



## 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 – 2025

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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**

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 first and 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 Executive Branch 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 composed of fifteen members including two Senators and two Delegates. The Board meets quarterly to review and approve the operations of the school, the residential program, and the overall agency operations. The Superintendent maintains direct management of the agency and is accountable to the Board of Visitors as well as to the Secretary of Education.

Currently, VSDB serves 75 students from across Virginia—a 34 percent increase in three years—with enrollment increasing steadily. It is estimated that by the end of the school year, VSDB should have approximately 82 students enrolled. Unlike public schools in Virginia, VSDB provides overnight in-residence accommodations and is responsible for the students 24 hours a day, 5 days a week during the school year. Students may enroll as a day student or residential. About  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the student enrollment are

residential students. Day students typically live within an hour of VSDB. However, day students may choose to enroll as residential students at any time during their tenure at VSDB.

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 education and service of children who are sensory impaired. During the 2024-25 school year, VSDB saw an increase in enrollment, especially at the preschool and kindergarten level. 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 cannot begin to see the potential or to imagine a future for their child. For students and their families, VSDB is a life-changing experience.

The Secretary of Education has approved the planning phase for two capital budget requests: renovation of Price Hall's Independent Living Apartments and installation of a campus-wide mass communication system. These improvements are part of VSDB's commitment to ensuring a safe, modern, and independent living environment for students and to strengthen campus-wide emergency preparedness.

This year's annual theme, "Preparing Students for Life: Together We Empower," reflects VSDB's mission to prepare students for postsecondary education or training, employment, and independent living. The theme underscores VSDB's commitment to helping students build fulfilling lives through community partnership and collaboration. It was formally launched during the Opening Day Ceremony.

### **Financial Report**

For fiscal year 2025

Revenues equal \$270,542.62 and include general fund and non-general fund (no federal grants or bond reimbursements). Expenses equal \$15,273,245.71 which includes general funds and non-general funds (including federal grants). These figures do not include any capital project expenses.

### **Licensure and Accreditation**

While VSDB holds its COGNIA accreditation, VSDB is continuing to move forward to renew its accreditation with the Conference of Educators and Administrators of Schools for the Deaf (CEASD). The accreditation visit is scheduled for Spring 2026.

### **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 when academically appropriate 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 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's student population spans a broad spectrum of abilities. Students enroll at various stages of their life, preschool, elementary, middle, or high school. Some students enter VSDB with strong language, academic foundation, and independent living skills. Others enter needing significant skill development in similar areas. When students do not have a strong foundation in language, this often leads to limited world knowledge, ineffective problem-solving skills, and social and emotional challenges. At whatever stage of life, a student enrolls, VSDB's goal is preparing that student for life after graduation and to achieve the highest level of independence possible.

VSDB recognizes that 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. Most students come to VSDB having experienced isolation, bullying, and an insufficient level of disability services. At home, the majority of parents 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, or how to prepare them for success in the future. 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. Others who are blind, are learning for the first time how to take care of themselves, eat independently using utensils, to tend to daily self-care needs, access technology to engage in learning, and learn the skill of independent travel. 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 possibly for the first time, a plan for their future. Families of graduates leave inspired with greater insight into the needs and potential capabilities 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. Students applying to VSDB must have already been found eligible for Special Education Services through the categories of Deafness, Hearing Impaired, Blindness, Vision Impaired, Deafblind, or MultiDisabled (Deaf or Blind with other disabilities). All students have an Individual Education Program (IEP). An admissions process is established by the VSDB Board of Visitors and includes the completion of an application packet, an admissions interview, and if the Admission Team supports moving forward, the student is offered participation in the VSDB TEMP program. The TEMP program provides a prospective student the opportunity to experience 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.

### **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 two 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 Program (IEP). VSDB works in collaboration with the student's local school system to provide educational services that meet each student's individual needs.

As a state agency, there is never a charge to any family for their child to attend VSDB. All programs, services, room and board, and transportation are provided to students at no cost. When a student enrolls in VSDB, VSDB becomes the school of record, and the student is then served for Special Education services through a VSDB IEP. In addition, the student is counted on the Virginia Department of Education, as a VSDB student on the December 1 count, which provides data for Special Education funding that is provided to the public schools. Once the student enrolls in VSDB, that Special Education funding for that student transfers to VSDB.

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.

### **VSDB Programs and Services**

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, an educational urban farm, 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 have 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.

In support of independent living and safety, the Commonwealth has authorized the planning phase for renovation of Price Hall's Independent Living Apartments and a campus-wide mass communication system. These initiatives will modernize the ILA setting and enhance emergency communications across campus.

VSDB provides all levels of accessible learning both in the academic realm and workforce development realm. VSDB high school students have access to a variety of programs to support their academic and/or workforce goals. These opportunities include but are not limited to higher education experience, community work experiences, and vocational training programs, etc.

### **The Education Program**

The principal oversees daily operations of the school program. All teachers and paraprofessionals must be credentialed in compliance with the Virginia Department of Education to maintain employment at VSDB. In both the Deaf and the Blind Departments, teachers provide instruction that is accessible and tailored to the classroom population and prescriptive to each student's IEP. The majority of classrooms have additional support provided by a Teacher Assistant. In the Blind Department, students experience learning to utilize technology that is specific to the Blind. Those who will benefit from braille, also learn and use braille daily throughout the school day. In the Deaf Department, instruction is provided to students directly from a teacher who utilizes American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate and to support language development. Teachers follow bilingual (American Sign Language/English) research based instructional model to support the development of reading and writing skills. Often, service providers, such as the Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, or School Counselor, will push in to engage students in additional skill building within the classroom or work individually or in small groups with students, depending on their goals in the IEP. For the Blind, Orientation and Mobility Specialists work with students at all levels to increase travel independence. As students gain a higher level of skill, they are challenged to move forward, eventually using the Staunton Community as their living classroom experience.

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 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 or after-hours in the residential halls.

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 a class that is taught in the Deaf Department by a teacher who is deaf, they may join the class with an interpreter. Similarly, should a student in the Deaf Department enjoy music and express an interest in the music class offered in the Blind Department, they may also cross over to participate in that class with an interpreter. Crossover opportunities also extend to the sports programs depending on a student's interest.

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 or semester supervised independent 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 focuses 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. The ILA program is invaluable in guiding transition decisions. During a student's ILA experience, data is collected that identifies areas in need of further skill development. At the conclusion of the ILA period, the student's IEP team meets to review the data to determine areas of strength and to revise the IEP to address areas in need of further skill development. This process updates the student's IEP and increases the effectiveness of the student's Transition Plan.

VSDB provides an array of effective transition services 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, funded by the VSDB Foundation, consists of the VSDB Horticultural Program and the VSDB Educational Urban Farm. It provides fully 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 garden 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 has been a repeated recipient of the USADA grant program. The farm also serves as an on-site work experience placement for those students interested in agriculture and/or horticulture related fields.

During recreational time, students have full access to after school social activities, sports, and clubs. VSDB offers students the opportunity to be part of a team and to participate in a variety of 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, the boys goalball team will travel to Texas for national competition. With the support of the VSDB Foundation, VSDB is one of a few schools for the Blind in the country to have a Blind Soccer Team and is the only school at its level 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.

Thank you for catching that. I'll continue from where the document was cut off ("The Residential Program...") and finish it in full, including your requested addition about the Porch of Incidental Learning and the closing Conclusion.

### **The Residential Program**

At VSDB, learning does not stop at the end of the school day but continues during after school hours in the residential program. 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 operations and transition planning.

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.

The residential program includes a variety of 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 possess 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 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. Staff who are visually impaired or blind themselves provide adult role models who encourage the students to become all that they can be.

A unique feature of the residential program is the Superintendent’s Residence Porch of Incidental Learning. Research shows that 80–90% of learning occurs incidentally—through overhearing conversations or observing visual cues—yet such opportunities are often not accessible to students who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, visually impaired, or deafblind. The Porch is intentionally open to students, giving them space to engage in informal conversations with peers and adults. This setting creates opportunities for incidental learning that supports both academic and residential programs while fostering communication, confidence, and social growth.

### **Conclusion**

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.

The 2025 theme, “Preparing Students for Life: Together We Empower,” echoes this vision and reinforces VSDB’s role in equipping students for success beyond graduation through strong community partnerships and collaboration.