



MONTANA  
SCHOOL for  
Deaf & Blind  
CHILDREN

*giving kids the building blocks to independence*

SENATE FINANCE AND CLAIMS

COMMIT NO. 25

DATE 3-31-05

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To: Senate Finance and Claims Committee  
From: Steve Gettel, Superintendent  
Re: Testimony on MSDB 07 Biennium Budget  
Date: Thursday, March 31, 2005

### Background of the School

The Montana School for the Deaf and Blind is state supported special purpose school, a part of the Montana public education system, providing a residential and day school for 72 children who are deaf or blind or whose hearing or sight is so defective that they cannot be successfully taught and are unable to receive a sufficient or proper education in their home school districts. MSDB is the only education agency mandated to serve children ages 0 to 21. For these students, centralized educational services at the MSDB in Great Falls are critical to their successful education and transition into postsecondary education or work.

In Montana, the repository of technical expertise in educating the deaf and blind students is the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind with the professional expertise and experience of its 34 licensed professional staff and 23 certified residential staff who are able to meet the unique communication, education and social needs of sensory impaired, preschool, school age, and transition students it serves. There is no other educational program or resource in Montana that has the number of trained and experienced staff as does MSDB. Access to this resource has been and will continue to be vital to the success of most deaf and blind students across Montana.

In accordance with its statutory mandates the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind serves two primary functions. First, by the use of specialized instruction and training, MSDB provides educational services for deaf and blind children that are commensurate with the education provided to non-disabled children in the local school districts. This education enables children being served by MSDB to become independent and self-sustaining citizens.

Second, in compliance with its statutory objects and purposes MSDB serves as a consultative resource for parents of deaf and blind children not yet enrolled in an educational program and for school districts where deaf and blind children are receiving educational services. Upon request MSDB outreach staff provide consultation and technical assistance to the families, teachers and administrators of 18 infants and toddlers, and 283 school age students in 87 school districts and 44 counties across the state.

I would like to call your particular attention to the School's "Program Indicators" for FY 2004. While the number of students served in our on-campus education program remains steady, the School continued to make impressive growth in the numbers of students, parents and professionals served through our summer and professional development programs.

## Central issues of quality programs for sensory impaired children

The critical needs for blind and visually impaired students are Braille, orientation and mobility instruction, and support for transitional programming including independent living and work attainment skills. The IEP related issues include access to the core curriculum through modification of materials, and support services provided by professionals with training specific to the unique needs of blind and visually impaired children. Both deaf and blind children need support for transitional programming including independent living and work attainment skills. Communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing students are the driving force behind the curriculum used at MSDB. The School provides a language enriched program with a staff and peer group who are fluent in sign language. These language role models are critical to the language development of each deaf and hard of hearing child. Across Montana, only 4 school districts employ teachers who have specific training in the area of deaf or blind education and only 1 district has a certified orientation and mobility specialist on its staff. This is, in part, why it is so critical that the programs of MSDB be adequately funded.

Regardless of whether a deaf or blind child is educated at MSDB or in his or her local school district, a system of quality education includes an instructional program provided by a professional trained and experienced to understand and meet the unique educational needs of that sensory impaired child. At MSDB, the ability to meet the needs of the student through the IEP, require that the School have the resources necessary to recruit and retain teachers with specialized training that goes beyond the current accreditation standards. Providing a quality program requires that the School has a budget sufficient to supply the specialized equipment and materials necessary to carry out appropriate instruction techniques within the IEP and unique to the needs of sensory impaired children. With a budget sufficient to recruit for and fill all teacher and specialist positions currently vacant and with an operating budget that allows for the purchase of equipment and materials necessary for those staff to carry out instruction appropriate to the IEP of each student, MSDB can ensure that all students currently enrolled will receive a quality education and can achieve their potential as independent, self-supporting and successful members of communities throughout Montana.

## Budget for FY 2006-2007

Regarding the budget for fiscal years 2006 and 2007, the School is pleased with House action to approve the present law adjustments that were made by the budget office under the Martz administration for extra curricular compensation \$10,930, and for replacement of lease vehicles. Although this adjustment is revenue neutral, it is significant that the school maintains a replacement schedule for vehicles essential to both the campus-based and outreach programs.

The School is particularly pleased with the positive recommendation by the Joint Education Subcommittee and House approval of the new proposals added by Governor Schweitzer's budget office for yearly adjustments to Repair & Maintenance NP 3, \$75,000, Computer Replacement NP 6, \$25,000 and most significantly funding for Teachers and Other Professionals Salaries NP 8 \$150,000. These funds help to address the critical budget issues which stem from the long-term effects of under-funded operating and personal services budgets.

This school year the average disparity in pay between licensed professional staff at MSDB and their peers in the Great Falls Public Schools is \$5,870 with a high of \$11,488 (MA+30/12 yrs) to a low of \$681 (BA/28 yrs). As a result, when the school attempted to recruit a teacher this past

summer, we had only 2 applicants, one of whom was not minimally qualified. When apprised of our entry level salary, the other withdrew her application and took a job in Washington State. Of the 34 licensed/ professional staff at the MSDB, as of June 30, 2004, 35% have 25 or more years of service. Like other public schools, MSDB is facing a recruiting crisis. However, our problem is compounded by the fact that there are no training programs within the Montana higher education system that prepare teachers of the deaf or blind. Our teachers must be recruited from a highly competitive regional pool of candidates. House action to approve the addition of \$150,000 for personal services, as recommended by the Governor, will help to narrow the pay gap for our licensed professional staff.

Even with the additional \$150,000, with the recent 4% raises approved for the 2005 and 2006 school years for teachers in the GFPS, a teacher at MSDB with a BA and 10 years of experience will still earn approximately \$7,800 less in the 2007 school year. A teacher at MSDB with a MA and 20 years experience will earn approximately \$9,000 less.

### Vacancy Savings

Since FY 85, total FTE at the School has been reduced by 4.41. The application of vacancy savings as a budgeting tool has always created a problem for the school. The total current rate of vacancy savings assessed the School is approximately 6% in each year of the biennium (0.06 - \$202,894 FY 04 and 0.59 - \$203,041 FY 05). To meet the budget this fiscal year the School is leaving 3.5 (2.51 FTE) positions vacant in the Education Program and 4 positions vacant in the Residential program (2.88 FTE). As a result, the school has been unable to admit students who would have been in previous years, because of a lack of staff necessary to meet their needs.

The School is most pleased with House approval of a 0% rate of vacancy savings, as recommended by the Joint Education Subcommittee, for the school's two most important programs, Education and Student Services. This action recognizes that in order for the school to provide staff sufficient to meet the education, care and supervision needs of its students, all positions in these 2 programs must be filled and that education options must be available for students who can, and should be appropriately served at MSDB.

### Summary

A quality residential education program must provide safe facilities, appropriate levels of supervision, teachers with the skills necessary to provide appropriate instruction and the equipment and materials needed for that instruction to occur. The Governor and the staff in the budget office, as well as the Joint Education Subcommittee gave serious consideration of the School's needs and recommended adjustments to address critical needs in the budget. I ask for your support for this budget as it was amended by the Joint Education Subcommittee and approved by the House. This action takes important steps toward solving critical funding issues which will help ensure that MSDB can fill all essential staff positions, provide for more equitable salaries making recruitment of qualified professionals possible, provide specialized materials and equipment that meet the unique instructional needs of its students, and provide for much needed repair and maintenance to keep its facilities safe and sound. For MSDB, this is our definition of a "quality" education for Montana's deaf and blind students.

Program Indicators for the 2005 Biennium – Year 1

Indicator	FY 2000	FY 20001	FY 2002	FY 2003	FY 2004	Projected FY 2005
<b>Campus Based Services</b> 20-8-102 MCA, 10.61.102 ARM						
<b>Total Served</b>	316	287	314	439	453	(459)
Education Program - Deaf	55	51	53	48	51	54
Education Program – Blind	30	28	27	25	24	25
Residential Program	40	39	42	40	37	40
Evaluations – Educational	26	22	32	29	23	30
Evaluations – Audiological	165	147	160	297	318	310
<b>Outreach and Itinerant Services</b> 20-8-102 MCA, 10.61.102 ARM						
<b>Total Served</b>	229	246	255	292	301	(303)
Consultation Services - Deaf	52	59	75	89	95	95
Family Advisor Program	13	13	10	15	18	20
Consultation Services - Blind	164	174	170	188	188	188
<b>Summer Programs</b> 20-8-102 MCA, 10.61.103 ARM						
<b>Total Participants</b>	154	139	206	251	287	(315)
Summer Skills Program for Blind	9	6	8	13	8	10
Summer Camp for Deaf/Hearing Impaired	19	26	21	28	26	26
Family Learning Weekend - Blind	0	0	57	85	90	99
Family Learning Weekend – Deaf	126	107	120	125	163	180
<b>Professional Development – Parents, School Districts and Education Associations - (Not including training for MSDB staff)</b> 20-8-102 MCA						
<b>Total Participants</b>	550	441	785	1100	1377	(1710)
Number of Training Sessions	20	13	43	54	90	95
<b>Total Population Served</b>	1249	1113	1560	2082	2418	(2787)
<b>Percent Change Over Previous Year</b>	+ 87%	- 11%	+40%	+33%	+14%	(+13%)