

Virginia Schools Offer Specialized Educational Options

By Kristin Stemhagen

Similar in their mission of providing quality day and residential programs, The Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind at Staunton (VSDB-Staunton) and the Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind and Multi-Disabled at Hampton (VSDBM-H) offer specialized educational options for students from Virginia. Both schools also serve as resources for children with similar disabilities educated throughout the state. Below are details about each school and the programming they provide.

The Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind at Staunton

The educational philosophy of VSDB-Staunton is to provide students who are either hearing impaired or visually impaired with opportunities to learn in an environment that recognizes individual differences, challenges students to do their best, and actively involves students in the learning process. One of the oldest schools in Virginia, and the second of its kind in the world, VSDB-Staunton was established by an act of the Virginia General Assembly in 1838. A member of the legislature, the Honorable James Bell of Augusta County, deeded five acres of land just outside of Staunton, and the Board of Visitors then purchased an additional 17 acres providing sufficient land for the school. Since its first graduation in 1844, VSDB-Staunton has graduated over 6,000 students, many of whom pursue higher education and/or career training programs.

Instructional Programs & Related Services

VSDB-Staunton provides comprehensive educational programs and support services to students of all ages. Individualized programs for children with hearing and visual impairments at preschool, elementary and secondary levels are offered. Programs of study are designed to meet individual needs as specified in each student's Individualized Educational Program (IEP).

Additional programming involves extracurricular and special activities, including summer school, leadership programs, driver education and sports; contact with role models/peers who are deaf or blind; preparation for work and independent living; mainstream educational opportunities; educational opportunities for students to access all diploma options (including academic diplomas for students who meet high school graduation criteria); and comprehensive evaluations for children with visual or hearing impairments.

Additional Related and Support Services

The following are also part of VSDB-Staunton services:

- An environment immersed in American Sign Language, including secondary level classes, and child-centered, language-based developmental programs for toddlers and preschoolers with hearing impairments;
- Weekly orientation, mobility instruction and assistive technology for students with visual impairments;

- Daily-living instruction, speech/language, occupational and physical therapy services, audiology, as well as opportunities for each child to increase body awareness, spatial concepts and mobility skills;

- Support for behavior needs with a school psychologist, guidance counselors and behavior staff;

- On- and off-campus work study programs and opportunities to participate in courses in the public school with support from VSDB-Staunton staff.

In addition, VSDB-Staunton provides full medical services with registered nurses and on-call physicians and residential services with supervisors trained in medical and CPR certification.

Technology

The information technology environment at VSDB-Staunton consists of over 200 PCs and 12 servers communicating over a fast and reliable Cisco network framework. Internet connectivity is supplied via a high-speed circuit, and the latest in Web filtering is in place to provide students with the safest possible Web environment. Computer labs are readily accessible in school and in the dorms. Technology such as interactive whiteboards in classrooms provide a high-tech learning environment, while the latest in disability-tailored computer applications ensure that technology is accessible by each student.

Residential Program/ Student Life

VSDB-Staunton provides both day and residential options for most students, depending upon distance

from the home and the child's needs. Upon enrollment, students are assigned placement in a dormitory appropriate for age, grade placement and gender. Dormitories are separate facilities from the classroom buildings and are designed to provide both comfort and an environment conducive to learning and social skills development. Students in the residential program have weekly visits home.

Additionally, many field trips and activities are planned to encourage both fun and learning. While on campus, students can take advantage of a Student Center, complete with air hockey, pinball games, a pool table, and an atmosphere that promotes socialization and relaxation. An indoor pool is another bonus for students who enjoy swimming.

Outreach Services

VSDB-Staunton provides outreach services to local school systems in the areas of educational, psychological, speech and language assessments. These assessments are at no charge to the school systems. Audiology services are also provided to families and babies for hearing evaluations and follow-up services. Additional outreach services include professional development, summer programs and support with assistive technology.

Admission/Contact Information

VSDB-Staunton serves students with a primary disability of deafness, hearing impairment or visual impairment including blindness. Students with secondary disabilities may also be approved for admission. To be considered for enrollment, students must be referred by their local school divisions and the child and one parent or legal guardian must be domiciled in and a resident of Virginia. The application process involves completion of an admission application, approval letter and Services Agreement and the development of an IEP.

For more information on admis-

sions, or to obtain a copy of the complete admissions policy, contact the Admissions Coordinator at 540-332-9004.

Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind Post Office Box 2069 Staunton, VA 24402-2069 800-522-VSDB Outside Virginia: 540-332-9000 www.vsdb.virginia.gov

The Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind and Multi-Disabled at Hampton

VSDBM-H provides children, adolescents and young adults with deafness, blindness and sensory impaired multiple disabilities with a center-based program affording the opportunity to earn a special diploma or certificate of attendance. The school also offers a functional skills program focused on preparing students for supported work placement. Established by an act of the Virginia General Assembly in 1906, VSDBM-H opened in 1909 to serve educational needs of those with deafness and blindness under the leadership of William C. Ritter, who himself was deaf. In 1977 the school began serving students with sensory impairments and multiple disabilities. VSDBM-H has a 14-building campus on approximately 75 acres in the city of Hampton. The school operates under supervision of the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Board of Education.

Instructional Programs & Related Services

VSDBM-H's developmentally based curriculum emphasizes daily living skills and includes community-based instruction. A vocational program that provides instruction and training in a variety of areas is also part of programming. (Through this program, students participate in on-the-job-training under the super-

vision of job coaches and individual attendants.) Instruction based on a student's IEP is provided through small classes, endorsed teachers and a variety of support staff. Communication skills including American Sign Language, English, speech and speech reading are stressed for students with hearing impairments; students with visual impairments have access to Braille and large print materials, audiotope devices and descriptive videos.

A preschool program for children with cochlear implants is also offered. This program involves a language rich environment to develop oral language abilities, interaction with peers who are non-disabled to facilitate listening and speaking skills, intense speech and language therapy, as well as audiology and other related services.

Related and Support Services

VSDBM-H provides comprehensive related services including: speech/language, occupational and physical therapy; audiology; evaluation; counseling; behavior management programs; functional vision assessment; orientation and mobility; and transportation. Health services are provided 24-hours a day, staffed with registered nurses, a consulting physician and a consulting dentist.

Technology

Extensive technology is available for instruction and student use. A Local Area Network (LAN) connects all classrooms with the library media centers. Computers are available in every classroom as well as in computer labs in the dormitories. The library also offers captioned video materials for those with hearing impairments and a variety of devices to assist students with visual impairments in accessing textual and graphic materials.

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Residential Program/ Student Life

Therapeutic residential programming stresses social and cultural development, creative arts, daily living skills and therapeutic recreation. Assistance is provided for each student to reach the highest potential possible independently. Residential students return to their homes every weekend.

Outreach Services

Outreach services offered by VSDBM-H include consultation to parents and local school divisions; staff development for professionals; comprehensive assessment of children; parent education; assistance to community organizations; summer programs; and assistive technology outreach support.

For more information contact:

Virginia School for the Deaf,
Blind and Multi-Disabled at
Hampton
700 Shell Rd
Hampton, VA 23661
757-247-2050V/TDD
800-666-0041
www.vsdbmh.virginia.gov

Personal Perspective...

Comments from a former VSDB-Staunton Student and Teacher

"I am a proud graduate of VSDB-Staunton and I am grateful for the people -- teachers, staff and students -- who were a part of my life there. They helped me fulfill my dreams to be a successful teacher and coach," says 1969 graduate J. H. Cline, Jr.

Cline's achievements in terms of teaching and coaching include a 20-year career as a wrestling coach with roles at high schools in Nashville, Tennessee, and Halifax, Virginia; at the Mississippi School for the Blind (where he started a wrestling program); and 10 years

at VSDB-Staunton where he taught Physical Education & Health to elementary through 12th grade students and served as a senior class sponsor. In addition, Cline has run many 5K's 10K's, 10-mile runs, half marathons and a marathon, and competed in the Blind Olympic trials in wrestling in 1976, the

Blind National trials in wrestling 1980, and masters division track and field events in 1980, 1986 and 1995. Now retired, he serves as a representative to VSDB-Staunton for the school's Blind Alumni group.

According to Cline, one of the major benefits of the VSDB-Staunton student experience is teachers "able to see us as children who had an impairment, not as impaired children." Cline says this helps faculty -- and students -- have high expectations. "They helped us see ourselves as just normal children," he explains. "I was able to run and hold class office, club offices and student body office. I competed on the forensics team,

wrestling team and track team. I was in the senior choir. As for social life, we had dances on the weekends. We had our wrestling matches against public schools and some blind schools. We spent a lot of time downtown going to the stores and restaurants. We went to a teen club and to the movies. Our lives were not any different that anyone else's. We just could not drive."

When Cline was working for the South Boston-Halifax County YMCA, he had a chance to return to VSDB-Staunton for the first time in 10 years. Standing in the gym, he recalled what it felt like to be part of the wrestling team, which was a particularly memorable part of his high school experience. "When we would come up from the wrestling room and get ready to enter the gym, we would stand at the door looking in a packed gym. The stands full and no standing room left. The cheerleaders

would be lined up at the door doing a cheer the crowd would be into it. The hair would stand up on the back of my neck with chills going down my back. We would run in to circle the mat. I would feel such an honor and privilege to wrestle for our school. Doesn't that sound like any high school in the country?"



VSDB-Staunton Main Hall, built in 1846.

As a former teacher, Cline sees much value in the emphasis VSDB-Staunton places on individual time with students. One of the most important results of this interaction, according to Cline, is the opportunity it provides for teachers to learn how each student "feels about their impairment, and to help them to deal with and accept it." In his experience -- both personal and professional -- this special emphasis builds the foundation for future success: "The school has been an important part of life for many successful blind and visually impaired people who have gone out and become a productive part of our society." ■