

School for Deaf could get new statewide mission

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The Washington School for the Deaf would get a new name — the Washington State Center for Childhood Deafness and Hearing Loss — along with a new statewide mission under legislation that passed the House on a unanimous vote this week.

Under House Bill 1879, prime-sponsored by Rep. Jim Jacks, D-Vancouver, the school's Vancouver campus would become the base for delivery of services close to home for students statewide who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The residential school would remain as part of the center, and its mission would not change.

Reps. Deb Wallace, D-Vancouver, Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver, and Ed Orcutt, R-Kalama, are co-sponsors of the bill. This is the third year the House has passed legislation

to broaden the school's role; in 2007 and 2008, those bills died in the Senate.

The legislation "is intended to bring more services to more young people in their communities all across the state," Jacks said. "The fact is that not everyone can send or wants to send their children to school in Vancouver. We need to establish more cooperation with local schools, school districts and educational service districts — and at the same time make it less expensive for everyone involved."

Rick Hauan, the School for the Deaf's current superintendent, would

become the director of the new institution. Under the legislation, Hauan and members of the school's board of trustees would travel to each of the state's nine

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SCHOOL, back page

School:

From Page C1

districts and meet with local school officials to look at the strength of their programs and identify service gaps.

Based on what they learn, school officials would recommend to the 2010 Legislature that two educational service districts become the sites of demonstration projects for innovative programs to serve deaf children. One of those ESDs would have to be in sparsely populated Eastern Washington, where children who are deaf often are isolated.

Staff members at the School for the Deaf already travel throughout the state to consult with local school districts that need their expertise to help them serve students with special needs, Hauan said.

"We have the most experienced staff in the state," he said. "Right now we travel to Spokane, Pullman, Wenatchee and Seattle." Though most local school districts have programs designed for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, he said, few have programs for students who, for example, are both deaf and autistic.

A total of 118 students are enrolled at the Vancouver campus this year, and 168 others who are deaf or hard of hearing are served around the state, primarily through video technology.

The legislation is the outgrowth of a 2006 study that raised questions about whether a residential school with low enrollment and high per-student costs was the most efficient way to deliver services to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. In the wake of the study, some lawmakers suggested that both the School for the Deaf and the Washington State School for the Blind be closed.

The 2006 Legislature appropriated \$55,000 for a survey of the quality of education provided to deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

In 2007, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy published a report recommending that a single state agency be charged with overseeing the quality of local, regional and statewide schools and programs serving students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Under the House bill, the center will provide statewide leadership and coordination of deaf-education services using the full range of communication modes, including American Sign Language, total communication and oral-aural technology.