

FINAL REPORT OF RANDOM MONITORING OF
EXCEPTIONAL STUDENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN

The Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind

MAY 6 - 10, 2002



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
BUREAU OF INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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June 17, 2003

Mr. Elmer Dillingham, Jr., President
Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind
207 San Marco Avenue
St. Augustine, Florida 32084-2799

Dear President Dillingham:

We are pleased to provide you with the Final Report of Random Monitoring of Exceptional Student Education Programs at the School for the Deaf and the Blind. The report from our visit on May 6-10, 2002, includes the system improvement plan proposed by your staff.

An update of outcomes achieved and/or a summary of related activities, as identified in your district's system improvement plan, must be submitted by June 30 and December 30 of each school year for the next two years, unless otherwise noted on the improvement plan.

If my staff can be of any assistance as you continue to implement the system improvement plan, please contact Eileen L. Amy, ESE Program Administration and Quality Assurance Administrator. Mrs. Amy may be reached at 850/245-0476, or via electronic mail at Eileen.Amy@fldoe.org.

Thank you for your continuing commitment to improve services for exceptional education students in the School for the Deaf and the Blind.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shan Goff".

Shan Goff, Chief
Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services

Enclosure

cc: Edgar Turner, Board of Trustees Chairman
Members of the Board of Trustees
Tracy Upchurch, Legal Counsel
School Principals
Margaret McClure, FSDB Senior Administrator
Jim Warford, Chancellor

SHAN GOFF
Chief
Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services

The Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind Final Report
Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Monitoring Process	3
Introduction.....	3
Monitoring Activities.....	3
Monitoring Report	3
Commendations	4
Concerns	5
Report of Findings	6
Assessment.....	6
Curriculum and Instruction.....	6
Discipline	6
Extended School Year.....	6
Forms Review	7
Parent Participation.....	8
Record Reviews	8
Staff Development	9
Project Monitoring.....	9
System Improvement Plan	10
Appendix A: Parent Survey Results	13
Appendix B: Teacher Focus Groups.....	17
Appendix C: Student Focus Groups	20

Florida School for the Deaf and Blind
Random Monitoring Visit
May 6-10, 2002

Executive Summary

During the week of May 6-10, 2002, the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, conducted an on-site review of the exceptional student education programs at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind (the School). The purpose of these monitoring visits was to ensure compliance with federal and state laws, rules, and regulations regarding exceptional student education programs, as well as to assess the implementation of procedures related to the requirements. In addition, the monitoring process is intended to assist in the development of improvement plans related to compliance and implementation of exceptional student education programs designed to promote student educational outcomes.

Summaries of Findings

Assessment

There were multiple opportunities for the students to engage in Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) practice activities, and there was a good understanding among the teachers in regard to alternate assessment. Some teachers expressed concern that taking the FCAT was very difficult for their students.

Curriculum and Instruction

There was good individualized instruction observed in some classrooms. Special-needs students had opportunities for on-the-job training activities both on and off the campus. The technology in the computer class was up-to-date. The students preparing for college had high-level academics courses available to them, which were provided either at the School, or at a St. Johns district high school.

Discipline

While the implementation of the school-wide discipline/behavior plan appeared to be effective, the written procedures for discipline will need to be revised.

Extended School Year (ESY)

While there were no findings in this area, there is a concern because the staff at the School do make recommendations on IEPs regarding summer school for the students. The teachers, through the teacher interviews, appear confused about the difference between summer school and ESY. Therefore, it is not always clear whether the IEP recommendation for a summer program for a student is a determination that the student requires ESY services, or whether the recommendation is that the student may benefit from a summer program.

Forms Reviews

A review of the forms used by the School found that some of the forms were out of compliance and will need to be revised.

Parent Participation

The communication established between the School and the parents appeared to be excellent, with good parent attendance at meetings and individual education plan (IEP) reviews.

Records Reviews

A review of the individual educational plans (IEPs) indicated that there were no instances of noncompliance that will result in an adjustment in federal funding.

Staff Development

The staff reported that training options were available and that the teachers felt well supported.

Project Monitoring

There were no findings related to projects funded under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Commendations

During the monitoring process, some exemplary practices were evident. Communication between parents and school staff was excellent. Responses to surveys indicated the parents are highly satisfied with the school. Staff development and training is very available and the teachers feel well supported. Students have opportunities for college preparatory courses through an arrangement with the local school district. There is a good variety of technology available to students and staff.

Concerns

There were some concerns expressed that may be significant to the quality of programming at the School. Teachers expressed concern regarding the lack of adequate and up-to-date textbooks, particularly the ones available in Braille. Performance of the students on the FCAT is seen as problematic. For students who are deaf, the teachers felt that problems in language and life experiences are of most concern, while students who have vision problems struggle with the math portions of the test. Although not part of the monitoring process, dormitory life was an area of concern expressed by both teachers and students in the focus groups.

System Improvement Plan

In response to these findings, the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind is required to develop a system improvement plan for submission to the Bureau. This plan must include activities and strategies intended to address specific findings, as well as measurable indicators of change. The format for the system improvement plan, including a listing of the critical issues identified by the Bureau as most significantly in need of improvement, is provided at the end of this report.

Monitoring Process

Introduction

The Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services, in carrying out its roles of leadership, resource allocation, technical assistance, monitoring, and evaluation is required to: examine and evaluate procedures, records, and programs of exceptional student education programs; provide information and assistance to school districts; and, otherwise assist school districts in operating effectively and efficiently (Section 229.565, Florida Statutes). In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Department is responsible for ensuring that the requirements of IDEA are carried out, and that each educational program for children with disabilities administered in the state, meets the educational requirements of the state (Section 300.600(a)(1) and (2) of Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations).

The monitoring system established to oversee exceptional student education (ESE) programs reflects the Department's commitment to provide assistance and service to school districts. The system is designed to emphasize improved outcomes and educational benefits for students while continuing to conduct those activities necessary to ensure compliance with applicable federal and state laws, rules, and regulations. The system provides consistency with other state efforts, including the State Improvement Plan required by the IDEA.

Monitoring Activities

The monitoring activities were conducted by personnel from the Florida Department of Education. Staff members reviewed student records and examined forms and policies and procedures documents. DOE staff also conducted interviews with school staff and teachers, and examined fiscal project documentation.

Monitoring Report

This is the preliminary report presented to the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind following monitoring activities. School program staff had the opportunity to review the preliminary report and provide additional information, identify inaccuracies, or clarify discrepancies.

The report addresses findings found at the School level as well as within each department. For clarity, findings are grouped according to areas addressed in the interview questions, which provided the framework for the monitoring activities.

- Assessment
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Diploma Options
- Discipline
- Extended School Year
- Forms Review

- Parent Participation
- Records Review
- Staff Development

The format for the system improvement plan is included at the end of the report.

Commendations

During the monitoring process, some exemplary practices were evident.

- Observations revealed some good individualized instruction, especially in the department for students who are blind.
- Diploma options were clear and a lot of information was provided to parents.
- The two new positions in the department for students who are blind enhanced services provided to students. These were the on-the-job training positions which increased community access, and high level literacy activities which included instruction in grade 3 Braille and other specialized skills that would help students with college preparation.
- High School students who needed highly advanced college preparatory courses attend classes at the local high school through an arrangement between the School and the local school district.
- Many teachers and staff e-mailed parents to foster ongoing communication. Some teachers and staff involved parents in meetings by phone.
- Staff development and training options appeared very available and teachers were enthusiastic and felt well supported.
- Special needs students were in on-the-job training placements four days per week.
- There was very high parent participation at IEP meetings.
- The availability of the parent resource staff was very positive.
- There was a good variety of up-to-date technologies in the computer class observed.
- The school-wide discipline/behavior plan was very organized and appeared to be effective.
- There were multiple activities available to students for FCAT preparation.
- The weekly interdisciplinary team meetings appeared to be effective in planning and in resolving problems.
- Interviews showed a clear understanding of alternate assessments and their use.

- The School's focus on literacy and intensive reading and math instruction was evident through interviews and classroom observations.
- Parent survey results indicated very high satisfaction with the School and its programs. Respondents indicated very high satisfaction with their children's education and with other services and opportunities at the School.

Concerns

There were some areas of concern that, while not actual findings, were significant to the quality of programming.

- The IEPs of several students had identical goals. Also, for some students, there was no change in the goal from one year to the next.
- Some IEPs included signatures without indication of the role of the person who signed.
- In some classes visited, teachers were not using a variety of instructional techniques, and not all students were observed as being engaged and involved in learning.
- Based on the teachers' focus group, the most pressing concern teachers expressed with regard to the general curriculum was what they perceived as the lack of adequate Braille textbooks. They indicated that state adopted textbooks were regularly out of date by the time they were printed in Braille. Teachers also felt that students entered the school with lower than expected academic achievement levels, due, perhaps, to untimely diagnosis of the students' disabilities.
- Teachers felt that both hearing impaired and vision impaired students were at a disadvantage when taking the FCAT. Language and life experiences were seen as the main problem for hearing impaired students while math portions of the test were seen as the biggest problem for vision impaired students.
- Teachers felt they were teaching to the test rather than teaching content. Student focus group participants' concerns were very similar to those expressed by teachers.
- Teachers and students who participated in the focus groups felt that the weakest area of programming at the school was dormitory life.

Report of Findings

Program Monitoring

Assessment

No findings were identified in this area.

Curriculum and Instruction

No findings were identified in this area.

Discipline

In conjunction with the 2002 random monitoring visit, Bureau staff reviewed the School's discipline policy outlined in the Parent/Student/Staff Handbook, 2001-2002 edition. The policy lacks the following required components:

- Procedures for Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) according to Section 300.523 of Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations (Title 34), for students who are suspended for a total of 10 cumulative days.
- Procedures for conducting a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and Behavioral Improvement Plan (BIP) for students suspended for a total of 10 cumulative days.

The following are revisions to the existing text that are required for compliance:

- Section IV, Gun Free School Act of 1994, Parts B and E. The handbook must be revised to indicate that the consideration of the student's expulsion is made at a manifestation determination meeting by an IEP team in accordance with the procedures established in the Manifestation Determination Review, rather than at an eligibility staffing as is currently stated.
- Section IV, Gun Free School Act of 1994, Part D 2. This section must be revised to reference IDEA requirements rather than Honig v D.
- Section IV, Gun Free School Act of 1994, Section D. 2. This section must be revised to include the reference to the appropriate Florida Statutes.
- Section XII, Code of Student Conduct. This section must be revised to include language from S 228.041(25), F.S., which addresses homework assignments.
- Section XV, Disciplinary Procedures and Disposition. This section must be revised to include information regarding the right of the parent/guardian to a hearing.
- Section XVI, Discipline Procedures. This section must be revised to include procedures for out-of-school suspensions on the basis of felony charges on and/or off school property.

The School may wish to contact the Bureau of Equity, Safety, and School Support for assistance.

Extended School Year

Interviews indicated that, at the teacher level, there was not a consistent understanding of how extended school year (ESY) services differed from summer school.

Forms Review

The Staffing Intake Form and the Staffing Committee Process Documentation for Additional Disabilities Form lacked an indication that documentation of the determination of eligibility is provided to the parent. There is no reference on the Intake Staffing Form that a copy of the form is provided to the parents.

The Consent for Formal Individual Evaluation form included all required components. However, it is recommended that the form be revised to include space to describe evaluations, tests records, or reports in addition to the preprinted statement stating, “all records and reports available to the School.”

The Consent for Placement form and Consent for Temporary Assignment form lack the following required components:

- a statement that the parents of a child with a disability have protections under the procedural safeguards of the IDEA
- sources for a parent to contact to obtain assistance in understanding the provisions of the IDEA

The Notice of IEP Conference forms lack the following components required for compliance:

- the various versions used by the different departments within the School
- a place to indicate if one of the purposes of the meeting is to consider reevaluation needs of the student
- a statement that procedural safeguards are provided with the notification of an IEP meeting
- an appropriate notice of the IEP meeting. (The form letter to parents to confirm an appointment for an enrollment evaluation may not be used as a notice of IEP meeting as it does not include required components.)

The IEP form lacked the following components required for compliance:

- there is no space to indicate the duration, frequency, and location for accommodations.
- the section of the IEP that explains the extent of participation with nondisabled peers has an inaccurate statement regarding need to complete a certain section only for students who are removed 50% of the day from nondisabled peers
- the front page of a version of the IEP states that the form is used for students through age 13. This version of the form does not include a section that addresses the course of study statement. If the student turns 14 during the duration of the IEP, the IEP would lack the required course of study statement. Federal regulations require that this be addressed beginning at age 14. It is recommended that the heading of the form be changed to indicate that it is used for students under age 14
- when the IEP review form is used to document reevaluation, it does not adequately describe the information reviewed by the team as a part of the reevaluation process.

The forms used for parental notice of an IEP meeting are not uniform across the Departments and not all forms contain all the required components. Some examples include: School staff who plan to attend the meeting were not identified; and, procedural safeguards were not referenced as an attachment. In some cases, there are different forms that are sent for the

same meeting, leading to confusion as to the nature of the meeting as well as identification of meeting participants.

The School does not have specific forms to document notice of dismissal, notice of ineligibility, notice of change of placement, or consent for reevaluation. These forms, with all required components, must be developed by the School.

Parent Participation

No findings were identified in this area. (See also Form reviews.)

Record Reviews

In reviewing the individual student records, the following items of noncompliance appeared to be systemic in nature:

- A number of IEPs reviewed included annual goals that are not measurable. (Note that when the majority of the goals on a given IEP are not measurable, the School must reconvene an IEP meeting.)
- The sections of the IEP that addresses support for school personnel and the special education services do not consistently reflect appropriate information. For example, services that are supplementary aids, such as large print books, are often listed as a special education service. Also, what is considered the special education service for the student was often not described. It is recommended that the School consider listing for special education services such information as: “specialized instruction in unique skills [Braille, abacus, etc.], or “specialized instruction in how to access technology.”
- The assistive technology section of the IEP is not consistently completed correctly. For example, assistive technology is checked on the front page of the IEP, but is not addressed in the supplementary aids and services section.
- The present level of educational performance statements in some IEPs lack sufficient information, particularly the statement regarding the effects of the student’s disability. There appears to be some lack of understanding about the “based on” portion of the present level section, and what kind of information should be recorded there.
- When a range of time is used for the amount of special education services, there is no documentation of the individual student’s need for using a range of time.
- There is not consistent documentation that FCAT scores were considered in the development of the IEP.
- Most IEPs of students who are not participating in the statewide assessment lack the alternate assessment(s) used, and reasons why the student is excluded from standardized testing.

Other record reviews included:

- One IEP had the term “TBA” as the initiation and frequency. There were also some inaccurate descriptions for frequency of services, such as “as needed,” and “ongoing.”
- In some IEPs reviewed, the benchmarks simply restated the annual goal.
- In some IEPs reviewed, the description of the location of services was inadequately listed as “FSDB.”
- In some IEPs reviewed, it was indicated that progress reports would be provided “as needed.”

- For one IEP reviewed, the section indicating consideration of behavioral factors was checked on the front page of the IEP; however, behavior issues were not addressed in the body of the IEP, such as through goals or accommodations.
- For one student, evaluations were administered that were not indicated on the consent for evaluation/reevaluation form.
- The intake/staffing form was not routinely given to parents
- Some notice forms and consent forms had sections left blank.
- It was also reported that, for students known to be in the custody of the Department of Children and Families, there were no clear procedures being followed in relation to surrogate parents.

Staff Development

No findings were identified in this area.

Project Monitoring

There were no findings related to projects funded under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Florida School for the Deaf and Blind System Improvement Plan

This section includes the issues identified by the Bureau as most significantly in need of improvement. The School is required to provide system improvement strategies to address identified findings, which may include an explanation of specific activities the district has committed to implementing, or it may consist of a broader statement describing planned strategies. For each issue, the plan also must define the measurable evidence of whether or not the desired outcome has been achieved. Target dates that extend for more than one year should include benchmarks in order to track interim progress.

Category	Findings	System Improvement Strategy	Evidence of Change (including target date)
Discipline	The School discipline policy does not include the required components for compliance.	Revise Parent/Student/Staff Handbook	Revision will be completed by August 2003 and a copy of the revised Handbook will be sent to DOE.
Extended School Year	The School staff was not clear on the differences between summer school and the requirements for ESY.	Provided training to all instructional staff using DOE handouts to include: Technical Assistance paper (dated January 2002) and ESY Services for Students with Disabilities Guide.	All staff were trained during February 2003, at Departmental Meetings. 100% of the staff assessed passed an ESY written test that was given after the training.
Form Review	The following forms will need revision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing Intake Form • Staffing Committee Process Determination • Consent for Formal Individual Evaluation • Consent for Placement • Consent for Temporary Assignment • Notice of IEP Conference Individual Educational Plan 	Revised Forms	Revision of forms was completed in February 2003. Revised forms were sent to DOE on February 13, 2003.

Category	Findings	System Improvement Strategy	Evidence of Change (including target date)
Record Reviews	<p>The following areas of noncompliance were found during the record reviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of measurable annual goals • Areas that address support for school personnel and special education are not consistently completed appropriately • The assistive technology section was not consistently completed appropriately. • The present level of performance lacked sufficient information. • No documentation was provided to support the need for using a range of time. • There was not consistent documentation that FCAT scores were considered in the development of the IEP. • For students who were not participating in the state and district-wide assessments, there was not documentation that an alternate assessment was used, nor the reasons why the students were excluded from standardized assessment. 	<p>Provide training to all instructional and Related Services staff involved in writing IEPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 5, 2002: Half day IEP inservice presented by Hope Nieman to instructional and Related Services staff. • August 16, 2002: Half day inservice on IEPs and related legal issues presented by Julie Weatherly to administrators and Related Services providers. • October 18, 2002: Inservice on writing measurable annual goals presented by Debbie Schuler to Mental Health Department. 	<p>An assessment, consisting of random reviews of IEPs, completed after the training and using the new forms approved by DOE, will be done by the Administration by June 2003. An 85% compliance rate is expected.</p> <p>By January of 2004, a 95% compliance rate is expected.</p>

Category	Findings	System Improvement Strategy	Evidence of Change (including target date)
Surrogate Parents	There were no clear procedures being followed regarding surrogate parents for students known to be in the custody of the Department of Children and Families.	Issue will be re-visited and reviewed to determine applicability to FSDB.	Completed procedures will be submitted to DOE in June of 2003.

Appendix A- Parent Survey Results

FLORIDA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND
Monitoring Results
Parent Survey

Responding to the need to increase the involvement of parents and families of students with disabilities in evaluating the educational services provided to their children, the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Instructional Support and Community Services contracted with the University of Miami to develop and administer a parent survey in conjunction with the Bureau's monitoring activities. In 1999, the parent survey was administered in 12 districts; in 2000, it was administered in 15 districts and two special schools; and, in 2001 it was administered in four districts.

In conjunction with the 2002 monitoring activities for the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind, the parent survey was sent to the parents of the 742 students with disabilities for whom complete addresses were provided by the district. A total of 195 parents (PK, n=7; K-5, n=54; 6-8, n=46; 9-12, n=88) representing 26% of the sample returned the survey. Forty-one surveys were returned representing 6% of the sample.

Parents responded "yes" or "no" to each survey item, indicating that they either agreed or disagreed with the statement. The response for each item was calculated as the percentage of respondents who agreed with the item.

	% Yes
• Overall, I am satisfied with the exceptional education services my child receives	90
• Overall, I am satisfied with my child's academic progress	80
• Overall, I am satisfied with the amount of time my child spends with regular education students	63
• Overall, I am satisfied with the effect of exceptional student education on my child's self-esteem	87
• Overall, I am satisfied with the level of knowledge and experience of school personnel	92
• Overall, I am satisfied with the way I am treated by school Personnel	92
• Overall, I am satisfied with the way special education teachers and regular teachers work together.	82
• Overall, I am satisfied with how quickly services are implemented following an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) decision	85
• My child is usually happy at school	92
• My child spends most of the school day involved in productive activities	89
• My child has friends at school	95

	% Yes
• My child is learning skills that will be useful later on in life	92
• My child is aiming for a standard diploma	76
• At my child's IEP meetings we have talked about ways that my child could spend time with students in regular education	49
• At my child's IEP meetings we have talked about whether my child needed services beyond the regular school year	61
• At my child's IEP meetings we have talked about which diploma my child may receive	74
• At my child's IEP meetings we have talked about the requirement for different diplomas	73
• At my child's IEP meetings we have talked about whether my child would take the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test)	84
• At my child's IEP meetings we have talked about whether my child should get accommodations (special testing conditions, for example, extra time)	75
• My child's teachers set appropriate goals for my child	93
• My child's teachers expect my child to succeed	93
• My child's teachers give homework that meets my child's needs	85
• My child's teachers call me or send me notes about my child	87
• My child's teachers are available to speak with me.	93
• My child's teachers give students with disabilities extra time or different assignments, if needed	85
• My child's school wants to hear my ideas	87
• My child's school encourages me to participate in my child's education	93
• My child's school informs me about all of the services available to my child	81
• My child's school addresses my child's individual needs	88
• My child's school makes sure I understand my child's IEP	95
• My child's school explains what I can do if I want to make changes to my child's IEP	87
• My child's school sends me information written in a way I understand	96
• My child's school sends me information about activities and workshops for parents	93
• My child's school encourages acceptance of students with disabilities	97
• My child's school involves students with disabilities in clubs, sports, or other activities	92
• My child's school provides students with disabilities updated books and materials	88

	School % Yes
• My child's school offers a variety of vocational courses, such as computers and business technology	83
• My child's school provides information to students about education and jobs after high school	84
• My child's school does all it can to keep students from dropping out of school	91
• My child's school offers students with disabilities the classes they need to graduate with a standard diploma	87
• I have attended one or more meetings about my child during this school year	84
• I participate in school activities with my child	60
• I am a member of the PTA/PTO	17
• I belong to an organization for parents of students with disabilities	25
• I have	
• comfortable talking about my child with school staff	97
• I attend School Advisory Committee meetings concerning school improvement	19

Appendix B- Teacher Focus Groups

FLORIDA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND
Monitoring Results
Teacher Focus Group Report

Eighteen staff from the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind attended the focus group interview including: 11 teachers from the school for students who are deaf; six teachers from the school for students who are blind; and one member of staff from the learning opportunity center.

Assessment

Several teachers felt that students with hearing and visual impairments were at a disadvantage compared to regular students when taking the FCAT. Hearing impaired students, for example, were not viewed as having been exposed to the same vocabulary development experiences as regular students. “Our kids don’t get certain experiences. We can’t provide the thousands/millions of experiences that kids get in the home.” Teachers believed the real life reading selections used in the FCAT, in particular those containing humor, could not be fully appreciated by hearing impaired students because many of them had not been privy to these experiences. As a result, teachers felt they had to teach to the test to bring students up to the required level of knowledge. Moreover, teaching to the FCAT meant lower performing students often missed out on learning important life skills. “A lot of the times kids, even if they have had a fraction of the experience of what is happening, they don’t have the written vocabulary to answer that question. If you can’t explain to them what is happening then they don’t have a chance.”

Aspects of the FCAT were also viewed as being problematic for visually impaired students. Mathematical graphs, in particular, were seen as cause for concern: “... to rotate a triangle 180 degrees. That is almost impossible for a blind student taking the FCAT. Presenting a graph to a blind child is totally useless.” Another teacher maintained that the graphics on the FCAT are not crisp, they are hard to read, and that teachers are not allowed to explain the question, they can only read it aloud.

Teacher cited the following FCAT preparation programs: intensive remediation classes for students who needed to retake; lunchtime FCAT review sessions; and a summer camp. However, participants felt that adequate textbooks were not available to provide concentrated FCAT remediation. Teachers also recommended that hearing impaired students have the opportunity of selecting their sign format as those with weaker vocabularies might benefit from a full sign test.

Curriculum

The most pressing concern teachers had with regard to the general curriculum was the lack of adequate textbooks. State adopted textbooks were regularly out of date by the time they were printed in Braille. Furthermore, the material covered in the books was set according to Sunshine State Standards, however, the academic achievement levels of students often did not meet these standards; therefore adaptation and supplements were necessary requiring intensive input from teachers. Moreover, teachers reported that when teachers use elementary school books to teach

lower level reading material, students often get offended because the books are not age appropriate. “With special diploma kids in high school I often use elementary school textbooks because there is not a set book for any of those kids. We address them when they get here. There will never be one book that will meet all the kid’s needs. There is not much variety ... high interest, low level, age appropriate reading material is required.”

Teachers were also concerned about the high proportion of students who were joining the school with lower than expected academic achievement levels. Teachers hypothesized that delays amongst hearing impaired students were a result of untimely diagnosis of their disability. “The basis of all of this is language level. When many kids start school, they are 4 years behind on language level. So starting at kindergarten we are catching up ... this is starting at home because they are deaf. It is not a home matter; it is an early diagnosis problem. With early diagnosis students would be much better off.” Visually impaired students on the other hand were considered to be delayed as a result of inadequate service provision prior to attending the school. “Kids that come into school blind are not receiving the services they require. Thus they are so far behind when they arrive. They are delayed in every area, even in body language. We are playing a couple of years catch up.”

Parent Participation

Teachers cited the following forms of communication with parents: telephone calls; email; homework planners; weekly progress reports; weekend folders; parent involvement groups; web site; and newsletters. To accommodate parents, who lived outside of the local area, IEP conference calls were offered.

Staff Training and Knowledge

Teachers agreed that the school provided ample professional development opportunities. In fact one teacher went as far as to say: “We wish they would not provide so many!” The school was viewed as being “open and supportive” not only in providing in-house services, but also keeping staff abreast of what was going on within the State in terms of training, workshops, seminars, and conferences. “The school really bends over backwards to help you improve your skills.” Specific examples cited by teachers of how the school has supported them include: assistance with developing grants; specific disability training; technology workshops; excellent interpreting services; membership in business organizations; and the provision of specialists. Teachers realized that they were very lucky with regard to the resources that were available to them, and that the type of support they receive would not typically be available to teachers elsewhere.

Other

Teachers noted that one of the advantages of working at the school was the ease with which field trips could be organized. Because buses and adequate funding are readily available, students do not have to pay for transportation or food.

Appendix C- Student Focus Groups

FLORIDA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND

Monitoring Results Student Focus Group Report

Two focus group interviews were held with students at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. The first group involved five visually impaired students (two in the 11th grade and three in the 12th grade) all of whom were working toward a standard diploma¹. The second group involved eight high school seniors who were hearing impaired. All students in this group were also hoping to graduate with a standard diploma.

Assessments

Participants in the visually impaired group had all taken the FCAT. Most felt that the math section of the test was more difficult than the reading portion. Students reported getting accommodations on the test including: extended time, Braille print, read aloud questions, and use of V-tech machines (magnifies size of text). In particular, students were happy that questions were read aloud as it enabled them to work faster than would otherwise have been possible.

The math section of the Braille FCAT was viewed as having failings. Students maintained that graphs for corresponding math problems were often situated on other pages, thus making it difficult to relate to the question.

Most students in the hearing impaired group had taken either the FCAT or the HSCT (High School Competency Test). One participant said about the FCAT, "It's good, but most of the students here are not challenged enough and the FCAT will probably be very tough for them." Another concurred that many students had not been challenged enough when they were growing up, and that this had contributed to students being ill-equipped to take the FCAT once they reached the 10th grade.

In general, the math portion of the FCAT was viewed as being particularly difficult, in part because the material covered in classes was not seen as adequate preparation for the test. "Classes helped prepare students for the reading part, but not for the math part." Another student stated: "Students are struggling with Algebra I. They aren't taking pre-calc [calculus], trig, [trigonometry] the higher math ... I thank God for the mainstreaming program." The school was perceived as trying to address the gaps in knowledge by hiring new math teachers: "They just realized that there has been trouble with the math, so they have been hiring new teachers ..."

Some students with hearing impairments believed it was harder for them to learn English than for regular students. Three students concurred that they should have been taught English at an

earlier age rather than simply focusing on ASL (American Sign Language). Students from both groups stated that those who had failed the FCAT were offered tutoring to improve their testing

¹ Students with visual impairments do not have the option of studying for a special diploma.

strategies and shortcuts. NovaNet, a computer program that helps students prepare for the FCAT, was also cited as a resource that students could access.

Dropout

Both groups reported knowing students who had dropped out of school. Contributory factors cited as possible reasons for dropping out include: personal reasons; expulsion resulting from bad behavior; dormitory conditions/rules; pregnancy; drugs; and dissatisfaction with the school. Both groups felt that dropout was not a frequent occurrence and that most cases were the result of personal reasons rather than the fault of the school. . “I have been here for 6 years and I have grown here. I’ve had a lot of opportunities to grow here and I am leaving on a positive note. I have had a lot of positive experiences.” Another student concurred, “I have been here for 11 years and I agree with that.”

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Students did not express specific concerns about placement or interaction with other non-disabled students. In fact, students believed the school encouraged ‘mainstreaming’ by allowing students to attend classes with regular education students at St. Augustine High School. Most students felt mainstreaming allowed them to interact with regular education students in a different setting and broadened their education. “Mainstreaming makes a big difference, the variety of classes. The classes at the deaf school are good, but at hearing classes [regular classes], they challenge you and increase your desire to learn.” In spite of enthusiastic support for mainstreaming among students, a lack of good interpreters was viewed as a barrier to taking classes at St. Augustine High School. “Sometimes you can’t be mainstreamed because there aren’t enough interpreters.”

Transition at Age 14

Goals and plans

Students in the visually impaired group had various plans. All participants planned to go to college and major in areas including physics and math, business management, recording arts, music, computer science, and education. Several students reported having part-time jobs: 2 worked at a dry cleaning shop; 1 taught music to elementary school students; 1 worked at a party store; and another was employed at a shipping company. Four students obtained their jobs with assistance from the school.

The students with hearing impairments also all wanted to continue their education after high school. Areas of interest included: computer repair, biology, aero engineering, medicine, law, psychology, physical therapy, and education. One student, who had received help from the school to acquire a job, was currently employed at a printing shop. The group reported that the school offered a number of services to assist students gain employment, including a member of the staff dedicated to helping students obtain jobs. Moreover, the school pays for transportation of students who want to attend job interviews.

Knowledge of Programs Offered by the School

Visually impaired students reported that whereas few vocational options were available to them, students in the deaf department could access vocational classes such as landscaping and drama at a local technical institute. According to participants, the school offered classes in woodworking and recording arts and production. One student maintained the woodworking class "... lets you be creative with your imagination." Another believed taking the recording arts and production class had helped them prepare for what they wanted to do after they left the school. Hearing impaired students stated that they could be mainstreamed to take vocational courses including motor mechanics, welding, woodworking, and IT classes.

Both groups recognized that counselors were available to provide career guidance, facilitate job search activities, and assist with the completion of college application forms. One hearing impaired student stated, "They don't hold our hands all the way, but if we need them, they are there." Some students felt that although counselors were doing a good job, typically they were busy which often made it difficult to schedule an appointment. "Most of the time when I go to the office I have to leave a note and then go back again to make an appointment. If you want a letter of recommendation you can't just pick that up from the desk, and not see a counselor."

Transition Planning Meetings

All students in both focus groups recalled having attended a transition planning meeting. Most students felt that they were able to express their preferences and that what they had asked for had been implemented.

Recommendations

On the whole students expressed satisfaction with the education they were receiving at FSDB. Students, however, made the following suggestions for improvement:

- provide additional translators to enable more mainstreaming options for hearing impaired students
- review, revise, as appropriate, additional academic electives.