

An Evaluation:

Wisconsin Center for the Blind
and Visually Impaired

April 2003

Report Highlights ■

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.

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 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, regional outreach, and increasing the availability of assistive technology to students with visual impairments. The Department anticipated completing these objectives by 2003.

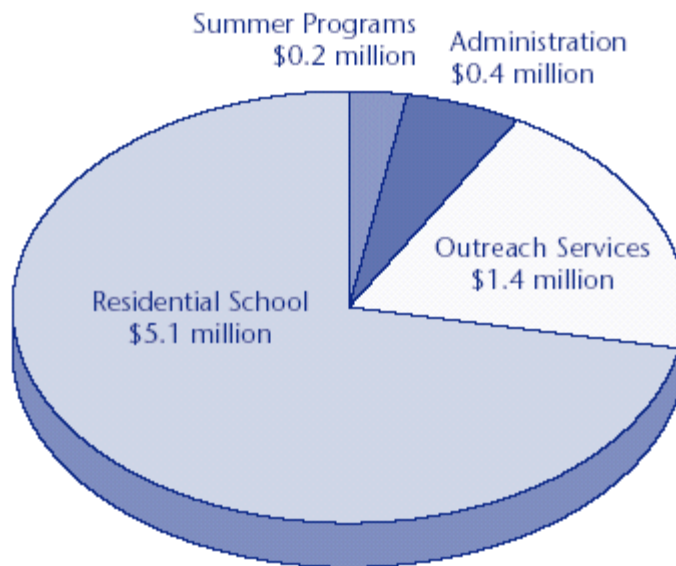
1999 Wisconsin Act 9 directed the Legislative Audit Bureau to conduct a performance evaluation of the Center during FY 2002-03.

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.

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

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.



Key Facts and Findings

1999 Wisconsin Act 9 created the Center and allowed it to provide outreach services statewide.

In FY 2001-02, the Center spent \$7.1 million, including \$4.6 million in general purpose revenue.

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

Approximately 75 percent of enrolled students have disabilities in addition to

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

visual impairments.

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

A May 2000 transition plan describes how the Center will fulfill its statutory mission.

Through December 2002, the Center made satisfactory progress in implementing a number of transition plan objectives.

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.

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

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 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.

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 largeprint 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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