



NCAERolina News **June, 2009**

President's Message

Kathy Davis

News from Raleigh and the Legislature

Dear Members

This quarter's newsletter will be brief and to the point. I wish I could bring you good news from Raleigh but unfortunately such is not the case. As you know, we have all been experiencing not only personal but professional economic hard times. While everyone has been reading and hearing about the severe budget cuts, and anticipating the worst, unfortunately for the Governor Morehead School the news arrived on Friday, June 5. It was one day early for D-Day remembrances but for GMS, June 5 became our "D Day." That was the day we received news that a draft special provision included CLOSURE of GMS as a means of cost savings for the NC Department of Health and Human Services. The two schools for the deaf, Morganton and Wilson, would remain open. The provision provides for (1) no further admissions for the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years with (2) looking to reduce the census and returning students to their LEAs and (3) closure of GMS with the 2011 school year. Needless to say we were speechless, caught completely off-guard, and still reeling, I would say, even almost two weeks later.

However, all is not yet lost. While we have lost the battle at the House level, we are at Conference Committee level and have marshaled many forces to come to our support. The Independent and the News and Observer both have run articles regarding the closure; legislators are seeing us rally and hearing our voices. Parents, former teachers, alums have all come to our support as has the Council of Schools for the Blind (COSB) with a joint letter of support for GMS remaining open. Dr. Diane Wormsley has added her expertise and her correspondence to our cause. Several professionals have written letters, including the school's previous director, Dennis Thurman. Your chapter of AER has drafted a provision (attached) to be sent out the week of June 15.

Additionally, the NC chapter of NFB has drafted a letter.

I will attach copies of the significant letters (COSB, NCAER position) for your review. When folks ask what they can do, NOW is the time to realize that the power is with the people....Recognize that you have a voice. YOU are not a part of the democratic process. YOU ARE THE democratic process.

As someone that I know so eloquently phrased this, "the budget is being balanced on the backs of folks with no voice and no choice"—the folks with mental illness, the folks who are differently abled.

If you have questions or need further information, feel free to contact any of your NCAER Board members listed below.

Your Board Members

President

Kathy Davis, Principal and Outreach Director
Governor Morehead School
301 Ashe Avenue
Mail Service Center 2303
Raleigh NC 27699-2303
Horchover2@gmail.com

President Elect

William Tubilleja, Outreach, Low Vision Teacher
4700 Winterlochen Road
Raleigh NC 27603
(W) 919-715-4257
(H) 919-661-7269
William.tubilleja@ncmail.net

Secretary

Joy Fleming, Governor Morehead Preschool
8312 Poplar Grove Circle
Waxhaw NC 28173
(H) 704-243-0760
Joy.fleming@ncmail.net

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Treasurer

Susan Purdy, VI Teacher
2 Sedgewood Road
Chapel Hill NC 27514
(H) 919-968-1328
(W) 336-599-6995
shpvi@aol.com

Members at Large

Sandy DeLuca, sdeluca538@earthlink.net
Dion Ousley, dion.ousley@ncmail.net
Julie Kagy, jkagy@dpi.state.nc.us

What's Happening

July 3 – 8, 2009

National Federation of the Blind National Convention. Detroit, MI. www.nfb.org for details

July 17 – 19, 2009. Families Connecting with Families Conference. Costa Mesa, CA.

www.familyconnect.org

October 15 – 17, 2009. APH Annual Meeting. Louisville, KY. info@aph.org for information

October 28 – 31, 2009. Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA 2009). Chicago, IL. www.atia.org

November 12 – 15, 2009. Getting in Touch with Literacy Conference. Costa Mesa, CA.

www.gettingintouchwithliteracy.com for information



Council of Schools for the Blind

June 11, 2009

To whom it may concern:

My name is Stuart Wittenstein and I am the president of the Council of Schools for the Blind (COSB). The Council is gravely concerned that North Carolina is moving towards closing its special school for children who are blind or visually impaired, including those with multiple disabilities. Such special schools are a necessary part of the service delivery systems of over 40 states and ensure that children have a full array of service options from which to benefit. Children and families should have more choices for placement options, not fewer.

Unfortunately, in an era of shrinking resources and research dominated by studies of high incidence disability populations, some individuals make the error of assuming that programming designed to meet the needs of high incidence populations will also meet the needs of those with sensory impairments. Research and program evaluations which study high incidence populations cannot be generalized to programs for children who are blind or visually impaired. Children with visual disabilities have very different educational needs and for many of them placement in a special school for the blind is the least restrictive environment.

In addition, maintaining the special school option allows each state the flexibility to initiate and variety of programming to meet its needs, including providing short courses (anywhere from one week to a semester) to provide intensive instruction in blindness adaptation skills which enable students to be more successful when they return to their home district for core curriculum coursework.

Schools for the blind offer a unique environment to provide intensive instruction as well as a social milieu needed by many students for their emotional growth and adjustment. Many blind children are terribly isolated in their home schools and often feel like the school for the blind was the first placement in which they could thrive.

The bottom line is -- the school for the blind in the 21st century has a lot to offer its state and if the Governor Morehead School is closed, it is the families and children who will lose a rich opportunity for learning and growing.

The Council stands ready to assist North Carolina in making plans to strengthen its school. Please call on us should you desire to use our technical expertise and experience.

Sincerely,

Stuart Wittenstein, Ed.D.
President
Council of Schools for the Blind
500 Walnut Avenue
Fremont, CA 94536
510-794-3800, X201

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Position on the Closure of The Governor Morehead School for the Blind as provided in Draft Special Provision 2009-DHHS-29

North Carolina Chapter Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired

We, the members of the Board of the North Carolina Chapter of the Association for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (NCAER), do hereby urge the North Carolina legislators to remove from consideration any suggestion of consolidating the Governor Morehead School for the Blind (hereinafter, GMS) with the North Carolina School for the Deaf (Morganton) and the Eastern School for the Deaf (Wilson). As professionals in the field of teaching students with visual impairments, we adamantly oppose not only consolidation with the schools for the deaf but also the closure of GMS.

Legal Mandates: Closing GMS is possibly illegal on many levels.

- Federal regulations defining services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stipulate every identified child shall have access to a 'continuum of services' to provide the most appropriate educational placement based upon the assessed needs of that child. Along that continuum are the special schools for the blind, visually impaired, deaf, and deafblind. Should GMS be closed, every child there potentially would have the right to seek appropriate out of state placement at public expense.
- There is a principal associated with this Federal law, "maintenance of effort." Briefly this means that public agencies are required to maintain a comparable level of service regardless of funding difficulties. Clearly the legislature considers closing GMS as part of a solution to the very difficult economic times we are experiencing as a state; however, finding additional funds cannot be done by discontinuing GMS without a violation of this principle.

Educational Needs: The visually impaired and hearing impaired populations and their educational needs represent almost polar opposites. Here are just a few examples of this:

- Seventy to 80% of all learning is conveyed visually. Students with vision impairments and blindness are at a distinct disadvantage. These students are at high risk for social isolation and unemployment for many reasons including the fact that they will never drive and must learn to utilize alternative modes of transportation and communication.
- Because so much of learning takes place through visual channels, specialized instruction must be provided in order for blind and or visually impaired students to learn skills and acquire knowledge that sighted persons acquire through observation and imitation throughout the lifespan.
- Visually impaired students require teachers who are knowledgeable in teaching visual concepts to those who do not function visually and adapting materials for tactile learners. Hearing impaired students require teachers who are knowledgeable in teaching students who learn visually.
- Visually impaired students require professionals to teach them how to orient themselves to their environment and to travel independently and safely within it ; hearing impaired students can see where they are going and do not need this specialized instruction.
- Visually impaired students need additional technology and training to use computer technology to access print information either through software which reads screen information aloud or which enlarges the font size. Hearing impaired students can access regular computer equipment visually.
- Communication between visually impaired students and hearing impaired students is difficult to achieve: visually impaired students find it impossible to make eye contact or to

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see gestures and rely almost solely on oral language for interacting with others; hearing impaired students rely heavily on eye contact and gestures including formalized sign language rather than spoken language.

- Few teachers or professionals in the field have qualifications which allow them to work with both populations. Professionals in the field of teaching students with visual impairments often do not have the skills or certifications necessary to teach hearing impaired students and vice versa. Irrespective of the campus on which the students are housed, the students continue to require the services of highly qualified instructors.
- Moving students from one campus to another does not mean that teachers or professionals will follow. Money must be spent to train additional teachers whether they are for hearing impaired or visually impaired rather than utilizing existing staff at each location.
- Students attending a school where highly trained teachers meet their various learning needs assures a quality education for these students.
- Sending students to either of the schools for the deaf or to their LEAs will only exacerbate this teacher shortage, and in the long run potentially incur greater operating costs, due to the decentralizing of resources, including teachers, support personnel, and specialized equipment.
- The instructional (teaching) staff at GMS hold a collective 570 years of teaching experience, for an average of 15.4 years per teacher. Eighty percent of the teachers hold “Highly Qualified” (NCLB) licensure in teaching students with visual impairments. The remaining 20 percent are actively pursuing add-on certification through university coursework at North Carolina Central University’s Visual Impairment Training Program

Residential schools for the blind exist for a variety of reasons.

- In the case of schools for the blind they permit pooling of resources which can serve a number of children resulting in a cost savings to the Local Education Agency (LEA).
- The adapted equipment necessary for students who are blind or visually impaired is expensive because such equipment is not mass produced in quantities that would bring prices down.
- Not all students are able to function in their own home school settings. A special day or residential school provides them with another venue for a successful education. Of special importance as part of this group of students are those students who have additional disabilities. This group makes up approximately 60 percent of the population of students who are classified as visually impaired. The specialized needs of this group of students related to their visual impairment often go unmet in their local schools due to the overwhelming nature of their multiple disabilities.
- One feature of GMS, and residential schools for the blind generally, is their concentration on the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) areas of compensatory skills including braille and listening skills, visual efficiency, orientation and mobility, assistive technology, low vision skills, career exploration, social skills development, independent living skills, self-advocacy. These specialized curriculum areas are essential to the successful integration of students who are blind and visually impaired into their communities as independent and employed citizens. Because these skills fall outside the domain of standard course of study and accountability testing mandated by school districts, instruction in these areas often receives short shrift or is completely neglected when students attend their local public school. The uniqueness of this ECC instruction is what makes residential programs critical for the lifelong success of a student who is blind and/or visually impaired. The instruction in this curriculum, because of its highly specialized nature, requires that teachers have expertise in instructing in the specific areas of the ECC. The residential school (GMS) makes this ECC curriculum available to students across North Carolina through its Outreach and Preschool programs as GMS has the teachers with the training and expertise in teaching ECC areas.

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Closing GMS impacts services for the blind in the state of North Carolina in general. The GMS Campus provides a home for many meetings of individuals concerned with blindness and visual impairment and is a centralized location for those services.

- On the same campus with GMS is Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) and one of the rehabilitation facilities where newly blinded individuals come for rehabilitation to learn new skills such as Braille, assistive technology, and independent living skills. A portion of the GMS operating costs will continue even with closure of the K-12 programs as other components on the campus, e.g., DSB, will need these services, including but not limited to dining hall services, security services, and physical plant needs.
- A working partnership exists among DHHS (GMS and DSB), as well as the Department of Public Instruction, and the Visual Impairment Training Program at North Carolina Central University. This partnership centers around the facilities at the GMS Campus and strives to ensure provision of quality services to the population in North Carolina who are blind or visually impaired.
- A low vision clinic on campus provides low vision evaluations to students and clients, as well as a practicum site for teachers in training.
- The statewide conference for vision professionals has been held each year at the GMS facilities. This centralized location makes it easier for participants to attend and to explore the school resources in terms of their students' needs. This year, even with limited travel funding and with a limited agenda, the conference attracted over 120 professionals from around the state.
- Preschool students attending programming on the GMS campus can transition naturally to the K-12 instructional program, if deemed appropriate by their IEP team, confident and comfortable traveling in a familiar environment and availing themselves of resources with which they are familiar.
- Preschool students who transition to their LEA receive followup and services from GMS Outreach, a collaboration fostered by their proximity to each other on the campus. Separating the school, or any of its constituent programs, jeopardizes students' abilities and potential for a smooth, efficient transition to public school in cases where IEP teams consider public school placement appropriate.

The bulleted lists above touch the surface. Economics is a tricky thing. While it may seem like a simple move to gradually phase out and eventually close GMS, and while, *prima facie*, it might seem to be a cost saving measure, closure comes at a cost unmeasurable solely in monetary terms. The impact on the population of people in the state of North Carolina who are blind themselves, or involved in providing services to children and adults who are blind, will be to compromise delivery of both educational and rehabilitation services, including preparation of personnel to train these students and clients. When the costs of this move become apparent, we predict that consolidation or closure will not result in cost savings but will incur even greater than anticipated expenditures at a time when these resources do not exist. The NCAER Board fears that legislators and the public will look back and realize that hasty, knee jerk reactions to extreme situations, without careful consideration of the long-term ramifications of our actions, cost the citizenry untold losses in human potential, human capital, and human productivity. We advocate for our students hoping that those who have the power of the purse understand the magnitude of their proposal to close GMS and the far-reaching economic effects rendered by an educational system which produces students ill-prepared to be self-supporting or contributing members of our global economy. In these severe economic times, can the state of North Carolina afford to have greater numbers of citizens receiving and relying upon public assistance monies for their daily existence?

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The NCAER Board believes that you have the best interest of this population at heart. Please do not allow our short term struggles with the economic situation to compromise the service delivery system for an entire low incidence population of state citizens and render even greater costs to be borne by our fragile economy. Allow GMS to continue its mission: to produce students who have the skills and abilities to support themselves economically, to contribute to their global community, and to lead successful, productive, and fulfilling personal and professional lives.