



## Rhode Island General Assembly

### 2021 Report on RIVESP

#### Summary

The Rhode Island Vision Education and Services Program (RIVESP) was created by legislation in 2006 to coordinate statewide services for school aged students who are blind or have low vision. The services it provides include vision assessment, direct instruction, and consultation with classroom teachers or families. Additionally, orientation and mobility services are available. The program employs both certified Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVIs) as well as Orientation and Mobility Specialist (O&M). Historically, RIDE provides federal IDEA Part B funds<sup>1</sup> to subsidize the program while local school districts who utilize the program provide the remaining funding through a fee-for-service structure.

To date, the statewide program has been primarily operated through a contract awarded to the Sherlock Center at Rhode Island College. That 5-year contract was due to expire on June 30, 2020. However, due to the difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and a desire to maintain continuity and quality of services, RIDE made the determination to extend the contract for one year, consistent with Department of Administration Policy. That decision was made in consultation with the Sherlock Center leadership.

At the end of that contract period, RIDE issued an RFP<sup>2</sup> in the form of an MPA<sup>3</sup>. The Sherlock Center applied and received a 5-year, 2020-2025, contract for a total sum of \$684,600.00.

#### Statutory History

In 2006, RI General Law § 16-26.1-1-5 was enacted which outlines RIVESP. Included in the legislation is the RIVESP Advisory Board, which advises RIDE on the program. Members are appointed by the Commissioner of Education. The act requires RIDE, through the Commissioner of Education and the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education (formerly the Board of Regents), to manage the program. RIDE is required to annually review the program and report to the General Assembly, which this document serves to fulfill. The Act allows for different approaches in designing the program, such as regional approaches (RI Gen L § 16-26.1-4). RIDE determines how to best meet the students' need, which may also involve changing the program's

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<sup>1</sup> Part B of the IDEA contains two sections—Part B, Section 611 contains provisions relating to special education for school-aged children with disabilities (ages 3 through 21) and Part B, Section 619 addresses the supplemental state grants program for preschool children with disabilities (ages 3 through 5). The grant programs authorized under Part B of the IDEA provide federal funding to states and local educational agencies (LEAs) for the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities.

<sup>2</sup> RFP is a Request For Proposals, part of the formal procurement process through the State of Rhode Island's Department of Administration.

<sup>3</sup> MPA is a Master Price Agreement or Master Purchasing Agreement.



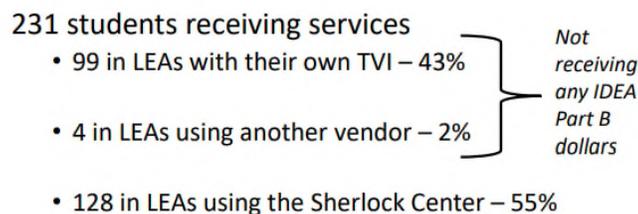
structure in order to most effectively and efficiently meet the needs of students. The Act creating RIVESP may be viewed here: [Chapter 16-26.1 - Index of Sections \(state.ri.us\)](#).

### Program Review

In collaboration with Sherlock Center leadership and in anticipation of a new contract, RIDE conducted a comprehensive review of the programmatic and fiscal functions of RIVESP services in 2019-2020. RIDE also examined how other states are managing vision education services to provide an analysis for the future direction of services in Rhode Island.

Through the program review, RIDE found that since 2015, district participation in the Sherlock Center’s program declined. Many local school districts utilizing the program through the Sherlock Center regarded the services to be appropriate for meeting the need of the students as prescribed in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). However, several districts selected to offer their own services for a variety of reasons: some LEAs were hiring their own vision teachers, and some LEAs were electing to use a different vendor. Regardless, program costs at Sherlock continued to increase, rooted in staffing levels, operating costs, and contractual obligations.

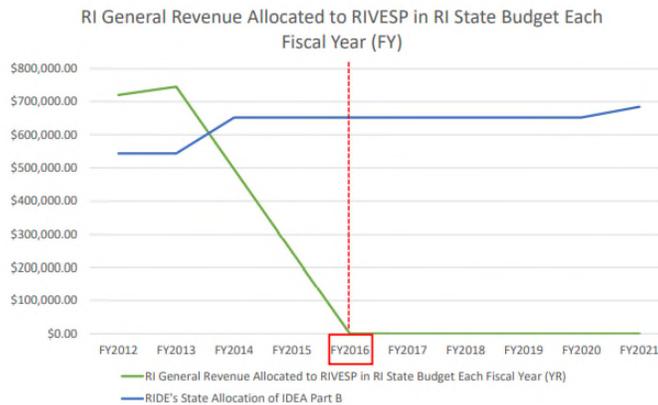
## State Student Service Totals



Additionally, as RIDE reviewed the program fiscally, it became apparent that declining enrollment and increasing costs have left the Sherlock Center program with a significant and growing fiscal deficit. RIDE found that the revenue for the Sherlock Center program is well short of the needed funds to operate the program with current staffing levels regardless of the RIDE IDEA Part B subsidy. It is worth noting that this is the only program in the state directly receiving a subsidy. As a result, there is currently no statewide professional development capacity building effort for educators supporting students who are blind or visually impaired; all of the current funds support direct services and staff salaries.



## RI General Revenue Support



To address these emerging fiscal concerns, the Executive Director of the Sherlock Center has also conducted a complete review of the efficiency of the program and has concluded that changes will need to be made in order to sustain the services if they remain a service of the Sherlock Center. RIDE sought and secured approval from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to add service codes for Medicaid reimbursement to local school districts for some reimbursement of eligible vision services. This was done in order to help local school districts to defray some of the cost for the services if effectively accessed. Additionally, the state continues to fund the High Cost Special Education Categorical fund which may be accessed by local school districts for students whose cost of education exceeds an annual threshold. Some students eligible for vision services may be eligible for this funding.

### Conclusions

The RI General Law that created the statewide system of RIVESP empowers the Commissioner of Education as well as the Council of Elementary & Secondary Education to manage and oversee the state's vision service program, with input from the RIVESP advisory board. Clearly, a single entity for providing services statewide has served well for a number of years, but fiscal and programmatic changes initiated by LEAs require consideration of a new design approach to statewide vision services. School districts in the state have signaled a need for change by choosing alternatives for meeting the needs of children, other than through a single statewide vendor. As school districts have moved to a mixed service model it is becoming apparent that the Sherlock Center sole source program is not sustainable in its current design.

The Advisory Committee and special education directors agree that accountability for the program's services, cost effective management of the program, and improved coordination with local school districts need to be addressed.