Department's contact information is often outdated and does not specify children's disabilities, which are relevant for regional staff to target their services appropriately. School districts have current information, but some of them are reluctant to share it because of confidentiality concerns. We have recommended that the Department help the Center obtain parental contact information.

The Center has made progress in using its Web site to link the regional sites and the central office. As of January 2003, the Web site included contact information for the regional staff, but not descriptive information. The Center plans to include additional information in the future.

Finally, the transition plan states that the Center will develop a coordinated plan for the regional sites, but the Center has not done so. The Center originally intended that the regional sites would be separate from CESA offices and would be staffed by vision teachers, orientation and mobility instructors, and others. Subsequently, the Center decided not to create separate offices with multiple staff and, as a result, a coordinated plan was determined to be unnecessary.

## **Assistive Technology**

***The Center fully completed 1 of the 13 objectives related to assistive technology.***

Statutes allow the Center to provide assistive technology services to students with visual impairments. These services help an individual acquire or use an assistive technology device, which helps maintain or improve an individual's ability to complete day-to-day activities. Many individuals with visual impairments need such devices to complete their education or to succeed in their employment. However, assistive technology devices can be expensive and can require training to use; educators and parents may be unfamiliar with the devices that are available; and technical assistance on their proper use can be difficult to obtain. Therefore, the Department's transition plan includes 13 objectives relating to the provision of assistive technology services and devices. Through December 2002, the Center had fully completed 1 of the 13 objectives.

### Assistive Technology Services

Assistive technology devices range from basic items, such as dark-lined paper to help a student write neatly, to sophisticated electronic devices. For example:

- a closed circuit television system uses a video camera to project a magnified image onto a video monitor or television screen;
- a monocular is a hand-held device that magnifies images; and
- a Braille note-taking device allows the user to input information in Braille and may include a Braille display and synthetic speech output.

***In November 2002, the Center hired an assistive technology specialist to support educators.***

As shown in Table 16, the transition plan includes seven objectives to improve students' access to assistive technology services. In November 2002, the Center had fully completed the first of these objectives by hiring an assistive technology specialist to provide technical assistance and training to educators, students, and parents statewide. The specialist is expected to help determine the particular devices that are most appropriate for students, demonstrate how the devices operate, and be available for follow-up questions. In addition, the specialist will help maintain the Center's computer network, provide support to staff regarding assistive technology issues, and help teach youth summer programs.

Table 16

**Status of Transition Plan Objectives Related to Assistive Technology Services Through December 2002**

Objective	Status
1. Establish assistive technology expertise at the Center and make it available to parents and educators	Completed
2. Develop a directory of assistive technology experts and make it available on the Center's Web site	Partially completed
3. Develop a technology laboratory with devices that can be used to provide training and can be loaned on a short-term basis	Partially completed
4. Partner with organizations to create assistive technology plans for students who are transitioning into adulthood	Partially completed
5. Provide year-round training on the use of devices	Not completed
6. Provide training in the Center's distance learning laboratory and at the regional sites	Not completed
7. Promote training opportunities to interested individuals	Not completed

Through December 2002, the Center had partially completed three other transition plan objectives. First, it had developed a directory of assistive technology experts whom educators and others can contact. The directory was not available on the Center's Web site as of January 2003, but the Center plans to post a copy of it there in the future.

Second, the Center has a technology laboratory with devices that can be used by residential school students and summer program participants. The public can also use the laboratory, although it is not known how many people know about this resource. The Center stated that outreach staff publicize the laboratory, and it plans to add information about the laboratory to its Web site. To date, it has not used the laboratory to provide training because the assistive technology specialist was hired only recently. However, the Center plans to use the laboratory more extensively during the 2003 youth summer programs. It has decided not to loan devices directly from the laboratory because it has a separate program for loaning devices.

Third, the Center has developed collaborative partnerships with organizations that serve adults, such as the Department of Workforce Development's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. It has also worked with the Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative, an organization that helps school districts with assistive technology services, to create opportunities for educators and students with visual impairments. For example, one regional staff member of the Center is a member of the Initiative's advisory board. In addition, staff of the Center and the Initiative have worked together to present training events and have discussed evaluations of assistive technology devices. However, the Center has not worked with these organizations to create assistive technology plans for students transitioning into adulthood, as the transition plan had anticipated.

***As of December 2002, the Center had not provided assistive technology training.***

As of December 2002, the Center had not completed the remaining three objectives related to the provision of training in the use of assistive technology devices, but the assistive technology specialist plans to offer training opportunities in the future.

### **Distribution of Assistive Technology Devices**

Many students with visual impairments rely on assistive technology devices to complete their educations. Statutes allow the Center to lend, rent, or lease devices to local educational agencies; CESAs; and county children with disabilities education boards, which are special education programs that may include schools, classes, or instructional centers. When the Department wrote the transition

plan, the residential school had devices available to loan to school districts, but few devices were technologically advanced. As a result, school districts needed to purchase expensive technologically advanced devices, sometimes without a thorough evaluation of the devices' usefulness to the students. The transition plan sought to improve this situation. However, through December 2002, the Center had made little progress in implementing the six transition plan objectives related to the distribution of assistive technology devices, which are shown in Table 17.

Table 17

**Status of Transition Plan Objectives Related to the  
Distribution of Assistive Technology Devices  
Through December 2002**

Objective	Status
1. Develop a system for evaluating devices and informing individuals of the results	Not completed
2. Lease high-technology devices and train individuals to use them	No plans to complete
3. Coordinate the availability of devices with CESAs, universities, and regional sites	No plans to complete
4. Develop a system to recycle devices that are no longer being used	No plans to complete
5. Collaborate with private organizations and vendors to provide or share devices	No plans to complete
6. Purchase tutorials and site licenses for software that school districts can use	No plans to complete

***The Center has not developed a system for evaluating assistive technology devices.***

The Center has not developed a system for evaluating assistive technology devices for individual students who have unique needs. However, the recently hired assistive technology specialist is to spend approximately three-fourths of his time providing evaluations and other outreach services to educators and parents. The Center does not plan to implement the other five transition plan objectives. It stated that information obtained since the plan was written two years ago has led it to believe those five objectives are no longer desirable or feasible.

Educators from school districts throughout the state can submit requests for assistive technology devices that students need. The Center reviews requests to determine whether they are appropriate, given a student's age and visual impairment. If a request is approved, the Center either sends the needed device from its inventory or purchases the device. The Center does not have written policies that explain the process used to review and process requests.

The Center's expenditures for assistive technology devices that are available for loan increased significantly, from \$26,700 in FY 1999-2000 to \$170,400 in FY 2001-02. The Center recently purchased more technologically advanced, expensive devices, such as closed circuit television systems and Braille note-takers.

The Center had loaned 1,025 assistive technology devices as of December 2002. It loaned:

- 807 devices to 177 school districts;
- 100 devices to 10 CESAs;
- 94 devices to 45 other entities, including the State's two residential schools, local government agencies, churches, and private organizations; and
- 24 devices to 15 county Birth-to-Three programs.

As noted, the Center does not have written policies for reviewing and processing requests for assistive technology devices. Without such policies, educators may not fully understand in which circumstances they are able to obtain devices for their students.

#### **☑ Recommendation**

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*We recommend the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired develop written policies for lending assistive technology devices and make these policies available on its Web site.*





## Future Considerations ■

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***Additional work is needed to improve the Center's provision of services.***

The Center has changed its focus from primarily serving students enrolled in the residential school to providing outreach services statewide to students with visual impairments. As noted, it has hired outreach staff located at the regional sites and an assistive technology specialist, supported parents and education professionals with a variety of services, and implemented a youth summer program. However, additional work is needed to improve existing services and to provide additional services that are under consideration. Planning efforts will be necessary to help ensure that the Center successfully completes its statutory mission.

### **Satisfaction Surveys**

Between December 2000 and December 2001, 50 students with visual impairments graduated from Wisconsin high schools, including the Center's residential school. The Center and CESA 11 surveyed these students, 39 of whom responded, about their post-secondary education, employment, and independent living activities. In June 2002, they reported the survey's findings, which included the students' observations and insights about their high school experiences, as well as several suggestions for school districts to consider in improving educational programs for students with visual impairments. However, while providing useful information, the survey report did not analyze results that were specific to students who had attended the residential school.

In addition, the Center has not surveyed the parents of former students who had attended its residential school, but it may wish to consider doing so. An analysis of student and parental satisfaction specific to the residential school could be valuable in helping the Center improve its educational efforts.

***The Center could improve its effectiveness by periodically surveying recipients of outreach services.***

Similarly, the Center may wish to consider periodically surveying the recipients of its outreach services, including educators, students, and parents. It could, for example, inquire about the quality and usefulness of the assistive technology devices that it loaned, the Braille and large-print materials it provided, and the various training opportunities that it offers to educators.

## **Strategic Plan**

The Department considers the May 2000 transition plan to be an interim document that it will continue to modify, based on the ongoing educational needs of students with visual impairments. As noted, the Center no longer plans to implement some transition plan objectives because the needs of students and educators, as well as the available resources, have changed since the plan was developed three years ago. Later this year, it plans to complete a strategic plan that will build upon progress to date and focus on additional tasks that need to be completed for it to meet its statutory mission.

In attempting to implement objectives in the transition plan, the Center focused staff and resources on the areas it decided would be most useful for students with visual impairments. For example, it hired regional outreach staff to serve as a resource to educators before hiring an assistive technology specialist to complete training programs for educators and students and to provide evaluations of the available devices. However, other objectives that could have been completed with a relatively small investment of resources have not yet been addressed, such as developing a written resource directory of Braille experts and including information about short-term residential school enrollment options on the Center's Web site.

Most of the transition plan's objectives do not include quantitative goals against which progress can be measured. For example, one objective states that the Center is to form an assessment team that can evaluate students statewide and provide school districts with follow-up services that ensure effective outcomes. However, the objective does not establish goals for the number of students to be evaluated or the extent to which follow-up services are to be provided. Similarly, another objective states that the Center will provide training sessions on the use of assistive technology devices at various times during the year. However, the objective does not

state the number or locations of the sessions to be provided, nor does it explain to whom the sessions will be targeted or estimate the number of individuals who will complete the training.

Including quantitative goals whenever possible in the forthcoming strategic plan would help the Department, educators, and others measure the Center's progress toward achieving the plan's provisions. For example, the strategic plan could include information about the numbers, types, and general locations of Braille workshops and classes that the Center plans to offer in the next few years. Given expected limitations in future funding, the strategic plan will need to reflect the most pressing educational needs of children with visual impairments, educators, and parents and to provide a way in which the Center's progress toward implementing the strategic plan can be assessed.

#### Recommendation

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*We recommend the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired:*

- *complete its strategic plan by October 1, 2003, and provide it to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee;*
- *place priority on objectives that are most likely to improve the delivery of those educational services that children with visual impairments need most; and*
- *establish measures, particularly ones with quantitative goals, against which its progress toward achieving the plan's objectives can be assessed.*

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## Appendix

### **Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired Youth Summer Programs 1999 through 2002**

The Center offered 20 youth summer programs from 1999 through 2002. Detailed program content information, such as program brochures, was available for 12 programs. The Center was unable to provide us with information for the other eight programs.

#### **Summer 1999 Programs**

##### **History of Wisconsin Native Americans (Janesville):**

The program taught students, who worked in teams, about the history of Wisconsin's Native Americans and their cultures.

##### **Northern Exposure (Wausau):**

The Center was unable to provide detailed program information.

##### **Experiencing Summer (Brookfield/Milwaukee):**

The program offered a variety of summer activities and taught recreation, socialization, and life-building skills. It also fostered relationships between younger students and older students who served as role models.

#### **Summer 2000 Programs**

##### **On the Move (Janesville):**

The program had a transportation theme and required students to keep a daily journal and complete a research project. Students could also use a variety of assistive technology devices.

##### **Northern Exposure (Wausau):**

The program offered students a chance to shop for groceries, plan and prepare meals, label food products and clothing, develop résumés, and complete job applications.

##### **Experiencing Summer (Brookfield/Milwaukee):**

The program was similar to the summer 1999 program. Some older students worked as junior counselors and were paid a stipend to guide, under adult supervision, younger students during activities. Students competed in athletic and other events during an event day that was open to families and friends.

##### **Summer of Discoveries (Milwaukee):**

The Center was unable to provide detailed program information.

## **Summer 2001 Programs**

### **Pioneer Spirit (Janesville):**

The program's brochure indicates it had a "pioneer spirit" theme, but no further information about the program's content was available.

### **Summer Theater (Waukesha):**

The program allowed students to create the scenery and perform a theatrical presentation for family and friends.

### **Northern Exposure (Wausau):**

The program focused on providing students with daily living skills.

The Center was unable to provide detailed program information for:

- Janesville School District Day Program (Janesville)
- Sports Camp (Glendale)
- Summer of Discoveries (Milwaukee)
- Rock Aqua Jays Water-ski Clinic (Janesville)
- Career Exploration (Janesville)

## **Summer 2002 Programs**

### **Summer Employment Skills Experience (Janesville):**

The program enhanced students' employment skills. Following two weeks of learning employment skills, students completed four weeks of supervised employment at Janesville businesses and were paid by the businesses.

### **Independence Day (Janesville):**

The program used an Independence Day theme to promote students' independence in mobility and a variety of activities.

### **Intensive Technology (Janesville):**

The program exposed students to new assistive technology, including computer operating systems and software programs, and it allowed students to learn additional skills with technology they had previously used.

### **Bring on the Braille (Janesville):**

The program enhanced students' Braille reading and writing skills, including Braille music and math.

### **Sports Camp (Janesville):**

The Center was unable to provide detailed program information.



# State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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**Elizabeth Burmaster**  
State Superintendent

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April 18, 2003

Janice Mueller, State Auditor  
Legislative Audit Bureau  
22 East Mifflin Street, Suite 500  
Madison, WI 53703

Dear Ms. Mueller:

I have reviewed the recently completed evaluation of the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (WCBVI) operated by the Department of Public Instruction. WCBVI is a statewide educational resource for students with visual impairment as well as their parents and teachers. Act 9 (1999) created the center and directed the department to continue to operate the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped (WSVH), to offer youth and adult summer programs, and to provide outreach services to school districts in Wisconsin.

The audit represents a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the department's progress in meeting the goals contained in legislation for the establishment and operation of the center. We commend the auditors for their recognition of the complex needs of students who are blind and visually impaired, a number of whom have other impairments as well.

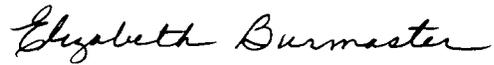
We were pleased with your treatment of the transition plan that guided our work in the establishment of the center. The goals in the transition plan were developed based on work by the State Superintendent's Blind and Visual Impairment Education Council, a broadly based group of stakeholders required in Act 9. The plan represents the best thinking about the needs of this group of children and includes goals to meet those needs. We view the transition plan as evolutionary; with better understanding of the needs and resources in the state, it will evolve to maximize service delivery options for children who are blind or visually impaired. The audit report supports the need to take significant actions to address our efforts to improve results for these children.

We believe the audit report identifies the critically important relationship between WCBVI, including its outreach efforts, and school district staff and parents in the state. We appreciate the finding of satisfactory progress in implementing the outreach goals, including establishment of the state's first teacher-training program in the area of vision.

Janice Mueller, State Auditor  
Page -2-  
April 18, 2003

Again, we believe the report is constructive and will assist legislators, school districts, the department, and the public to better understand the progress made and the critical work that still needs to be accomplished to improve results for the children we serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth Burmaster".

Elizabeth Burmaster  
State Superintendent

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