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IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY: IDAHO SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND BLIND SUPPORTS EACH INDIVIDUAL AND UNIQUE STUDENT

(BOISE) – Many small schools have small graduating classes, but eight students in Idaho who graduated on May 26th were unique.

Receiving their diploma from the Idaho School for the Deaf and Blind (ISDB), six were blind or visually impaired and two were deaf or hard of hearing. One was in a wheelchair.

“Every year I get in front of the legislature and tell them my job is to get these kids to graduate and get a job. We want them to reach their full potential,” said Brian Darcy, administrator for the Idaho Educational Services for the Deaf and Blind (IESDB), which runs the special school campus in Gooding. The commencement ceremony that day, attended by Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra and Matt Freeman, executive director of the State Board of Education, were a validation of that goal.

In some ways, Darcy said, the graduates “are just like any other 18-year-olds, with 18-year-old issues. They’re no different from any other person.”

But the challenges they faced to earn their diplomas – typically the lack of vision or hearing – go well beyond what most students must overcome to reach graduation. Still, Darcy said, “we expect a lot of our kids and we expect them to graduate.”

Besides learning skills at the ISDB campus to cope with their disabilities, students learn all regular material expected of a student and must meet all the regular state graduation requirements, but the process to get there is often harder. Blind students, for example, must take the ISAT in braille, the special system where a series of raised dots on a page can be felt by a student who has learned to recognize the letters that the dots under his fingers represent.

But the school is designed to provide the special accommodations students need. They have “refreshable braille” devices where small pins pop up on 6”x5” tablets that translate downloaded text into braille. “It’s like a Kindle in braille,” Darcy said. “We want them to have access to technology because, like everyone else, they need it to function in today’s world.

“But they’ve got to be able to read before they can access it, so we have to teach (blind students) braille skills... (and) we try to teach braille at an early age so students won’t fall behind their peers.”

If learning to read through your fingertips is difficult, the challenge for deaf students can often be just as great. The students must learn American Sign Language to help them communicate with others and learn from teachers, but ASL uses a completely different syntax and grammar than written English. As a result, they functionally have to learn two languages and the ability to translate between them. “A lot of (deaf) kids struggle with reading” as a result, Darcy said.

All languages are best learned in the first three years of life. “The first thing a child needs is language,” Darcy pointed out. “We know language happens at an early age.”



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About 90 percent of the ISDB's deaf students are born deaf to hearing parents, and their parents have to learn the skills needed to communicate with them, Darcy said, which is why the IESDB operates an extensive outreach system designed to provide the educational support needs of children from birth to 21. "We go into the homes to help parents" learn to deal with their child's disability and help their child learn coping skills. "It's important to get to them early," Darcy said, noting that typically about two-thirds of the students at the campus are either deaf or hard of hearing.

Children that are blind or have significant visual impairments, or those that are born totally deaf, are often caught early. Various coping skills, such as sign language for the deaf, can be taught during the crucial formative years of children.

But, Darcy said, those that are hard of hearing or have difficulty processing sounds, often aren't identified right away "and they can sometimes find things difficult. They struggle in the classroom. They often don't learn how to sign." Sometimes, he said, they're sent to speech pathologists because, unable to effectively hear a sound, they have difficulty reproducing the sounds of a word, and the initial diagnosis is difficulty speaking. "Sometimes, it can take a while for others to recognize they have a hearing deficiency," he said.

"Sometimes, we get kids (with hearing disabilities) who are in high school and somehow they've muddled through. They can experience life, but they don't really know what's going on. Maybe they've been taken to grandmother's house, but they really don't know who she is, or why she's important, just that she's a nice lady who bakes cookies for them."

"That's why it's so important our students have language," Darcy said. "Many don't even have that when we get them."

Some students come to the school at an early age and attend the ISDB campus in Gooding throughout their life. Others come at a later age, as problems are diagnosed or because some of life's curveballs make a student a candidate for the school. "We had one young woman who came here; she'd lost her vision to cancer. We taught her how to read braille, how to use a cane for mobility, how to take care of herself, all of life's little coping skills you need, and then she went back to regular school."

Too often, people think that when local schools can't deal with a student they have to send them to the ISDB campus. "We're working hard to change that mindset," Darcy said. "Campus is not a sentence, it's an opportunity. We offer things here not offered anywhere else."

Darcy said "it's easy to fall back on a 'poor me' attitude" when a student faces the kind of challenges the ISDB's students experience. "But that's not life," he said, noting they work hard to make sure the students do not perceive themselves as victims.

Instead, the staff at the ISDB campus teaches more than just basic education, they teach compensating skills to help students further their education or to get a job. "Our goal is to teach them to become independent," especially the specialized skills needed for blind students. "My sister was blind, so I grew up in that field."

The students come from all over the state. Some live in the six student cottages on campus throughout the school year, some are bused in daily from their homes in the Magic Valley, and some actually fly in on Sunday nights to Boise where they are picked up and taken to the school. They stay at the cottages and then are returned to the airport Thursday night to fly home. At least one of those students comes from Boundary County, "and that's about as far away as you can get from here (in Gooding) and still be in the state," Darcy noted. Some of those who normally are bused daily to the school will occasionally stay in the cottages during a sports season. The school



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itself offers volleyball, basketball, and track and has a cooperative agreement with the Gooding School District to allow its students to play on the Gooding football and girls and boys soccer teams.

The school serves pre-K through grade 12 and has a post-graduate transition program to help students move toward independent living. Sometimes, that also requires additional special training because a number of the school's students have problems that go beyond being deaf and/or blind. Some also have cognitive problems or mobility issues or require some other special accommodation. The school tries to give them the skills to participate in life to the fullest degree possible, and most of the time it succeeds.

In the last 20 years, with graduating classes that typically range from 3-10 students, at least three of their graduates are known to have gone on to get their doctorate degrees (PhD). Most recently, one of the ISDB's blind graduates earned a PhD in English from a major midwestern university. "We're proud of our grads," Darcy said.

To achieve those successes, Darcy gives high praise to the "fantastic team" of teachers and staff that work with the students. "Frankly, these (teaching) skills are hard to find. They need a teaching degree. Then they have to get their special education credentials, and then they have to understand deafness and blindness and mobility issues. It's a very demanding job. For example, you may have four 8-year-olds in your class all functioning at four completely different levels."

One of the members of that "fantastic team" was this year's commencement speaker, braille instructor Jan Zollinger, who has served the school for 40 years. Considering the campus has been in existence since 1910, she's served nearly 40% of the school's history. That's the kind of dedication Darcy sees in his staff. "We are something unique," he said.

So are the graduates of the 2016 class of the Idaho State School for the Deaf and Blind.

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