

October 12, 2006

BOARD VOTES TO EXPAND DEAF/BLIND STUDENT SERVICES

LEWISTON - The State Board of Education voted unanimously to begin a process of improving educational services for deaf and or blind students.

The State Board has evaluated the quality and availability of deaf and blind education programs since 2005. The Board first appointed a study committee, which gathered extensive input from stakeholders from across the state and outlined significant and broad issues in improving the state's programs. A subsequent working group developed a timeline for action as well as specific programmatic steps that must be taken to develop an implementation plan to move to an improved service delivery system. Recommendations focus on a standards-based approach for deaf students and blind students and extending programs across the state.

"The state must do a better job of offering resources and services to our blind and deaf students," said Board member Karen McGee. "We owe our students the best education possible. Currently, blind and deaf students and parents have limited options for services. There is not an adequate coordinated effort from the state to help our students. The recommendations approved by the Board would set a timeline for action and begin improving programs immediately."

The Board approved a preliminary plan forwarded by the working group that includes splitting blind and deaf education programs and expanding services statewide. The process would begin with establishing standards for deaf/hard of hearing education programs and blind/visually impaired programs. Currently, the state sets minimum academic standards, but no standards specifically for deaf and blind education programs exist. Once standards are approved any deaf/hard of hearing and blind/visually impaired programs must meet the standards.

The recommendations also move to expand the state's system for students. Students would be offered a continuum of services that best fits the student's individual needs. No decision has been made whether the existing Idaho School for the Deaf and the Blind would close. The best means of expanding services will be studied over the next 18 months.

In addition, the Board will ask the Legislature to appropriate two full time administrators - one to the Idaho Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired and the other at the State Board of Education to create standards and establish services statewide. The Board will also ask the Legislature for funding and resources to support an administrative structure and services that are necessary to operate a statewide system.