

MEMORANDUM

To: Board of Regents

From: Board Office

Subject: Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) Training and Placement in Rural Iowa

Date: April 9, 2001

Recommended Action:

Approve the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School proposal to recruit up to three teachers interested in completing the Western Michigan University orientation and mobility specialist program, to sponsor the teachers with a stipend, and to employ them to serve AEAs 3, 4, 5, and 12.

Executive Summary:

Orientation and mobility is one of the eight extended core curriculum areas which are necessary for the success and independence of children who are blind or visually impaired or who have additional disabilities. This area of learning requires teachers with specific preparation. "Personnel specializing in orientation and mobility must be available to provide related services to students who are blind and visually impaired including those with multiple disabilities."¹

Since 1990, the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School has provided the services of certified orientation and mobility specialists to public school students who are blind or visually impaired or who have additional disabilities through cooperative arrangements and contracts with the area education agencies (AEAs). Because there is no university training program for certified orientation and mobility specialists in Iowa, the IBSSS must recruit personnel from out of state. The ten COMSs presently provided by IBSSS are all non-Iowa natives.

The ten specialists are serving the major metropolitan areas in Iowa. Other geographical locations, which are more rural, such as AEA 3 (Cylinder), AEA 4 (Sioux Center), AEA 5 (Fort Dodge), and AEA 12 (Sioux City) often do not have a certified orientation and mobility specialist. Frequently, IBSSS assigns COMSs to these locations on a temporary basis. Therefore, IBSSS is interested in recruiting and training COMSs who already live in these geographical locations and who have a commitment to living and working in rural Iowa.

¹ Blind and Visually Impaired Students Educational Service Guidelines, 1999.

The individuals who are selected to participate in the program will enroll at Western Michigan University and will complete two semesters of their program through distance education. In addition, the students will be required to attend classes for six weeks on campus at Western Michigan University during Summer 2002. The tuition for the program will be paid through a federal grant available through Western Michigan University called Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Long-Term Training. In addition, as an incentive for participating in the program, IBSSS will pay a stipend of \$4,000 to each person during the 2001-2002 academic year. The State Vision Grant will provide a portion of the stipend (\$2,500) and the remainder (\$1,500) will be provided by the IBSSS endowment fund. Each person will receive the grant in three installments at the completion of each semester and upon receipt of grades.

If faculty positions are available, each student will become an employee of IBSSS on the faculty matrix beginning in August 2002. During September 2002, each student will complete a one-month internship on campus in Vinton. Each student must also complete an 800-hour practicum under the direction of a certified COMS. Students will begin working in their respective AEAs in October 2002. A COMS will supervise their work one day per week. Each student who participates in this program will agree to remain in the employment of IBSSS for three school years beginning in 2002-2003. Teachers who leave before the three years are completed will be obliged to repay the stipends on a prorated basis.

Background:

The School serves more than 500 children in Iowa who are blind or visually impaired or who have multiple disabilities including a visual impairment. Some students receive comprehensive center-based services at the School in Vinton while other students receive regular direct services through outreach efforts in their home communities. One of the services that is provided by the School on an outreach basis through a contract with a local AEA is orientation and mobility. In the past, the School has had significant difficulty recruiting certified orientation and mobility specialists (COMS) to rural, outlying areas of the state. Therefore, the School has proposed a program which will recruit teachers who are already located in those areas and will provide the training which will allow them to become certified in this specialty.

Analysis:

Working with the staff of the four targeted AEAs located in Cylinder, Sioux Center, Fort Dodge, and Sioux City, the School will select up to three individuals to participate in the Western Michigan University program. The University is offering a graduate rehabilitation training program through distance education to prepare orientation and mobility specialists. Admission to the program requires completion of a bachelor's degree in education and a minimum GPA of 3.0. The School's selection criteria will give preference to teachers/graduates of special or

physical education programs. A federal grant is available to provide tuition assistance. As a condition of the grant, the graduate of the program is obligated to obtain employment in a state or federal vocational rehabilitation agency for a period of two years for every two academic semesters of training. Graduates who do not meet this obligation will be required to repay the tuition assistance.

The individuals selected will sign a three-year contract with the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School to teach orientation and mobility in their assigned AEA beginning in 2002-2003, if faculty positions are available. While undertaking classes during the 2001-2002 year, each student will receive a \$4,000 stipend from the School. The funds for the stipends will be obtained from the State Vision Grant (\$2,500) and from the School's endowment fund (\$1,500). The School has determined that it is appropriate to provide stipends to the graduate students, even though they are not employees of the School, because the students are obtaining their specialist certification on behalf of the School.

Students will attend a one-month internship on campus in Vinton as part of their training program. The School will provide on-campus room and board to the students during the internship. Students will begin working in their respective AEAs in October 2002 while they are completing an 800-hour practicum under the direction of a certified COMS. The COMS will provide supervision one day per week. Anyone leaving employment before the end of the 2004-2005 school year will be obliged to repay the stipend on a prorated basis.

The School's proposal has been reviewed by the Board Office. A copy of the proposal was recently sent to the IBSSS Advisory Committee but there was not sufficient time for the Committee to meet to discuss the proposal. The Board Office recommends that the proposed program submitted by Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School be approved as an opportunity for the School to obtain qualified specialists for some of the outlying areas of the State.

A copy of the School's proposal is included as Attachment A.


Diana Gonzalez

Approved: 
Frank J. Stork