

## **Washington School for the Deaf: Models of Education and Service Delivery *Executive Summary***

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.” At the same time, the Legislature assigned the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) “a capacity planning study of the capital facilities of the state school for the deaf.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Background**

The Washington School for the Deaf (WSD), located 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 a 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.

### **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.
- 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.

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<sup>1</sup> ESSB 6153, Section 608, and Section 103(2), Chapter 7, Laws of 2001, Second Special Session.

- 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

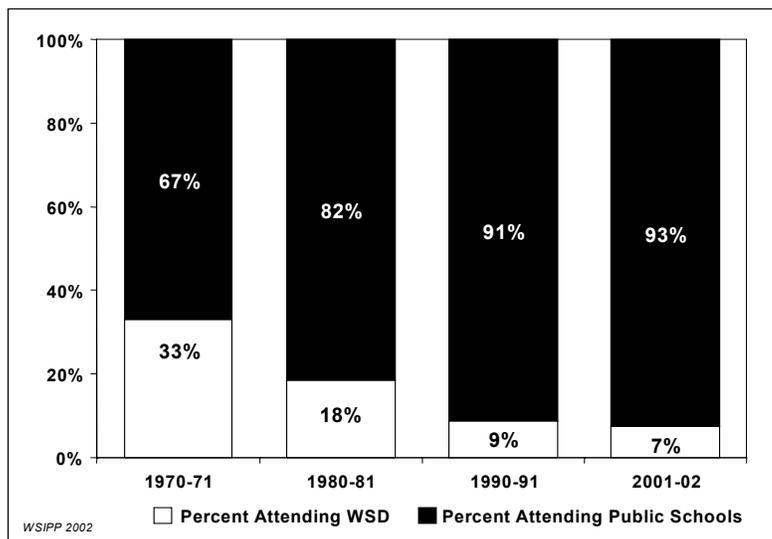
As of December 2001, 494 deaf and 1,029 hard of hearing students aged 3 to 21 attended public schools or WSD and received special education. Deaf students represent one out of every 2,045 Washington students, and hard of hearing students, one out of every 980. This does not include students with multiple disabilities, those with hearing losses but not in special education, or those attending private school. According to national research and a survey conducted by the Institute, 30 to 40 percent of deaf and hard of hearing students have multiple disabilities.

#### Where Do Students Go to School?

The passage of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 had a strong influence on where deaf and hard of hearing students are educated. Currently, more than 90 percent of deaf and hard of hearing students attend public schools rather than WSD (compared with 67 percent 30 years ago – see Exhibit 1).

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.

**Exhibit 1: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in Washington: 30 Years of Enrollment Trends**



#### Which Students Attend WSD?

Enrollment at WSD has declined by 45 percent in the last 20 years from 204 to 113 students at the beginning of the 2001–02 school year: 51 students in grades Pre-K through 8 and 62 in high school. The average over the last ten years has been 150 students.

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 with 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 cognitive 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. Other reasons include academic and cultural issues.

### **Models of Education and Service Delivery: Description and Comparisons**

There are five current models of education and service delivery for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington (see Exhibit 2). The Institute compared the various models based on their learning environments, effectiveness, and operating costs.

#### ***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 sign language-intensive communication environment.

Most deaf students in public schools spend at least part of the day in mainstream classrooms with hearing students, receiving instruction through an interpreter,

and modes of communication among students 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. Dependence on interpreters makes the skill level of interpreters a key variable affecting a student's educational experience. Educators interviewed by the Institute expressed concerns about the skill levels and recruitment and retention of interpreters.

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. Program size and expertise can also impact the choices available for parents who wish to educate their students in public schools. Because its high school enrolls fewer than 75 students, WSD has a more limited range of elective courses than large public high schools.

<p><b>Exhibit 2: Current Models of Education and Service Delivery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A) WSD offers a <b>statewide residential program</b> in Vancouver for students aged 3 to 21.</li><li>B) Eight <b>multi-district programs</b> are intended to draw students from surrounding areas in order to offer specialized services.</li><li>C) <b>Single district programs</b> 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.</li><li>D) Three <b>private school programs</b> focus on a particular mode of communication.</li><li>E) <b>Outreach services</b> 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.</li></ul>
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**Effectiveness**

Deaf and hard of hearing students usually do not do as well academically as their hearing peers. National standardized achievement test scores show that, on average, 17- and 18-year-old deaf and hard of hearing students score at a fourth grade level on reading comprehension. This is largely due to delays in acquiring language, which affects literacy. There is not sufficient data on achievement of deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington to compare WSD with public schools.

**The research literature provides no definitive evidence that a particular instructional setting or mode of communication is more likely to be academically beneficial or effective for deaf students.**

Graduation rates for high school seniors at WSD and Washington public schools are similar (88 to 90 percent). Information on post-high school outcomes for deaf students is limited.

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. For outreach services to be more effective, WSD could work more closely with other service providers to develop a comprehensive plan for coordinated delivery of outreach.

**Operating Costs**

A comparison of operating costs among WSD and public schools must take into account that each receives funding differently. This difference influences both the overall cost to the state and calculations of per-student cost of service among the delivery models.

**WSD:** WSD is a state agency and 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 service increases. Exhibit 3 shows the per-student cost at two different enrollment levels: current (113 students) and the average over the last ten years (150 students). The residential cost includes the cost of day attendance.

<b>Exhibit 3: WSD</b>		
<u>State and Federal Appropriation (2001–02)</u>		
<b>\$7,577,000</b>		
<b>Enrollment</b>	<u>Current</u>	<u>Ten Year Avg.</u>
Total	113	150
Residential	73	98
<b>Per Student Cost</b>		
Day	<b>\$32,600</b>	<b>\$24,600</b>
Residential + Day	<b>\$72,800</b>	<b>\$54,700</b>

**Public Schools:** Nearly all state and most federal money for school districts is allocated on a per-student basis. For each student in special education, additional funds are provided to supplement basic education funds. The funding formula for special education assumes an average cost of

<b>Exhibit 4: Public Schools</b>
<u>State and Federal Allocation (2000–2001)</u>
<b>\$8,320 per special ed student</b>
<b>Costs vary by student, program</b>
Average range: <b>\$21,000 to \$23,800</b>

service regardless of type of disability. Districts that can demonstrate a need for additional funds can apply for relief through the Special Education Safety Net. The costs of providing services for deaf students vary widely according to student needs. Exhibit 4 illustrates the average state and federal allocation for public schools for each special education student and a range of average costs for providing services for deaf students.

## 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 (see Exhibit 5). 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.

**Exhibit 5: Alternative Models for WSD**

<b>1. Comprehensive Program</b> (Current)
<b>2. Focus on Day Students</b> A. Vancouver Day Program B. Vancouver + Satellite(s)
<b>3. Focus on Secondary Students</b> A. Comprehensive Secondary + Day Elementary B. Comprehensive Secondary Program
<b>4. Focus on Outreach</b> A. Improved Coordination of Outreach B. Expanded Outreach

Under **Model 1 (Comprehensive Program or Current)**, WSD could continue to provide a unique educational option for students of all ages. Academic research is not conclusive that separate schools for the deaf provide better or worse academic or social outcomes for students. Parents and students choose WSD for its instructional setting, communication and social environment, and association with Deaf culture. Because there is little reason to expect dramatic future increases in enrollment, the costs of this service are not expected to decline.

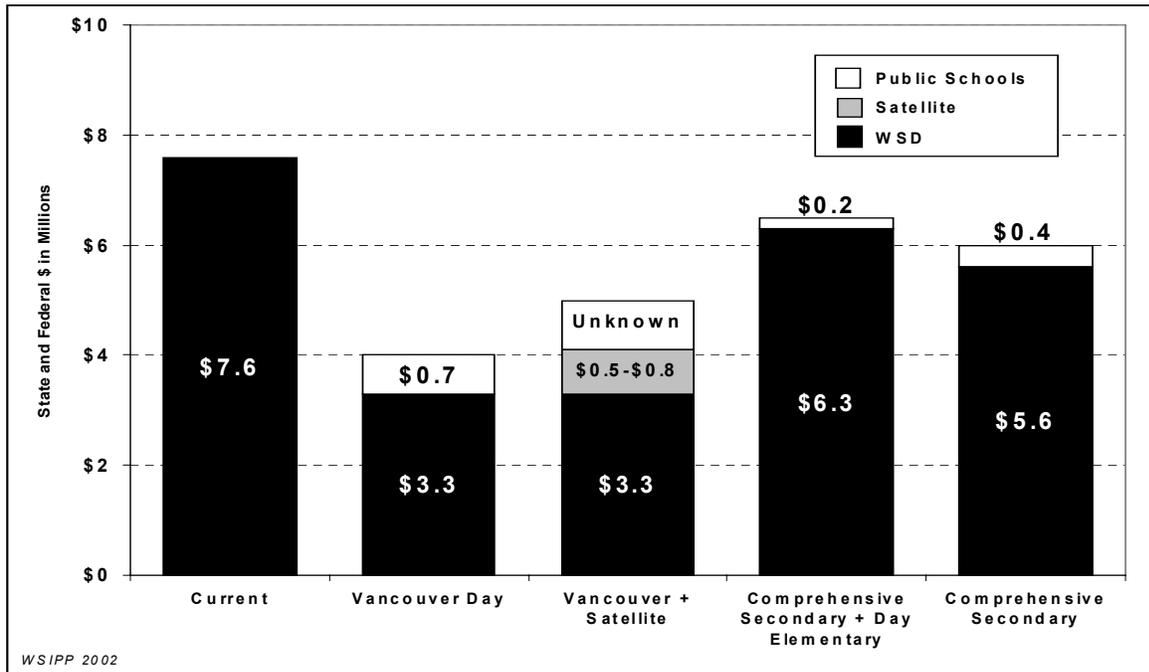
**Model 2 (Focus on Day Students)** would eliminate the residential program at WSD. At current enrollment levels, WSD would serve 27 elementary students but only 13 high school students on the Vancouver campus. Model 2 is, in effect, an “elementary-only” model, which runs counter to enrollment trends. Another option would be for WSD to operate satellite day programs at other locations in the state for students within commuting distance. 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. Costs for a satellite would depend on how the program was operated and its enrollment. The extent of demand for a WSD satellite is not known.

**Model 3 (Focus on Secondary Students)** follows current enrollment trends in targeting on-campus academic and residential programs to older students. Nearly 30 percent of deaf high school students in the state attend WSD. WSD could offer a comprehensive secondary program for 62 high school students and a day-only program for 27 elementary students. Another option would be limit on-campus attendance to older students and provide services for younger students only through outreach. 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 opportunity within Washington. No other state operates a school for the deaf only for secondary students.

**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. A key question for policymakers is whether to recapture some or all of the costs of expanded outreach from participating school districts. WSD’s current outreach program is too new to estimate district demand or willingness to pay for ongoing services.

Exhibit 6 summarizes possible state and federal fiscal impacts of the alternative models (except outreach). An estimated cost for a day student at WSD is also shown. The amounts for public schools reflect state and federal allocations for students who attended WSD in 2001–02 but would presumably enroll in public schools under the new model. The full educational and fiscal impacts of shifting students to public schools are not known.

**Exhibit 6: Comparison of Alternative Models: State and Federal Dollars**



<b>WSD: Per Day Student</b>	<b>\$32,600</b>	<b>\$57,400</b>	<b>\$57,400 + \$21,000 – \$32,600</b>	<b>\$35,100</b>	<b>\$37,100</b>
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The 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 significant fixed costs associated with administration and the Vancouver campus assumed in each model. If policymakers wish to pursue an alternative model, additional work would be needed to determine feasibility, demand, program design, and cost.

Evidence from the research literature and the information collected for this report do not lead to a recommendation from the Institute of one model over another. Each alternative presents educational and fiscal trade-offs for parents, students, educators, and policymakers.

*A complete copy of the Institute's report can be obtained from our website <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/> or by contacting the Institute at (360) 586-2677.*