



**SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE  
129<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of Ohio  
Testimony on the Proposed 2012-2013 Biennium Budget for the  
Ohio State School for the Blind**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, it is an honor to come before you to tell you about the comprehensive services, the dedicated staff, and the remarkable boys and girls that make the Ohio State School for the Blind (OSSB) what it is today. My name is Cynthia Johnson and I have been the Interim Superintendent of OSSB since 2008.

**WHO ARE WE?**

The Ohio State School for the Blind has a rich heritage as the nation's first public school for the blind in 1837. It opened its doors to five pupils and one teacher in a private home in Columbus. The school was later moved to a facility located on Parsons Avenue, where it remained until 1953 when it was moved to its present site at 5220 North High Street. This is an exciting time at OSSB partly due to the construction of our first new school buildings in over fifty years.

**WHY DO WE EXIST?**

The Ohio State School for the Blind was founded on the principle of universal education, that the "instruction of the blind is rightly regarded as equitable." For a child with blindness or visual impairment an appropriate education includes all general education course content like reading, math and science, but it also includes what is commonly called the "Expanded Core Curriculum" such as daily living skills, career education, communication skills, including Braille when appropriate and orientation and mobility. These skills areas are especially important to students with disabilities in addition to their blindness. While the general education and expanded core curriculum can be delivered in both public school and specialized school settings, some students require a level of intensity in these areas that is only available in a specialized school such as the Ohio State School for the Blind. Every student receives instruction and guidance from highly qualified staff that have been specially trained to work with children and young people who are blind and visually impaired.

Academic learning is only part of the learning that is emphasized at a specialized school such as ours. Social emotional learning is also critically important to the development of a student. Students receive direct instruction in many of the areas of development (social and leisure skills, self-advocacy) that their sighted peers learn incidentally. Students also get opportunities to participate in activities that are rarely open to them in the public setting.

**WHO DO WE SERVE?**

Ohio State School for the Blind is a specialized educational facility for students ages 5 through 21 who are blind or visually impaired including those with multiple disabilities living in Ohio. Our mission is to work cooperatively with students, families, and the community to provide an effective, enjoyable educational experience through specialized curriculum, equipment, materials, and individualized disability-specific instruction to develop our students' unique potential.

## **WHAT SERVICES DO WE PROVIDE?**

### **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING**

The educational program at OSSB is chartered by the State Board of Education. In 2007 Ohio State School for the Blind earned full accreditation status from the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement.

Its educational program includes elementary, middle and high school academic programs that meet the state's minimum requirements and whose curricula are aligned with Ohio's academic content standards. Forty percent of the school's population has multiple disabilities that require even more specialized services and extensive resources. Every student has an individualized education plan (IEP) that ensures that the education provided to them is focused on their particular needs and abilities.

Music is an integral part of the curriculum and students are encouraged to take advantage of a variety of opportunities such as cadet and varsity choirs, band, to individual and group instructional music. We are very proud of the accomplishments of OSSB Marching Band under the direction of Dan Kelley and Carol Agler. Again history was in the making as the Ohio State School for the Blind Marching Band became the first blind high school marching band to march in the New Years Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California. This was not only a life changing experience for our students, but an opportunity for the world to recognize the talents and abilities of individuals thought to be limited due to a disability.

A full program of adaptive physical education is provided to students as well, including swimming at the school's pool and track and field events. Our students are included in extra curricular activities and have equal access to sports, leadership roles, club participation, honors and school activities that are common in all Ohio schools. Students who choose to join the wrestling, swimming, track or cheerleading teams compete with students from other state schools for the blind. Other extracurricular activities include Key Club, Leo Club and Forensics.

Students receive additional related services identified through an evaluation process such as Braille, Speech and Language, Psychological Services, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Orientation and Mobility, Transition Services and Adaptive Technology.

Up-to-date technology is crucial to help visually impaired learners to access written materials in a timely manner as their sighted peers. A level playing field must be provided for our students as they prepare for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning that will afford those opportunities for success in the world of work and as an everyday citizen. Technology is also very costly. For example, a Braille note comparable to a very basic laptop computer that would cost only a few hundred dollars, with the removal of a monitor and the addition of a moving tactile Braille fingerboard raises the price tag to several thousand dollars, \$4,922 to be exact.

### **ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT**

Students at the Ohio State School for the Blind participate in the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) as prescribed by the state. The value of our program can be seen in the performance of our students when compared to other students with disabilities throughout the state, especially performance on the Ohio Graduation Test.

Out of the thirteen 2007-2008 graduating seniors, seven were accepted to either a two or four year college in the state of Ohio. Three graduates were to attend technical schools to increase their skills in the area of computer technology and the remaining three were to work in sheltered work environments in their local communities.

Of the nine 2008-2009 graduating seniors, two were accepted to a four year college; three attended community college to receive additional training and associate degrees. Two graduates worked in sheltered work environments in their local communities and lastly, two chose an extended year to receive additional instruction and training at OSSB.

Of the ten 2009-2010 graduating seniors, two were accepted to a four year college and three to attend a community college setting. Five of the graduates were to seek competitive employment in their local communities with one receiving additional training in a sheltered work environment.

### RESIDENTIAL LIVING

The school is a home away from home for many of our students who live outside daily commuting distance. The residential component supports the work of the educational program and assists students in acquiring social-emotional and independent living skills.

This component creates a unique environment where teaching and learning can take place from early morning until its time for bed. The student life program promotes socialization skills, personal goal setting, intellectual development, communication skills and emotional maturity. This gives an extraordinary opportunity for these skills to be integrated in the student's total educational experience and to prepare them for life in the larger community.

The residential living spaces are most commonly referred to as cottages. Each cottage has a kitchenette, lounge, and study area. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served daily in the school building. Students are assigned to cottage rooms of two, three, and four persons on the basis of age and sex. Staff designated as youth leaders provide structured activities for all residential students during non-class hours, Monday through Thursday, with students returning home for weekends and holidays. The residential program also allows for students to participate in the occasional weekend activities and summer programs.

### OUTREACH PROGRAM AND SERVICES

Outside OSSB, students who are blind and visually impaired are often served in locations where specialized programs and services do not exist or are limited. Many public school systems do not have staff with training and expertise to work with learners who are blind, visually impaired with multiple disabilities. Many have had no prior experience with learners whose learning modality is hands-on and auditory rather than visual. It is the mission of the comprehensive Outreach Program and Services (at OSSB) to support local school districts serving approximately 1,600 blind and visually impaired students in the state. The Outreach Department provides technical assistance, professional development, materials and resources to families and local school districts serving children who are blind and visually impaired including those with multiple disabilities. The services provided by our Outreach program include: teacher training and professional development; parent mentoring; infant/preschool assessments and consultations; school age assessments and consultations; multifactorial evaluations; center for instructional supports and accessible materials; state Braille production center; assistive technology and summer enrichment programs. Additionally, the school serves as the state's clearinghouse and distribution center for Braille materials. The Center for

Instructional Supports and Accessible Materials' role is to assist school personnel in trying to locate large print and Braille textbooks, audio, and digital textbooks, instructional aids and tools, and specialized equipment for students with visual impairment and print disabilities in the state of Ohio.

Not only are the materials sometimes difficult to obtain, they are very expensive, with a single textbook transcribed into many volumes, sometimes costing over several thousand dollars. For instance one recent purchase of a Braille math book cost the school \$2,365, a Braille social studies book cost \$3,410. In a local school district with only a single blind student, this kind of expense is very difficult to absorb. Every summer, schools around the state ship all their Braille materials back to us and place orders for what they will need the following year. The Center for Instructional Supports and Accessible Materials houses a collection of 38,000 books and materials of which thousands are distributed to schools yearly. This is a tremendous cost savings for school districts and the state.

## **CONCLUSION**

We are in our 174th year of operation. OSSB maintains a national reputation and leadership role among schools of its kind, and it continues today to provide the very best in educational programs for those blind and visually impaired children and youth enrolled. We work collaboratively with other agencies such as Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission, Bureau of Services for the Visually Impaired, Vision and Vocational Services of Columbus, and the Ohio State University Nisonger Center to provide seamless transition to help our students reach their potential to become independent and productive citizens. We also partner with the Ohio State University to provide opportunities for training, observations, field placements, and internships for future teachers.

The Ohio State School for the Blind continues to be a viable educational option for school districts throughout the state. This is both a welcomed challenge and an inspiring responsibility to students, families, and school districts throughout the state of Ohio.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the subcommittee, this concludes my testimony about the Ohio State School for the Blind. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. On behalf of our students, staff, families and stakeholders, we appreciate all of the programmatic and financial support from the Ohio General Assembly. I would be happy to answer any questions now.

Sincerely,  
Cynthia M. Johnson, MA  
Interim Superintendent