

Office of Performance Evaluations

News Release: Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind

October 17, 2005

(BOISE) October 17, 2005—The Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind (ISDB) is at a turning point. Policymakers will need to consider the school's future direction because changes in recent decades have resulted in declining enrollment, rising costs per student, increased demand for regional services, and underutilized campus facilities. Policymakers and ISDB officials have essentially two options according to the report Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind released today by the bipartisan Joint Legislative Oversight Committee, which called for the evaluation. The report, conducted by the committee's non-partisan Office of Performance Evaluations (OPE), contains nine recommendations.

ISDB, located in Gooding, Idaho, offers educational services to sensory-impaired children and students ages birth to twenty-one. Campus services are provided to residential students and to students who are bused to the school daily. ISDB also employs regional assistance to school districts. Based survey responses, parent and school district satisfaction with ISDB services was generally high. The facilities on the 40-acre campus are currently used at less than half capacity.

Campus enrollment has declined 40 percent during the past 15 years, and was at 75 students as of last month. If this trend continues, enrollment could decline to approximately 60 students within three years. Other states have faced declining enrollments at their schools for the sensory-impaired in the past several years, resulting in some closures. Nationally, over the past decade there has been an 18 percent decline in sensory-impaired students attending residential schools.

As campus enrollment has decreased, the cost to educate students has risen. The evaluation concluded that last year, ISDB spent approximately \$82,000 for each residential student and \$59,000 for each day student. If enrollment continues to decline at the past rate, annual costs for each residential student could reach \$100,000 within two years. Nearly all of ISDB's \$8 million budget comes from the state general fund.

The number of children with cochlear implants (a surgically-implanted device that allows detection of sound) in Idaho is small, but continuing to grow. With appropriate services, these children have a greater chance of being mainstreamed into regular classrooms. ISDB provides some services for children with cochlear implants, but parents have generally reported lower levels of satisfaction with these services.

The options evaluators recommend policymakers consider include: (1) Maintaining the current system of providing services and implementing OPE recommendations, or (2) Delivering services through a new model. A new model could include serving only day students or multi-disability students on campus; providing outreach services only; or relocating the school to an urban area to take advantage of a wider variety of educational opportunities. The report also includes additional recommendations for program improvements.