

Oregon HB 2755
Helping to fulfill Oregon's Promise to Blind and Visually Impaired Students

In 2009 the Oregon School for the Blind was closed after 136 years of service to Blind and Low Vision students. Supporters of the closure claimed that the shortcomings of services at the local level could be rectified with reallocation of the money that had previously been spent running the school.

"This bill is not about saving money. This bill doesn't save any money, because the resources that are currently spent... are directed back to the service of students who are blind and visually impaired." -Rep. Sara Gelser-D Corvallis

The intention was to take the money that had been used to run a school with a dwindling population in order to benefit students statewide (There were fewer than 30 students when the school was closed.)

"We're creating a state-wide resource center that will, for the on-going time, be able to provide assistance to improve services in every single school district in the state." -Rep. Gelser

The money was set aside into a new fund and was intended to improve services for students statewide.

"\$2,985,218 is allocated for this biennium... and it will...have the collateral benefit of providing enhanced help to the over 850 other blind and visually impaired students that we're currently serving in local school districts." -Rep. Gelser

A new legal standard was set once this valuable resource was taken away in order to create this fund. The state now has an obligation to improve and enhance the services that were previously offered to students.

"(These funds) are specifically earmarked and can only be spent for services that improve the education of students who are blind and visually impaired." -Rep. Gelser

Legislators in favor of the bill gave assurances that they would follow-up and see that the fund would be implemented as intended.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED: The Oregon Department of Education failed to implement enhanced services or to fully use allocated funds during the 2009 to 2011 biennium, leading to the elimination of the appropriation in the 2011 budget.

RESULT: *"No additional General Fund is needed for the Blind and Visually Impaired Student Fund. The current balance in this fund should be sufficient."* -Governor's 2011 Proposed Budget

WHAT WAS PROMISED: *"This is a good bill with a good plan. It comes with the backing of a committee that is going to be following this very closely and holding accountable school districts that attempt to step away from this (or) that fail either these students or any other student in this state."* -Rep. Gelser

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED: The provisions of the bill were not implemented. The fund was spent sending a few students who did not receive appropriate services out-of-state in violation of state law.

WHAT IS NEEDED DURING THIS LEGISLATIVE SESSION?

Support of HB 2755, establishing an advisory board comprised of various members within the BVI Community (including professionals from the community, parents, former OSB students and teachers, similar to the former board of OSB). We would encourage the legislature to require senate confirmation.

Restoration of the promised appropriation to the BVIS Fund. This should include enough additional funding to pay for students who will receive services at out-of-state facilities if determined necessary, as stated in one of the provisions of the bill.

IN SUMMARY:

Although the 2009 legislature could not legally bind future legislatures to continue funding, it could be argued there would not have been enough support to shut the school down had legislators realized the appropriation was going to be eliminated after only two years, contrary to their promise:

"You should also recognize that that Blind and Visually Impaired Student Fund is not a one-time thing. This is an on-going new fund that we intend to populate with an allocation in the next biennium."

"This is about...preserving and re-deploying these resources from the benefit of 31 students to benefit more than 850 students across the State of Oregon."

"It is about...preserving this general fund allocation for services to blind and visually impaired students before we lose it in a budget cut or before the school dies a natural death." -Rep. Gelser

Please help support HB 2755 and encourage the legislature to fully fund its promise to Oregon's blind and visually impaired students.