



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- 2023

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Enabling Authority

§ 22.1-346.2 (E.7.)

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Executive Summary

Parents across Virginia entrust the safety, care, and education of their children who are sensory impaired to the Commonwealth's only pre/K-12 school, the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind (VSDB) in Staunton, Virginia. Established in 1839, VSDB is the oldest school in the nation to serve both the Deaf and the Blind. VSDB serves a complex student population that includes children who are hard of hearing/deaf, vision impaired/blind, deafblind, and deaf or blind with other disabilities. As an agency of the Commonwealth, there is never a cost to a family for any child to attend VSDB.

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.

Currently, VSDB serves approximately 60 students from across Virginia, with enrollment increasing steadily after the COVID pandemic. Unlike other public schools in Virginia, VSDB provides overnight in-residence accommodations and is responsible for the children 24 hours a day, 5 days a week during the school year. VSDB's reputation for stellar and unique programs and services is well known, creating interest from across the United States and other countries. VSDB is a leader in many areas related to the

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education and service of children who are sensory impaired. This 2023-24 school year, VSDB is seeing an increase in enrollment, especially at the preschool and kindergarten level. Although VSDB has had a preschool for deaf children in the past, it is excited to establish its first preschool program for the Blind. VSDB is proud to have the opportunity to provide families across the Commonwealth with these critical, unique, and specialized services.

A key focus at VSDB is the development of the whole child, beyond the academics. From preschool to age 21, VSDB prepares students for life through the provision of innovative programs and services that are prescriptive to the needs of each student. VSDB students achieve the skills necessary for independent living, academic success, productive workforce careers, and social and emotional well-being. VSDB not only educates its students, but also works with each family to educate them on the needs of their child as well as services and available resources to support a successful future after graduation.

VSDB impacts the life of every student and family that comes through its doors. It provides the necessary programs and resources to allow students the opportunity to reach their potential and to become productive citizens within the community. VSDB provides hope and a vision for families who could not begin to see the potential or imagine a future for their child. For students and their families, VSDB is a life-changing experience.

Financial Report

For fiscal year 2023:

Revenues equal \$476,246.14 and includes general fund and non-general fund (no federal grants or bond reimbursements). Expenses equal \$14,198,200.31 which includes general funds and non-general funds (including federal grants). These figures do not include any capital project expenses.

Licensure and Accreditation

Currently, VSDB is in the process of renewing its accreditation through COGNIA, formerly Advanced Ed, which was put on hold due to COVID. VSDB plans to renew its accreditation with the Conference of Educators and Administrators of Schools for the Deaf (CEASD) next year, which was also put on hold due to COVID.

Student Population

For families and professionals throughout the Commonwealth, VSDB is recognized as the hub of expertise in the education of children who are sensory impaired. The entirety of VSDB's student population is served for Special Education with more than 80% of the students being served for more than one disability. Per the Code of Virginia, students must be referred to VSDB by their local school divisions and may enroll as a residential or day student. VSDB accepts residential students starting at age five and encourages students to continue their education at VSDB until they age out of Special Education services at age 21. Once enrolled, VSDB maintains a critical partnership with the referring school division in order to support

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the needs of the student both at school and at home. VSDB residential students stay on campus during the week and return home every weekend for valued family time. VSDB provides transportation for residential students and day students are transported by their referring local school divisions. All students are served through the National School Meals Program.

VSDB recognizes that in order for children to engage in instruction and succeed, they must be socially and emotionally well developed and stable. As a result, the social and emotional well-being of the students is a critical focus for both the school and residential programs. For many students enrolling in VSDB, their public-school experience was not a positive one due to them being the only one or one of a few with similar disabilities. The majority of students come to VSDB having experienced isolation, bullying, and an insufficient level of disability services. At home, the parents of many students have never met an adult who is deaf or blind and therefore have no point of reference for what the future may hold, the potential of their child, and how to prepare them for success. Many students in the VSDB Deaf Department come from homes where families do not sign, therefore increasing the already critical language delays, isolation, and lack of communication. For students in the Blind Department, families often are unsure of how to maximize their child's self-worth, develop independent living skills, or teach daily life experiences. VSDB has extensive experience with children of all ages who enroll and are deaf with no functional language, blind with little to no independent living skills, and deafblind possessing no communication skills or awareness of the world around them.

At VSDB, a child is not the only one, but one of many, allowing them to grow and develop self-confidence and a positive self-esteem while learning and interacting with similar peers. At VSDB, students feel equal, included, and welcomed. Many students who are deaf experience for the first time, the ability to learn language and to be able to communicate and be understood regarding their needs, wants, and thoughts. Other who are blind, are learning for the first time how to take care of themselves, eat independently using utensils, and to tend to daily self-care needs. For all students, enrollment at VSDB means the opportunity to develop true friendships and to socialize and share experiences with students and adults with similar disabilities who know the day-to-day challenges they face. Many VSDB staff, who are deaf or blind themselves, serve as role models to students and their families and provide hope to parents and a vision for how their child can grow, do, and become...replacing the overwhelming focus of what their child is unable to achieve. As a result, students leave VSDB with a greater sense of self, confidence, independence, and a plan for their future. Families of graduates leave inspired with greater insight into the needs and potential of their child and a vision for their future. This allows them to better support their children in working with adult agency providers who guide them in the next steps of life after graduation.

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 participation in the VSDB TEMP program. The TEMP program provides a prospective student the opportunity to experience

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life at VSDB for two weeks. During the TEMP program, the student attends classes, lives in the residential hall, if applying for residential status, and participates in social and recreational activities. The TEMP program provides valuable information to the student, the family, the referring school system, and the VSDB Admissions Team regarding the specific needs of the student. If accepted, 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.

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.

Students at VSDB have access to many one-of-a-kind programs and services including, but not limited to, fully accessible education and residential services, on-campus supervised Independent Living Apartments Program (ILA), on/off campus work experiences, the largest Educational Urban Farm in Virginia, and fully accessible sports programs such as basketball, volleyball, co-ed soccer, cross-country, Goalball, and Blind Soccer. In addition, the residential program offers older students who are demonstrated readiness for increased responsibility and independence, the opportunity to live on the supervised Residential Transition Floors. This option prepares students for increased responsibility and independence and supports the development of problem-solving skills as they prepare for the ILA program and life beyond VSDB.

At VSDB, learning does not stop with the end of the school day but continues after school hours in the residential program. 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 for the Blind. 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 by each student's IEP Team. 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) as their foreign language option. VSDB provides additional special education services as outlined in each student's IEP. These services may 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. Materials such as modified textbooks, subscriptions to supplemental instructional programs, software, and modified and brailed 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 or after-hours in the residential halls.

VSDB's flagship program is the ***Independent Living Apartments (ILA)***. As the only program of its kind in the Commonwealth, the ILA program provides VSDB students a nine-week supervised independent

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living experience with a focus on developing knowledge and skills needed for living on their own or within a group home setting in the future. The ILA program focusses on instruction in the areas of budgeting, menu planning, food shopping, meal preparation, paying bills, home maintenance, medication management, home and community safety, and the use of public transportation.

VSDB provides an array of effective transition services through its *ACHIEVE* program that prepares students for life through career exploration, fully accessible on/off campus work experiences, and independent apartment living experiences. VSDB's independent living skills curriculum supports student success in preparation for life beyond graduation. To maximize student achievement, the school and the residential programs work collaboratively to ensure consistency in service delivery and ongoing learning.

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 Horticultural Program* and the *VSDB Educational Urban Farm*. The program is funded fully by the VSDB Foundation and provides full accessible agricultural and horticultural educational 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 hundreds 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 is a former recipient of the USADA grant program. VSDB plans to submit a grant for this coming year in recognition of the critical role the CROPS program plays in the education of VSDB students.

During recreational time, students have full access to after school social activities, sports, and clubs. VSDB's offers students the opportunity to be part of a team and to participate in a variety sports. The sports program supports student participation with fully accessible activities with peers sharing many of the same challenges. In the past, VSDB earned Goalball recognition twice as the national champion and multiple times as the East Coast Champion. This year, both the boys and the girls Goalball teams will travel to Texas for national competition. With the support of the VSDB Foundation, VSDB is one of two schools for the Blind in the country to have a Blind Soccer Team and is the only school in the nation to have a professional level Blind Soccer pitch/field. In addition, VSDB is leading the efforts to establish a national Blind soccer league in preparation for the 2028 Paralympic Games in Los Angeles, California.

Another unique aspect of VSDB is the ability for students to cross over into other departments to access programs that they may be interested in experiencing. For example, if a student who has low vision expresses an interest in joining the photography class that is taught in the Deaf Department by a teacher who is deaf, they may join the class with an interpreter. Similar, should a student in the Deaf Department enjoys music and expresses an interest in the music class offered in the Blind Department, they may also crossover to participate in that class with an interpreter. Crossover opportunities also extend to the sports programs depending on a student's interest.

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 Individual Education Plan (IEP). VSDB works in collaboration with the student's local school system to provide educational services that meet each student's individual needs.

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 such as the Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) and the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI) to connect students and families to transition services that 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. VSDB maintains the Virginia Department of Education indicator data, as required, related to graduation and student outcomes.

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 follow 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. These specialized programs are critical elements in preparing students for life beyond VSDB. Many staff in both the Deaf and the Blind Departments, possesses unique skills that support fully accessible programs. In the Deaf Department, many staff are deaf and fluent in American Sign language, providing direct communication and consistent language role models. 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, to participate, and to succeed equally with their peers. VSDB provides the opportunity to develop true lifelong friendships, become leaders, and to reach their fullest potential so that upon integration into the community they are productive and successful citizens.