

Testimony: House Education Committee
 Regarding: HB 438 Braille literacy services for blind or visually impaired children
 Steve Gettel, Superintendent
 Monday, February 7, 2005

Data on VI Students served both at MSDB and in the LEAs.

The December, 2004 OPI child count indicates the statewide number of students receiving special education services, with a visual impairment as the primary disability, is 65. The number of students, with deaf-blindness as a primary disability, is 6. These numbers include those students served at MSDB where 10 students have a primary disability of visual impairment and 1 is identified as deaf-blind.

The APH count of students served statewide is 196. The eligibility criteria for this service is somewhat different than that for receiving IDEA services. The number of students identified as using Braille as their primary reading medium is 13 with 3 being served at MSDB. Students using Braille as a secondary medium is 16 with 7 being served at MSDB.

	APH		Child Count		Outreach VI/DB
Primary Out Reach	10	Primary VI LEA	55	Primary and Secondary	154
Primary MSDB	3	Primary VI MSDB	10	Braille Instruction	17
Secondary Outreach	9	Primary DB LEA	6	Pre-Braille Instruction	4
Secondary MSDB	7	Primary DB MSDB	1		
Total	29		71		21

This data indicates a very small population with variances in educational needs.

The MSDB opposes the current bill for two reasons.

1. Impact to school programs from Section 4 – Standards of competency and instruction.

Currently the MSDB has 3 outreach consultants are serving 154 students with VI as a primary or secondary disability. 21 students, including 4 pre-Braille readers, use Braille as a primary mode for accessing the curriculum. Of the total VI case loads, only 2 students are not receiving Braille instruction who MSDB consultants believe should be receiving this instruction.

Under Section (4) of HB 438, 133 students would potentially need consultation from MSDB Outreach Staff for the purposes of assessment, IEP/program planning, documentation of VI students ability to read or write effectively without Braille instruction. The additional workload to accomplish these tasks will be 4 days per student for a total of 532 days (133 x 4). Therefore, to manage this additional workload, the MSDB would have to hire three (3) additional Outreach Consultants (2.31 FTE).

HB 438 does not define the problem and does not take into consideration the numbers of VI students appropriately receiving Braille instruction or identify how many students are not. Statistical information from the Riles study compares performance of legally blind and sighted students. We are trying to discern the needs of legally blind, low vision and deaf-blind or blind – multi-impaired students. We know that we are looking at very small numbers. In talking with the sponsors of the bill, it is clear they have anecdotal information from a very small sample.

Before the MSDB can support this bill we would need to see a clear indication that students are not being served by their districts and/or there is an unmet need for Braille instruction of low vision students, based on a functional need that exists within the Individual Education Plan. Neither opponents nor proponents should be making assumptions about the level of services that are either in place or not in place based on anecdotal information from one or two scenarios from the LEAs.

MSDB Outreach does need more resources to work with students in the classrooms in the LEA. We've had two failed attempts to for requests of additional FTE to meet this need. This issue was broadly addressed by the School Renewal Commission through the recommendation to consider regionalization of some educational services. The MSDB believes the debate over quality education and future discussions on regionalizing special education services for low incidence populations is the appropriate forum for addressing future increases in MSDB outreach services.

2. Impact on available staff from Section 6 – Personnel Training. The requirement for passing an examination based upon the NLS standards is very clear. What is not clear is the intent of the language stating, “or by completing an accredited Braille class or program.” Does the bill intend to require licensure?

Trained and knowledgeable human resources are limited or nonexistent across the state. There are only 3 school districts with trained teachers of the blind on staff. Currently the MSDB can not recruit trained teachers of the Blind, assuming they would be qualified to teach Braille.

Braille instruction is typically provided by paraprofessionals who develop the skills necessary to instruct Braille because the need exists, not as a part of their training as a paraprofessional. The School could not support legislation that would make it even more difficult to provide Braille instruction to students were this resource does not exist.