



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind

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Document Title

Annual Executive Summary- The Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind- 2021

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The Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind

Enabling Authority

§ 22.1-346.2 (E.7.)

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Executive Summary

The Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind (VSDB) is a state agency located in Staunton, Virginia. Per the Code of Virginia (§22.1-346), VSDB is established as the only state school for students with sensory impairments in the Commonwealth. VSDB serves students who are visually impaired or deaf/hard of hearing, including those students who are deaf/hard of hearing, blind/vision impaired, deafblind, and/or sensory impaired with other disabilities.

As established by the Code of Virginia (§ 22.1-346.2.), the VSDB Board of Visitors provides oversight of the school and residential programs. The Board is comprised of eleven members including two senators and two delegates. The Board meets quarterly to review and approve the operations of the school and the residential programs. The Superintendent maintains direct management of the agency and is accountable to the Board of Visitors.

VSDB provides innovative educational programs to support those students with sensory impairments within the Commonwealth. VSDB works closely with the Virginia Department of Education to implement prescriptive programs to meet the needs of its student population and to ensure enhanced student outcomes.

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Financial Report

For fiscal year 2021:

Revenues equal \$365,577.95 and includes general fund and non-general fund (no federal grants or bond reimbursements). Expenses equal \$12,417,981.82 which includes general funds and non-general funds (including federal grants). These figures do not include any capital.

Licensure and Accreditation

VSDB is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Student Population

VSDB serves approximately 70 students from across the Commonwealth. Per the Code of Virginia, students enrolled at VSDB must be served for Special Education Services through the disability categories of Deafness or Hearing Impairment or through the disability category of Vision Impairment. Students may also be served under the category of Deafblind. In general, VSDB serves students who are deaf/hard of hearing, blind/vision impaired, deafblind, or deaf or blind with other disabilities. Over 80% of the student body is served for more than one disability with an increasing number being identified as multi-disabled. A student may enroll in VSDB as a residential or day student. Approximately two-thirds of VSDB's student body is residential. Of the total student population, approximately 55% of the student body is deaf/hard of hearing. The remaining student body is served for some level of visual impairment, including blindness. All students are served through the National School Meals Program.

Admissions

Students interested in enrollment to VSDB must be a resident of Virginia and must be referred to VSDB through their local school system. An admissions process is established by the VSDB Board of Visitors and includes the completion of an application packet, an admissions interview, and the completion of a TEMP week. The TEMP week allows a prospective student to attend VSDB for a week for the "VSDB experience". The TEMP week provides valuable information to the student, the family, the referring school system, and to the VSDB team as to the specific needs of the student and to ensure that VSDB can meet the student's needs. Students may enroll as a day or residential student. All programs, services, room and board, and transportation are provided to students at no cost to their families.

COVID-19 Update

VSDB opened the 2020-2021 school year successfully with the provision of in-person instruction daily. Approximately 85% of the students returned and additional new enrollments increased as a result of public school parents seeking options to the virtual/hybrid options offered by the local schools. VSDB continues to experience an increase in enrollment and predicts the trend will continue during the current 2021-2022 school year.

VSDB maintained in-person instruction for the majority of the first semester with little to no COVID incidents on campus. It was not until Thanksgiving break that VSDB moved to at-home instruction per

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the guidance of the Virginia Department of Health against in-person instruction. At that point, VSDB students did not return to campus and at-home instruction began. Due to the complex learning needs of its student body, the lack of fluent sign communication at home for the majority of VSDB's students who are deaf, and the absence of braille skills and specialized technology in the home to support those students who are blind, VSDB determined that continuity of instruction would best be provide through individualized learning packets, Google Classroom, and face-to-face video sessions. Individualized learning packets were prescriptive to each student's language and learning needs and provided review material for concepts taught previously as well as introduced to the greatest extent possible, new concepts. Packets were mailed home every two weeks and follow up support was provided to parents as needed. Although the packets supported the concept of continuity of instruction well, the educational team knew that for effective new instruction, students needed to return to campus in order to receive the full scope of services and programs that VSDB provides and was outlined in each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).

VSDB's plans for any potential closures in the future include virtual learning aspects such as Google Classroom, learning packets, and face-to-face video sessions. Enhanced parent support will continue as needed.

Education/Residential/Recreational Programs

VSDB operates all programs on a standard August-May school calendar. Beyond a student's educational needs, VSDB addresses the needs of the whole child by providing opportunities for peer socialization and interactions within a fully accessible setting. At VSDB, in contrast to public schools, students are not "the only one, but one of many". Students who are deaf/hard of hearing at VSDB interact with staff and peers who are fluent in American Sign Language providing direct access to language models and typical language development. Similarly, students who are blind/vision impaired have equal access to all programs and develop social skills in a setting where peers and staff provide natural opportunities for social interactions.

Students are on campus Sunday evening through Friday at noon and return home every weekend. For residential students, VSDB provides transportation weekly to and from designated "hubs" throughout Virginia. Day student transportation is provided in partnership with the local school division.

Learning occurs both within the classroom as well as within the residential halls. The residential program supports the skills taught in the classroom across all academic core areas as well as independent living skills and skills related to the Expanded Core Curriculum. The VSDB academic curriculum is based on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) and is made accessible to all students with accommodations as deemed appropriate in each student's IEP. All students participate in the Virginia Assessment process according to their program of studies. Students pursue various diploma options based on credits earned for an Advanced Studies Diploma, a Standard Diploma, or an Applied Studies Diploma. For an Advanced Studies Diploma, students may choose to take American Sign Language (ASL) or Spanish as their foreign language option. VSDB provides additional special education services per each student's IEP. These services include speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, orientation and mobility training, and braille instruction. In addition, VSDB offers 24/7 nursing care that is accessible to all students as needed and/or prescribed.

Specialized assistive technology enhances communication and access to the curriculum per individual student needs. Specialized materials such as modified textbooks, subscriptions to supplemental instructional programs, software, and modified and brailled library books are essential to supplement the programs at VSDB. In addition, tutorial and remedial instructional support is provided by highly qualified personnel to students who demonstrate deficiencies in any core area. Tutoring occurs within the educational setting and also extends to after-hours in the residential halls. Another unique aspect of VSDB's programs is the ability for students to crossover in programs should they express an interest. Should a student who is low vision express an interest in the photography class taught in the Deaf Department by a teacher who is deaf, they may access the class with an interpreter. In comparison, should a student in the Deaf Department have enough hearing to enjoy music and expresses an interest in the music class offered in the Blind Department, then they may also crossover to participate in that class. Crossover opportunities may extend to the sports team also dependent on student interest.

At VSDB, learning extends beyond the classroom with the ***CROPS Program*** located on the school's 73-acre campus. The CROPS Program is comprised of the VSDB greenhouse and the ***VSDB Educational Urban Farm***, the largest educational urban farm in the Commonwealth. The program is funded fully by the VSDB Foundation and provides full accessible agricultural and horticultural experiences to the students. Hands-on learning activities allow students to develop workforce skills in support of more effective transition planning as well as teach students the importance of healthy lifestyles choices. Students are involved in every aspect of the farm from the start of seedlings in the greenhouse to the harvesting of crops in the field to the preparation of fresh vegetables in the dining hall. The farm produces thousands of pounds of produce each year and provides fresh produce to VSDB's cafeteria. Students maintain a high level of engagement within the farm program and develop effective workforce skills to support employment upon graduation. The CROPS program was a proud recipient of a national USDA Farm-to-School grant in 2019. As one of only two Virginia recipients, VSDB was awarded approximately \$76,000 in funding to support continued development and growth of the CROPS program.

During recreational time, students have full access to after school social activities, sports, and clubs. VSDB's sports program offers students the opportunity to be part of a team and to participate in a variety of sports such as soccer, basketball, goalball, track, cross country, and volleyball. The sports program supports student participation with fully accessible activities with peers sharing many of the same challenges. In the past, VSDB has earned recognition nationally for two years running as the East Coast Champions in Goalball and as national champions twice. Currently, VSDB is one of two schools for the Blind in the country spearheading the formation of a Blind soccer league in preparation for the 2028 Paralympic Games in Los Angeles, California.

Services

VSDB maintains compliance with all federal and state regulations for Special Education Services. It provides special education and related services, diagnostic evaluations, transportation, residential hall services, community experiences, vocational training, work experience, and other support services according to the student's IEP. Nursing services are provided on a 24/7 basis to meet the needs of the residential program. Services are provided for children from birth to those who have not reached their 22nd birthday by September 30th of the current school year. All students are served through Special Education and have an IEP. VSDB works in collaboration with the student's local school system to provide educational services that meet each student's individual needs.

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VSDB offers a multi-year high school program with innovative transition program options that encourage students to remain at VSDB until they "age out" and are no longer eligible for special education services. VSDB works closely with state agencies and organizations to connect students and families to transition services to support goals of independent living, post-secondary education, or employment. Through the IEP process, a transition plan is developed that is prescriptive to each student's individual needs and interests and outlines goals for life after graduation. During the high school years, VSDB students access opportunities for career exploration and workforce skill development through on and off campus work experiences. VSDB partners extensively within its community to provide an expansive array of career placements and experiences. VSDB maintains Virginia Department of Education indicator data, as required, related to graduation and student outcomes.

VSDB's *Achieve Transition Program* includes innovative transition services to support the development of essential workforce and independent living skills. Students have the opportunity to develop independent living skills while residing in the residential halls, and as they approach graduation, by participating in the on-campus fully accessible *Independent Living Apartments (ILA)* program. The ILA program is the only one of its kind in the Commonwealth and is designed to provide students a nine-weeks experience within a supervised apartment setting. A VSDB designed curriculum provides prescriptive instruction to meet the needs of the unique student population and supports a successful transition into the ILA program.

Residential and School Staff

The Principal oversees daily operations of the school program. All teachers and paraprofessionals must be highly qualified to maintain employment at VSDB with many being highly qualified in multiple areas. In both the Deaf and the Blind Departments, teachers instruct in multi-grade classrooms. In addition, at the high school level in both the Blind and the Deaf Departments, each core area is taught by a single teacher who is highly qualified in multiple SOL content areas. In the Deaf Department, to support reading and writing skill development, teachers are trained in a bilingual (American Sign Language/English) researched based instructional model.

The Director of Student Life manages all aspects of the Residential Program and works collaboratively with the Principal to ensure continuity of services and support of transition plans. The Residential Program includes specialty programs that support student independence as graduation nears. For adult students, the "18 and up" residential hall floors support a supervised residential setting with a greater level of independence in preparation for placement in the Independent Living Apartments. These prescriptive and unique programs are crucial elements in preparing students for life after VSDB. In both the Deaf and the Blind Departments, residential hall staff possesses unique skills that support a fully accessible program. In the Deaf Department, many staff are deaf and fluent in American Sign language, providing consistent language role models for the students. In the Blind Department, staff is knowledgeable in braille and the Expanded Core Curriculum and support the maximum level of independence possible for each student.

VSDB's unique programs and services offer students who are sensory impaired, throughout the Commonwealth, an opportunity to "Grow, Do, and Become"! For many students, enrollment in VSDB allows them, for the first time, to learn, participate, and to succeed on equal ground as their peers. For many, for the first time in their lives, they are "not the only one but one of many" and experience the opportunity to develop true friendships, to become leaders, and to reach their fullest potential.

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