2023-2025 Biennial Report

North Dakota Vision Services/ School for the Blind

Superintendent
Paul H. Olson

State Superintendent
Kirsten Baesler

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I. NDVS/SB AGENCY FUNCTIONS AND ORGANIZATION

North Dakota Vision Services/ School for the Blind

Agency Functions and Organization

OUR MISSION

To provide specialized and individualized services for people of all ages who are blind or low vision by partnering with families, educators, and agencies to empower them in achieving their goals.

CORE PRIORITIES

Increase awareness of services throughout the state for citizens affected by low vision or blindness.

Enhance lives through effective collaboration with families, schools and other agency partners.

Provide high quality assistance, assessment and instruction in specialized skills to help students and citizens achieve their goals.
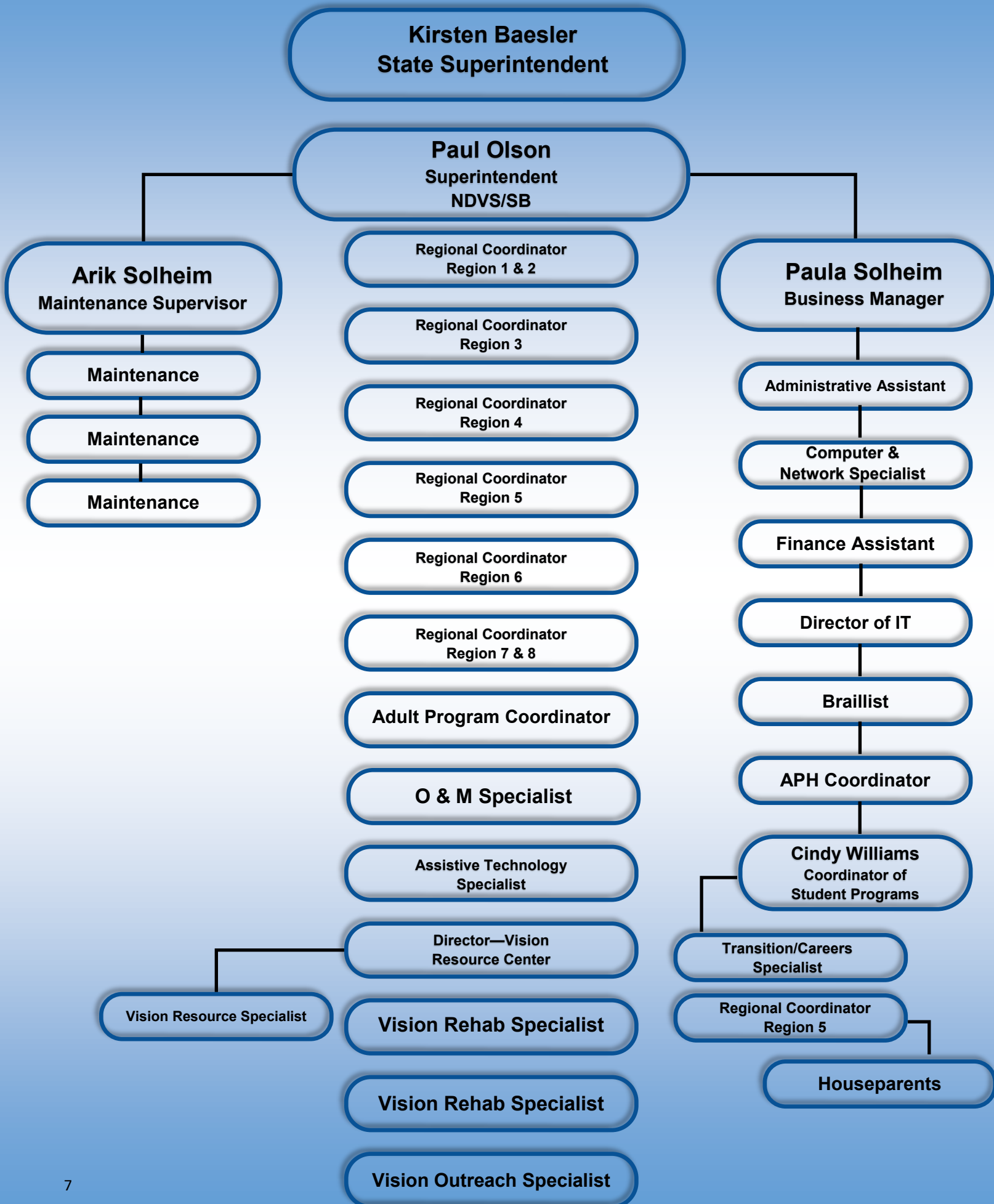
HISTORY

- **1908** The North Dakota Asylum for the Blind opened in Bathgate, ND.

- **1961** The school moved to Grand Forks to enable better transportation, medical services, and a more modern facility.

- **1995** The residential program was discontinued and a new model of short-term programs and outreach for children was established.

- **2001** Name change to North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind coincided with clarification of the mission to serve all ages.

- **2008** Celebration of the 100-year anniversary.

- **2020** The COVID-19 Pandemic suspended Short-Term Programs for students and adults from April through May of 2021.

- **2025** Initiative to enhance all Access Technology (AT) services provided by NDVS/SB.

NDVS/SB SUPERINTENDENTS

- 1908-1937   Benjamin Phillips Chapple
- 1937-1973   Herbert D. Jeffery
- 1973-1989   Charles Borchert
- 1989-1990   Alan Mealka
- 1990-1992   Betty Bender
- 1992-1994   Michael Graham
- 1994-2013   Carmen Suminski
- 2013-Present   Paul H. Olson

ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Kirsten Baesler
State Superintendent

Paul Olson
Superintendent
NDVS/SB

Arik Solheim
Maintenance Supervisor

- Maintenance
- Maintenance
- Maintenance

Regional Coordinator
Region 1 & 2

Regional Coordinator
Region 3

Regional Coordinator
Region 4

Regional Coordinator
Region 5

Regional Coordinator
Region 6

Regional Coordinator
Region 7 & 8

Adult Program Coordinator

O & M Specialist

Assistive Technology Specialist

Director—Vision Resource Center

Vision Resource Specialist

Vision Rehab Specialist

Vision Rehab Specialist

Vision Outreach Specialist

Paula Solheim
Business Manager

Administrative Assistant

Computer & Network Specialist

Finance Assistant

Director of IT

Braillist

APH Coordinator

Cindy Williams
Coordinator of Student Programs

Transition/Careers Specialist

Regional Coordinator
Region 5

Houseparents

STATUTORY/CONSTITUTIONAL REPSONSIBILITIES
CHAPTER 25-06 - EDUCATION OF BLIND PERSONS

25-06-01. North Dakota Vision Services/ School for the Blind – Maintained – Location. There must be maintained at Grand Forks, in Grand Forks County, a statewide service, resource, and referral center for the education and training of all residents of this state who are blind or have a visual impairment which must be known as the North Dakota Vision Services - School for the Blind.

25-06-01.1. Definitions. For purposes of this chapter, an individual who is blind means an individual who is totally blind or whose central visual acuity does not exceed twenty/two hundred in the better eye with corrective lenses, or the widest diameter of the visual field is no greater than twenty degrees; and an individual with a visual impairment means an individual with an impairment in vision which, even with correction, adversely affects the individual's functional ability.

25-06-02. Duties and responsibilities of North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind. Within the limits of legislative appropriation, North Dakota Vision

Provide vision-specific services that include consultations, evaluations, information, training, and educational services, including instruction in orientation, mobility, braille, braille music, daily living skills, technology, vocational training and recreation.

- Collect and distribute information on vision services and resources available in the state.

- Coordinate loans of adaptive devices, equipment, and materials.

- Maintain a data base of residents who are blind or have a visual impairment.

- Facilitate collaboration with agencies and programs providing services to individuals who are blind or have a visual impairment.

- Assist residents to access appropriate services, including services available from the vocational rehabilitation division, independent living centers, infant development programs, developmental disabilities programs, the state library, local education programs, and advocacy programs.

A teen sews a leather project during a summer program under the guidance of the Coordinator of Student Programs.

25-06-02.1. North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind – Appointment of superintendent, budget, staff, and reporting structure. The superintendent of the North Dakota Vision Services / School for the Blind is appointed by and reports to the superintendent of public instruction. The North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind must have a separate budget and separate staff from the department of public instruction.

225-06-02.2. Superintendent – Special duties. The superintendent of the North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind may also be the superintendent of the School for the Deaf.

25-06-03. Superintendent to possess certain qualifications. The superintendent of the North Dakota Vision Services/School for the Blind must possess those qualifications, educational and otherwise, as in the opinion of the superintendent of public instruction may qualify that person to instruct and minister to the needs of the blind persons.

MAJOR PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

The Vision Resource Center at NDVS/SB serves patrons from ages birth through end of life. This includes, but is not limited to, students, teachers, vision professionals, parents, and people with visual impairments or blindness. We manage and administer materials obtained through federal and state funding as well as grant funding sources. We strive to offer the latest in both professional and practical information for individuals whose lives are touched by visual impairment or blindness. We provide standard materials in non-standard formats, educate patrons in information literacy, and support the rights of all to the freedom of access to information. The Vision Resource Center is committed to the state-wide accessibility of its collection through Online Dakota Information Network (ODIN) and to a working partnership with the North Dakota State Library in providing all patrons within the state access to information despite physical or geographical limitations. Public awareness activities and education are, therefore, an important component of our mission. Requests for materials are taken over the telephone, by mail, via email, etc. "Our partnership with the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) is administered by the Ex Officio Trustee at NDVS/SB who oversees the federal quota funds that North Dakota receives for all legally blind students and eligible adults." Through it, textbooks and educational aids are provided free to eligible students in educational settings ranging from early intervention programs for visually impaired infants to rehabilitation for elders who have age-related vision loss, from center-based and residential school programs to the regular classroom.

A student attending a short-term program for elementary students reads a picture book with the help of a video magnifier obtained with APH funds.

The Store: The purpose of The Store is to provide persons who are blind or visually impaired direct access to a sampling of low-vision aids that they may need for daily living and enjoyment. The goal is to bridge that difficult first step in selecting low-vision aids. Some examples of items for sale are canes and tips, labeling and writing supplies, magnifiers, sewing and measuring aids, talking clocks, and a wide variety of recreational games. Print catalogs are available as well as a virtual catalog on the NDVS/SB website: ndvisionservices.com. Individuals are encouraged to access the catalog on-line to read product descriptions and view pictures of products. Whether someone is shopping for themselves or for a loved one, this catalog helps customers select the best product. Phone orders are welcome and staff is happy to answer questions. An additional benefit to North Dakota customers is that we do not charge shipping or handling fees.

Braille Access Center: The mission of the Braille Access Center is to provide equal access to print materials for persons who are blind or visually impaired. Materials are made available in braille and large print. Items prepared include agendas, programs, catalogs, flyers, brochures, reports, menus, tactile concept books, greeting cards, conference handouts, and correspondence. Customized braille materials are provided on a fee for service basis. A limited number of textbooks for students are produced annually upon request.

Regional Outreach Services: In providing a full range of services throughout the state, it is very important to sustain regional offices with highly trained teachers of the visually impaired. These teachers consult with local schools and other service agencies in the following areas: classroom adaptations, functional vision evaluation, orientation & mobility, technology, braille, vocational education, recreation, physical education, daily living skills and music. Regionally based teachers (coordinators) provide consultation and limited direct service. Case management is the responsibility of the local school; however, the NDVS/SB teacher works alongside the local educator as part of the IEP team. The regional teacher also works to coordinate consultation provided by other staff at NDVS/SB that specializes in areas of instruction like orientation & mobility and technology. The key to success in this model of service delivery is teamwork. Family and home based service is also typical. Home visits to observe and work with infants and preschoolers are frequent. The goal during home visits and through regular communication with parents is to provide needed support and vital information.

Short-term Programming for Students: The primary purpose of short-term programs is to provide high quality instruction and experiences to students to facilitate independence in the Expanded Core Curriculum and provide a foundation for overall academic achievement. Short-term student programs consist of numerous sessions throughout the school year and summer. These sessions allow for instruction in vision specific areas known nationally as the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). The sessions allow students in specific age groups to spend time periodically at NDVS/SB and in the community to enhance skills and receive one-on-one instruction in the Expanded Core Curriculum areas. Lessons are taught based on input from parents/guardians and teachers, utilizing various checklists, and incorporating input from informal and/or formal assessments in various ECC areas. The daily schedule has time devoted for specialized instruction from Teachers of the Visually Impaired, personal development, study skills and social activities. Selected weeks may have a particular instructional focus. After each session, written reports are compiled and disseminated to parents and the local school and/or other pertinent parties who are part of the educational team.

Short-Term Programs - Academic Year

- ♦ **Teen/Career Short-Term Programs (10th—12th grade)**
- ♦ **Middle School Short-Term Programs (6th—9th grade)**
- ♦ **Elementary Short-Term Programs (1st—5/6th grade)**
- ♦ **Summer Programs (Elementary, Middle School & High School)**

Adult Services: NDVS/SB provides vision specific services to adults which may include evaluations, consultations, and instruction in the following areas:

- ♦ Access to Community Resources
- ♦ Adaptive Technology
- ♦ Communication (i.e., braille, large print)
- ♦ Daily Living/Self Care Skills
- ♦ Functional Vision Evaluation
- ♦ Low Vision/Adaptive Techniques/Aids
- ♦ Orientation and Mobility
- ♦ Recreation/Leisure Activities

In-service Training: The Outreach Program offers in-service training for parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and additional staff working with persons with a visual impairment. These individuals have the opportunity to attend training sessions at NDVS/SB or outreach personnel may provide the training in the home, school, job site or workshop. Areas of training may include, but are not limited to:

- ♦ Braille
- ♦ Technology
- ♦ Daily Living Skills
- ♦ Visual Aids
- ♦ Orientation & Mobility
- ♦ Recreation/Leisure

NDVS/SB staff at the 2025 Family Weekend event in Minot.

2023-2025 BIENNIUM LEGISLATION
No new legislation specific to the operation of NDVS/SB was enacted.

2023-2025 RESPONSIBILITY ADDITIONS/DELETIONS
No changes in agency responsibility were added or deleted.

TRENDS

The following accurate commentary was created by an artificial intelligence assistance tool when posed with the task of summarizing *how today's major trends are reshaping the way teachers and rehab professionals work with children and adults who are blind or low vision:*

Teachers today are teaching in a very different landscape than even a few years ago. With AI-powered wearables, smart glasses, and advanced screen-reader tools becoming common, education and rehabilitation are shifting from "teaching a device" to teaching a system of skills that works across many technologies. Instead of training someone on one specific product, teachers now focus on helping learners build flexible digital literacy—skills that let them move confidently between phone-based apps, braille displays, mainstream computers, and AI assistants. This makes instruction more about strategy, problem-solving, and evaluating output from AI tools, rather than simply memorizing steps.

A middle school student uses a large monitor and color inversion as he works on his homework on a computer while attending a short-term program at NDVS/SB.

At the same time, the push for Accessible Educational Materials and Universal Design means teachers must think ahead and prepare content that is accessible from the start. Lesson planning increasingly involves choosing materials that work well with screen readers, magnification, braille displays, and audio formats. Instead of fixing access problems after the fact, teachers are expected to design learning environments where students can pick the format that suits them best—print, large print, audio, braille, or digital.

Telerehabilitation and virtual instruction have also changed teaching rhythms. Teachers and O&M specialists now blend in-person and remote sessions, using video calls to reinforce skills, provide follow-up training on devices, or reach people who cannot travel. This requires clearer communication, more intentional demonstrations, and the ability to coach students and families through technology setup at a distance.

With AI cameras and wearables constantly improving, teachers must also address new issues: accuracy limits, privacy rules, and when to rely on a device versus when to use foundational skills like braille, tactile graphics, or orientation techniques. The result is a more balanced approach—embracing new tools but still protecting core blindness skills that remain essential for employment, literacy, and navigation.

Finally, because tools are evolving quickly, teachers themselves must become continual learners. More time is spent staying updated, comparing devices, troubleshooting apps, and helping learners choose the right combination of tools for school, work, and daily life. The teaching role has expanded from instructor to technology guide, accessibility advocate, and problem-solving coach.

In short, national trends are pushing teachers to be more flexible, more tech-savvy, more proactive about accessibility, and more committed to teaching both digital and traditional blindness skills together—so learners can succeed no matter how technology changes next.
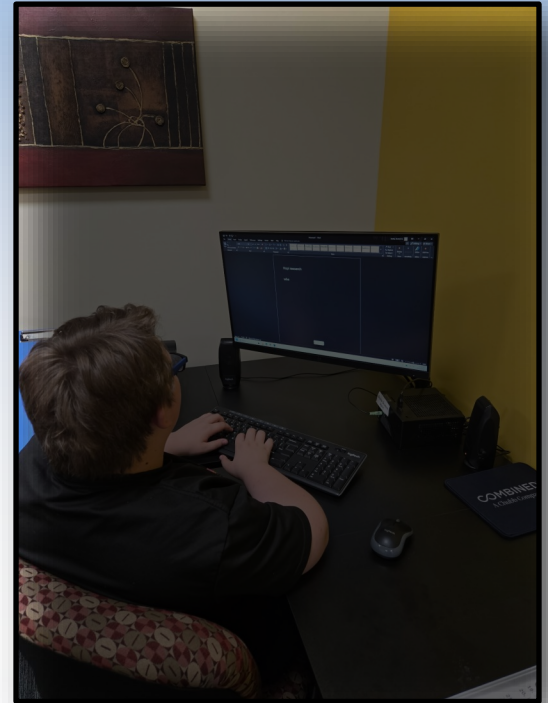
EMPOWERING
LIVES

MAJOR AGENCY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

On May 16, 2024, NDVS/SB hosted the agency's first-ever community open house in Grand Forks to raise awareness about NDVS/SB's services. Over 100 attendees, including local citizens, legislators, Lions Club members, and other stakeholders, gained valuable insights into our work.

During this period, NDVS/SB organized and hosted a high-impact, regional conference for vision/blindness professionals in education and rehabilitation across North Dakota and South Dakota. National experts presented on a range of critical topics and best practices.

Significant renovations were made to the west wing of our facility, enhancing both living and instructional spaces. These improvements expanded square footage for educational activities and modernized the environment, greatly benefiting the learning experience for students participating in short-term programs.

NDVS/SB and Community High School continue to have a mutually beneficial relationship. Community High School is the alternative school and adult education provider for Grand Forks Public Schools and is located in the west wing of the building. Between alternative education and adult education approximately 140 students are served on average. NDVS/SB provides maintenance support and limited IT support. In turn the biennial lease income from GFPS help support NDVS/SB services.

In April 2024, high school students with low vision participated in an educational trip to the Twin Cities. This program targeted nine ECC areas, including orientation and mobility, social skills, and assistive technology. Highlights included navigating urban spaces, visiting Vision Loss Resources and experiencing numerous cultural activities that can only be accessed in a metropolitan setting.

The updating of the ND Expanded Core Curriculum Assessment (NDECC) was a significant accomplishment for our educational team. The NDECC is a vital tool for assessing and planning instruction in areas related to the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC). The ECC supports students who are blind or have low vision in developing essential life skills beyond academics. The updated assessment was conducted on students during short-term programs, with positive feedback from IEP teams on its effectiveness in goal-setting.

In April of 2024 and again in 2025, NDVS/SB staff working in conjunction with a number of parent team members, planned and hosted Family Weekends. The 2024 weekend was held in Grand Forks and the 2025 weekend was held in Minot. During these weekend events, parents, students with low vision or blindness and their siblings converge to get acquainted, share stories and learn together. Veteran parent leaders facilitate discussions and share their experiences with parents that are just learning about the educational and real-life needs of their children. Many NDVS/SB staff devote evening and weekend time to do educational and recreational activities with all of the children in attendance while the parents meet. These events that generally include 12-15 family units create an atmosphere of positive energy and positive expectations for all involved.

The legislative approval of the 2025 to 2027 budget for NDVS/SB sets the stage for maintaining core services and enhancing citizen awareness of the resources available across the state for people of all ages. Funding to place billboards along travel corridors to increase awareness of NDVS/SB was proposed and approved. This novel approach will help reach North Dakotans in communities across the state who can benefit from consultative services.

NDVS/SB attended the Technology Showcase at the Capitol in March 2025. After the event, Governor Armstrong presented Titus, a student served by NDVS/SB with a signed baseball, which is both Titus's and the Governor's favorite sport.

IT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Our agency has taken a forward-thinking approach by equipping educators with real-time, actionable insights through Microsoft O365, Power BI analytics, enabling more informed and responsive citizen report interactions. We've made major strides in modernizing infrastructure by transitioning from local file systems to SharePoint that supports long-term records management and centralized employee and file management. Finally, our continued leadership in assistive technology AT ensures that low vision and blind citizens benefit from evolving tools and training that directly enhance their independence and quality of life.

A REVOLUTIONARY TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH

From the chalkboard to iPads, technology has transformed education. Today, students who are blind and low vision utilize low tech tools, like tactile rulers, and high tech devices, like video magnifiers, on a daily basis. These tools are essential, as they allow a student to learn the same skills and access the same information as their sighted peers. In 2024, a new device that is truly revolutionizing education for blind and low vision students took flight. The Monarch, which was created in partnership between HumanWare and the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), became available to purchase from APH. NDVS/SB purchased two Monarch devices in the summer of 2024 from APH using federal quota funds, which are awarded to each state based on an annual census of individuals who are blind and low vision. These devices, which cost approximately $14,900 each, are revolutionary because never has so much information been available to braille readers – literally at their fingertips – so quickly.

While most electronic braille reading devices today offer a 1-line refreshable braille display, the Monarch has a 10-line refreshable braille display, allowing a user to more quickly and easily read uninterrupted text. The Monarch also allows users to quickly and easily access APH's Tactile Graphic Image Library (TGIL) which contains thousands of tactile graphics, from the outline of a simple shape to complex maps and tables. Tactile graphics are essential for students who are blind or low vision to understand visual information, and the ability to be able to access these graphics on-demand is truly a game changer.

The Monarch revolution has already begun, as other companies are already developing or soon launching similar products. This will not only drive down the price but also make products like it as ubiquitous as the ruler or the chalkboard. The Monarch and products like it are truly the future of education for the students we serve at ND Vision Services/School for the Blind, and its growth will transform employment opportunities for these students in the future. The Monarch's flight will allow for more access, more independence, and more students who are prepared for a future of unlimited possibilities. That is what we hope for all of the people we serve at NDVS/SB, and the Monarch will help us reach that goal.

Tristan, an 8th grader in Devils Lake, uses the Monarch to complete many of his reading and writing assignments at school. He also uses it for recreational reading. His classroom teachers are more easily able to adapt their materials for him to access via the Monarch, and his Teacher of the Visually Impaired, Breanne Welk, says using it "empowers Tristan."

STATISTICAL INFORMATION

Services Provided

	2021-2023 Biennium	2023-2025 Biennium
Clients Served (Unduplicated):		
Infants/Students	312	297
Adults	222	237
Total	534	534
Vision Resource Center:		
New Loans	1,125	1,198
"Reaching Out" Newsletter (Circulated Quarterly)	376	594
APH Federal Registry	314	346
Store Sales (Invoices)	388	329
Braille Access Center (pages)	14,146	8,935
Short-term Center Based Programs (Persons Served):		
Short Term Programming	134	119
Adult Week	38	40
Summer Programming	38	38
Evaluations, Consultations and Instructions (Services Provided):		
Consultations	1,849	2,183
Evaluations	383	378
Instruction	9,629	9,858
In-Service Training (Attendees)	1,512	1,087

NDVS/SB attended the Technology Showcase at the State Capitol in March 2025. At our booth, 4th grader Titus (center) shared the assistive technology that he uses at his West Fargo school, including a braille writer and the Monarch, a cutting edge braille display produced by the American Printing House for the Blind. In the photo he is surrounded by his parents, his teacher of the visually impaired in West Fargo, and staff from NDVS/SB.

SUMMARY OF EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES

Revenues by Source

	Total
Donations	8,905.31
Admissions (Vocational Rehabilitation/Center Based Students out of state	9,868.27
Lease - Rent of Buildings GFPS, NDSH	342,755.10
Braille Access Center	1,904.36
Transfer from Common Schools/Ellendale Fund	1,679,700.00
Total Revenue	**2,043,133.04**

Expenditures by Program	General Fund	Federal Fund	Special Fund	Total
Maintenance & Utilities	499,439	-	913,301	1,412,740
Administration	742,783	-	89,889	832,672
Adult Program	230,731	-	43,199	273,930
Outreach (Age 0-5)	209,875	-	36,708	246,583
Outreach (Age 6-21)	2,042,187	-	200,992	2,243,179
Technology	632,315	-	97,777	730,091
Short Term Programs (K-12)	281,329	-	40,532	321,861
Vision Resource Center	725,542	-	22,037	747,579
Braille Access Center	-	-	3,884	3,884
Summer Camps	-	-	4,791	4,791
	5,364,200	**-**	**1,453,111**	**6,817,311**

BREAKDOWN OF EXPENDITURES BY LINE ITEM

Salaries - Permanent	3,654,244
Temporary Salaries	52,546
Overtime	926
Fringe Benefits	1,876,533
Total Salaries and Benefits	**5,584,248**
Travel	166,280
Supplies - IT Software	10,244
Supply/Material - Professional	8,684
Food and Clothing	12,302
Bldg, Grounds, Vehicle Supply	50,704
Miscellaneous Supplies	10,921
Office Supplies	9,656
Postage	2,786
Printing	125
IT Equipment under $5,000	30,373
Other Equipment under $5,000	13,906
Office Equip & Furniture-Under	10,969
Utilities	182,657
Insurance	21,260
Rentals/Leases-Equipment&Other	2,326
Rentals/Leases - Bldg/Land	12,957
Repairs	46,656
IT - Data Processing	102,503
IT - Communications	38,517
IT Contractual Services and Re	6,015
Professional Development	24,370
Operating Fees and Services	79,960
Professional Fees and Services	15,183
Medical, Dental and Optical	3,160
Total - Operating Expenses	**862,514**
Extra Repairs/Deferred Main	358,148
Equipment Over $5000	5,651
IT Equip / Software Over $5000	6,750
Total - Capital Assets	**370,549**
Total Expenditures	**6,817,311**
Expenditures by Source	
Total General Fund Expenditures	5,362,850
Total Special Fund Expenditures	1,454,461
Total Expenditures by Source	**6,817,311**

RESOURCES AND PUBLICATIONS

♦ "Reaching Out" Newsletter – Published three times each year

♦ Store Catalog

♦ Center Based and General Services Brochures

♦ Website — ndvisionservices.com

♦ Facebook— facebook.com/NorthDakotaVisionServicesSchoolForTheBlind

♦ Materials published by the NDVS/SB are available in alternative formats (i.e., braille, CD, large print, audio recording) upon request.

NOTICE OF NONDISCRIMINATION ND Vision Services/School for the Blind:

ND Vision Services/School for the Blind does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, sex (wages) or genetics in its programs and activities. For inquiries regarding nondiscrimination policies, please contact: Paula Solheim, Business Manager, ND Vision Services/School for the Blind, 500 Stanford Road, Grand Forks, ND 58203, (701) 795-2343.

The UND Swing Club has partnered with NDVS/SB to provide dance lessons to our students who attend short-term programs. One night during each student short-term program, Swing Club members teach our students basic dance steps. This is not only fun for students but has increased their confidence levels by being able to learn a lifelong skill in a no-pressure environment.

A teen proudly stands next to the mobile tool cart he helped build at NDVS/SB. This cart, which houses a variety of common household tools as well as accessibility devices, will allow students attending short-term programs to practice doing common household chores, like drilling holes, hammering nails, and sanding wood.