

An Evaluation:

Wisconsin Educational Services Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Department of Public Instruction

March 2006

Report Highlights ■

Program expenditures have increased primarily because of expanded outreach services.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) administers the Wisconsin Educational Services Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, which was created by 2001 Wisconsin Act 57. In fiscal year (FY) 2004-05, the program had 135.6 authorized full-time equivalent (FTE) positions and \$11.0 million in expenditures.

Residential school enrollment has declined more than staffing levels.

The program makes free residential education available to state residents from 3 to 21 years old who are deaf or hard of hearing and provides outreach services such as consultation, training, and mentoring to school districts, students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and their families. In addition, the Wisconsin School for the Deaf in Delevan offers a summer program.

Outreach expenditures totaled \$1.1 million in FY 2004-05.

Act 57 directed the Legislative Audit Bureau to conduct a performance evaluation of the program during FY 2005-06. To assess overall program performance and determine the extent to which DPI has implemented statutory changes, we analyzed:

- program expenditures from FY 2000-01 through FY 2004-05;
- changes in staffing levels;
- enrollment trends at the school; and
- the extent to which outreach services have been expanded, and the types of services provided.

Key Facts and Findings

In FY 2004-05 spending totaled \$11.0 million and the program had 135.6 authorized FTE positions.

In the 2004-05 school year, 142 students from 66 school districts were enrolled in the residential school.

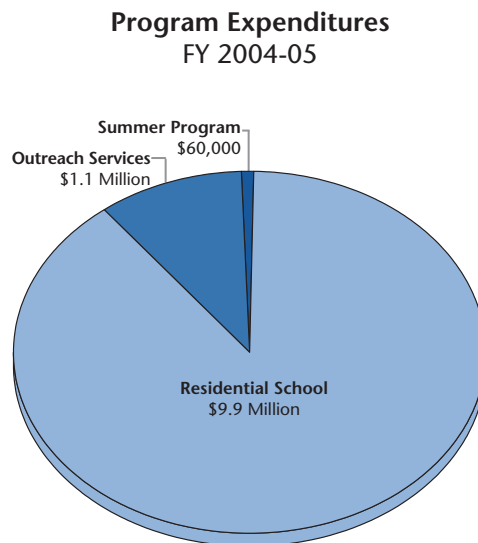
130 students participated in the 2005 summer program.

Expenditures for outreach services more than quadrupled from FY 2000-01 through 2004-05.

Program Expenditures

Program expenditures increased moderately from \$10.0 million in FY 2000-01 to \$11.0 million in FY 2004-05, primarily because of expanded statewide outreach efforts.

In FY 2004-05, spending for outreach services was \$1.1 million. However, at \$9.9 million, residential school expenditures continued to represent the majority of the program's costs.



Wisconsin School for the Deaf

During the 2004-05 school year, 6.3 percent of the 2,252 Wisconsin students who were identified as deaf or hard of hearing and were receiving special education services attended the Wisconsin School for the Deaf.

Enrollment at the residential school has declined in recent years, from 165 students in the 2000-01 school year to 142 students in the 2004-05 school year. Both instructional

and residential staffing at the school have also declined, from 97.7 authorized FTE positions in January 2001 to 91.0 authorized FTE positions in September 2005. In contrast, outreach services have increased, and the number of authorized outreach positions increased from 4.0 FTE in January 2001 to 11.0 FTE in September 2005.

Students are placed in the residential school when an individualized education program (IEP) developed according to state and federal requirements deems it appropriate. The IEPs of nearly 80 percent of students who currently attend the school list more than one disability. A speech or language disability is the most prevalent after hearing disabilities.

Although the majority of its courses cover subjects similar to those provided by schools in local districts, the school's courses are taught by staff using American Sign Language. In addition, some students with significant disabilities attend ungraded classes that are specifically designed to meet their special needs.

Most of the school's students enroll for the full school year. Fifty students, or 35.2 percent, commuted daily from nearby communities in the 2004-05 school year. The remaining 92 students stayed at the residence hall during the week and were transported home on weekends.

Because enrollment has declined faster than staffing levels, the number of teachers exceeds the levels recommended under the school's guidelines. For example, in

the 2005-06 school year, the school is serving 3.9 elementary students per classroom teacher, which is less than the 6.0 students its guidelines recommend. It is also serving fewer than one-half of the high school-level students per classroom teacher that its guidelines suggest. Given enrollment trends and staffing levels, we include a recommendation for DPI to monitor classroom staffing ratios.

The school also offers a summer program for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, as required by Act 57. Enrollment increased markedly in the summer program's first two years, from 84 students in the summer of 2004 to 130 students in 2005.

A goal of the summer program is to provide an opportunity for students who otherwise do not attend the school to interact with peers using American Sign Language. Summer program enrollment for these students increased by 29 students from 2004 to 2005.

Outreach Services

As intended by Act 57, the quantity and the types of services provided by outreach staff have increased. Outreach expenditures more than quadrupled from FY 2000-01, when they were \$248,800, to FY 2004-05, when they were \$1.1 million.

In FY 2004-05, outreach staff provided:

- consultations with educational staff regarding 64 students in 47 local school districts who are deaf or hard of hearing, and 2 children in Birth to 3 programs;

- conferences and training sessions for more than 300 local educational professionals and others;
- mentoring services that included in-home guidance in visual communication and sign language for 56 families, and support from trained parent guides for 35 families with children newly identified as deaf or hard of hearing;
- distance learning courses in American Sign Language for 75 hearing high school students in nine southeastern Wisconsin schools; and
- free captioned media materials for 1,425 registered users in Wisconsin.

Future Considerations

As allowed by Act 57, the program has broadened its focus from primarily serving students at the residential school to also providing

outreach services statewide to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. However, we believe existing outreach services should be broadened as outlined in the program's current strategic plan.

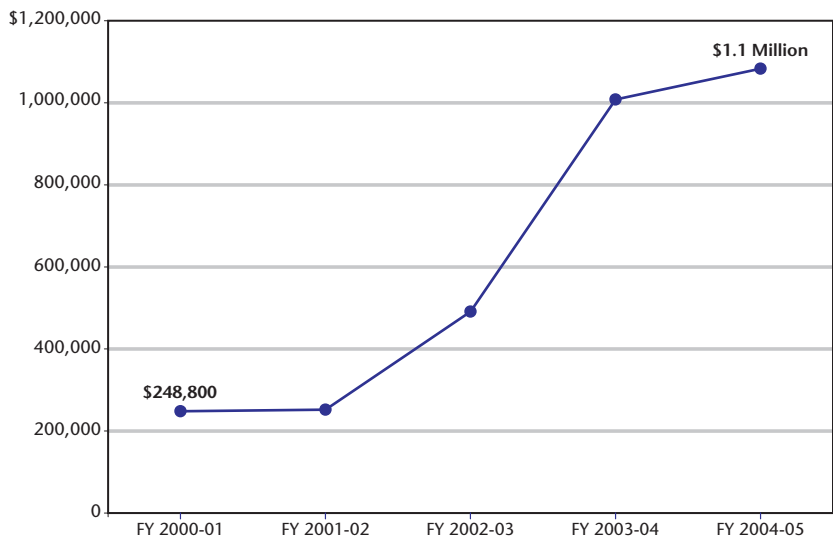
Although there is an interest among the parents of students who are deaf or hard of hearing in receiving instruction in American Sign Language, the program has not yet expanded its distance learning courses beyond those offered to hearing high school students in southeastern Wisconsin.

Recommendations

Our recommendations address the need for DPI to:

- monitor the school's classroom staffing ratios (*p. 31*) and
- increase technological resources to provide additional distance learning courses statewide (*p. 46*).

Outreach Expenditures



Additional Information

Report 06-3 includes a response from the Department of Public Instruction.



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