

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Background

The Washington School for the Deaf (WSD) in Vancouver has provided residential, educational, and support services to deaf and hard of hearing children since 1886. In the past five years, a number of issues have contributed to increased attention to WSD by state policymakers: declining enrollment, a major capital facilities plan, expansion of services, and concerns about student safety. These issues form the context for current legislative interest in exploring the role WSD plays in providing education and services for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington State.

The 2001 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to “examine various educational delivery models for providing services and education for students through the Washington state school for the deaf.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the Legislature assigned the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to “conduct a capacity planning study of the capital facilities of the state school for the deaf.”<sup>2</sup> Both studies are required to be completed by September 30, 2002.

## Overview: Education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

The following issues influence how education is provided for deaf and hard of hearing students:

- Even small hearing losses can affect children’s social development and acquisition of language skills (including vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension). Children with greater degrees of hearing loss can experience significant delays in language skills and the ability to communicate. Early acquisition of language is a strong predictor of later success in communication, literacy (the ability to read and write), and academics.
- Debate continues over whether oral or signed communication is most beneficial for deaf children. Signed communication occurs through American Sign Language (ASL), Signed English, or a hybrid called Pidgin Signed English (PSE). Parental preference creates demands for different modes of communication to be used in educational programs.
- Federal law requires students with disabilities to receive an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Some believe that a mainstream educational setting for deaf students does not always represent the least restrictive learning environment.

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<sup>1</sup> ESSB 6153, Section 608, Chapter 7, Laws of 2001, Second Special Session.

<sup>2</sup> ESSB 6153, Section 103(2), Chapter 7, Laws of 2001, Second Special Session.

- Technological advances, such as computers and cochlear implants, also affect education. If cochlear implants are successful, children can become functionally hard of hearing rather than deaf, necessitating a different mode of communication and services.
- Some deaf individuals identify themselves as members of a Deaf community, with a unique Deaf culture based on shared language (ASL), customs, and history. Residential schools for the deaf have played an important role in Deaf culture.
- The majority (46) of states have a state school for the deaf. Two of these states offer only a day school; the remainder have at least one residential state school. Two states have closed their residential schools in the last five years due to declining enrollment. Several states have created regional programs, providing direct instruction and/or outreach services for deaf and hard of hearing students in public schools.

### **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in Washington State**

- As of December 2001, 494 deaf and 1,029 hard of hearing students aged 3 to 21 attended public schools or WSD and received special education. Deaf students represent one out of every 2,045 Washington students, and hard of hearing students, one out of every 980. This does not include students with multiple disabilities, those with hearing losses but not in special education, or those attending private school.
- More than 90 percent of deaf and hard of hearing students attend public schools rather than WSD (compared with 67 percent 30 years ago). Because hearing loss is a low-incidence condition, more than 40 percent of school districts enroll no deaf or hard of hearing students, and another 46 percent report fewer than ten students.
- Enrollment at WSD has declined by 45 percent in the last 20 years to 113 students at the beginning of the 2001–02 school year. WSD students tend to be deaf (89 percent) rather than hard of hearing (11 percent). High school-aged students are more likely to attend WSD than younger students. Students tend to live either in the Vancouver area (42 percent) or in school districts serving fewer than ten deaf or hard of hearing students (41 percent). Two-thirds of WSD students live on-campus in the residential program during the week.
- WSD does not appear more likely than public schools to enroll students with multiple disabilities: 15 percent of WSD students have disabilities in addition to hearing loss compared with 44 percent reported by a sample of surveyed districts. However, it is difficult to accurately assess disabilities among deaf students.
- According to educators interviewed by the Institute, the primary reason students attend WSD is for social development, which includes the opportunity to communicate directly with teachers, staff, and other students using sign language.

## Current Models of Education and Service Delivery

### Description

There are five current models of education and service delivery for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington:

- A) WSD offers a **statewide residential program** for students aged 3 to 21 in Vancouver.
- B) Eight **multi-district programs** are intended to draw students from surrounding areas in order to offer specialized services.
- C) **Single district programs** are offered primarily for students living in the district. Nineteen districts have hired a specially trained teacher of the deaf. In two (soon to be three) Educational Service District (ESD) cooperatives, districts share an itinerant teacher. Other districts provide services through their special education program or send students to another district.
- D) Three **private school programs** focus on a particular mode of communication.
- E) **Outreach services** intended to supplement students' education are provided by a number of different entities, including WSD. Outreach includes early intervention, interpreter and teacher training, student assessment, and special learning opportunities.

### Comparisons

The Institute compared the learning environments, effectiveness, and operating costs of the current education and service delivery models.

- **Learning Environment.** WSD offers a different learning environment than public school programs. All students receive direct instruction from a teacher of the deaf in classrooms with other deaf students. WSD also provides an ASL-intensive communication environment. Most deaf students in public schools spend at least part of the day in mainstream classrooms with hearing students, and modes of communication are more varied. Parental choice has a significant influence on a deaf student's mode of communication and the instructional setting believed to be most appropriate and least restrictive.

WSD and a few public school programs have a critical mass of students and specialized staff with expertise in deaf education. However, the presence of specialized staff in public school programs is dependent on the size and type of program, and programs report difficulty in maintaining a critical mass of students. Because the high school enrolls fewer than 75 students, WSD has a more limited choice of elective courses than large public high schools.

- **Effectiveness.** The research literature provides no definitive evidence that a particular instructional setting or mode of communication is more academically beneficial or effective for deaf students. On average, deaf and hard of hearing students have lower

academic achievement than hearing students. This is largely due to delays in acquiring language, which affects literacy. Challenges of communication can affect deaf students' social development and participation in school, and this is often why students and parents choose schools for the deaf. Graduation rates for high school seniors at WSD and Washington public schools are similar, but information on post-high school transitions for deaf students is limited.

For outreach services to be more effective, WSD could work more closely with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), public schools, ESDs, and other service providers to develop a comprehensive plan for coordinated delivery of outreach.

- **Operating Costs.** WSD is a state agency and is funded differently than public schools. WSD receives a biennial appropriation that does not fluctuate with the number of enrolled students. As a result, when enrollment declines, the per-student cost of services increases. For 2001–02, the per-student cost at WSD is \$32,600 for a day student and \$72,300 for a residential student (including the cost of day attendance). This is higher than the average cost of service in public schools.

The average cost of providing services for deaf students in public schools can be \$21,000 to \$23,800, but costs vary widely according to student needs. Public schools received an average of \$8,320 from state and federal funds for each special education student in 2000–2001. State funding to public schools is based on an average cost of service for all special education students; districts that can demonstrate a need for additional funds can apply for relief through the Special Education Safety Net.

## **Alternative Models of Education and Service Delivery**

- The Institute examined four alternative models (a total of seven options) for WSD to provide education and services for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington. WSD could continue to offer a comprehensive program (birth through high school, day and residential) or focus its mission and service delivery on a particular student population.
- Each alternative presents educational and fiscal trade-offs for parents, students, educators, and policymakers:
  - 1) Under Model 1 (Comprehensive Program or Current), WSD could continue to provide a unique educational option for students of all ages. Because there is little reason to expect dramatic future increases in enrollment, the costs of this service are not expected to decline. The 2001–02 budget for WSD is \$7.6 million for 113 students.
  - 2) At current enrollment levels, Model 2 (Focus on Day Students) would serve 27 elementary students but only 13 high school students. Model 2 is, in effect, an “elementary-only” model, which runs counter to enrollment trends. WSD could potentially operate satellite day programs, but there are few locations in the state where a critical mass of deaf students live who are not already served by either

WSD or a multi-district public school program. Model 2 could cost \$4 million in state and federal dollars (including payments to school districts for students returning to public schools). A satellite program could cost \$0.5 to \$0.8 million for 25 students, depending on how instruction is provided.

- 3) Model 3 (Focus on Secondary Students) follows current enrollment trends in targeting on-campus academic and residential programs to older students. However, parents who wanted WSD's educational setting for their young children for linguistic or cultural reasons would have to move to Vancouver or not have this option within Washington. If elementary students attended as day-only, Model 3 could cost \$6.5 million. If only secondary students were served on-campus, costs could be \$6 million.
  - 4) Model 4 (Focus on Outreach) could be pursued in combination with other models. WSD, OSPI, public schools, and others could create a comprehensive plan to provide outreach services to maximize effectiveness and efficiency across multiple providers, and/or expand outreach services for students who would not attend WSD under one of the other alternative models. Additional work would be needed to prioritize and calculate the costs of expanded outreach.
- Most alternatives could cost the state less than the current model because the per-student state allocations to public schools are considerably less than to WSD. However, the per-student costs at WSD would increase because enrollments under each alternative are reduced, and there are fixed costs associated with the Vancouver campus. The full educational and fiscal impacts of shifting students to public schools are not known.
  - The Institute does not make a recommendation of one model over another because neither the research literature nor information collected for this report provide a single solution for providing education and services for deaf and hard of hearing students that is without drawbacks or limitations.