

Mustang Express

Montana School for the Deaf & the Blind



Lifting students beyond expectations

Volume XXXII Issue 2 Spring 2025



Morris takes aim



pg. 8-9- Meet the new
Foundation president

pg. 11- The Archery
Project

Mark Willmarth
Chair
Vision West, Inc.

Todd Carmichael
Vice President
O'Connor Funeral
Home

Laura Walker
Secretary/
Treasurer
Attorney at Law

Cathy Copeland
ASL Interpreter
MSU Billings

Vena Dagnall
MT Hands & Voices

Bonnie DeNoma
Retired MSDB
Foundation

Kevin Eckhardt
VP First Interstate
Bank

**Dee Dee Franzen-
Wallen**
Parent of Former
VI Student

Paul Furthmyre
MSDB
Superintendent

Jim Kelly
MSDB Student
Life Director

Connie Keogh
Legislator
Retired Educator

Tammy Lacey
Retired Great Falls
Public School
Superintendent

Doug Little
Retired Teacher &
Parent of MSDB
Student

Gary McManus
Retired MSDB
Teacher/Coach

Shyla Patera
North Central
Independent Living
Former MSDB
Student

Travis Stevenson
MSDB Parent

Rick Thompson
Retired Hi-Line
Home
Programs



From the Superintendent



Welcome to 2025! It is crazy to be thinking we are in our spring semester. It feels like the school year just started. That means that the students and staff at MSDB have been busy with learning, activities, and developing. On the administrative side, it has been busy getting ready for the legislative session. We are currently nineteen (19) days into the session, and MSDB has been involved at its highest level – for which we are thankful.

One bill that we have been working on with the Interim Education Budget Committee over the past two years is to support the recruitment and retention of Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Teachers of the Deaf, and Educational Interpreters. House Bill 151 sponsored by Representative Connie Keogh does exactly that not only for MSDB but also for all public schools around Montana. When recruiting these employees to work in the state of Montana, MSDB has to recruit from colleges and universities from around the country, as Montana currently has no programs.

One specific aspect of the bill will provide for a Quality Educator Payment for any certified educational interpreter employed by any district in Montana. Currently, educational systems receive no financial support for employing educational interpreters. The bill defines an educational interpreter as an interpreter that has earned a 3.5 or higher on the EIPA exam. This rule comes from ARM 10.55.718. Once this becomes law, MSDB will then find a partner to start providing educational interpreter training for our interpreters in our state.

The bill sponsors and MSDB administration believe this is a great way to develop an understanding of the current landscape in Montana. As of now, we have no solid data on how many certified interpreters are working in our public schools. If a district claims an educational interpreter for a QE payment, we will learn how many EIPA certified interpreters are employed by our public schools. That's a start. An exciting one.

In Mustang Spirit,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Paul Furthmyre'.

Paul Furthmyre



PRESCHOOL CORNER

Early Learning at Its Finest



Owen carrying his own tray to the snack table



Oliver, Talitha and Charlie build graham cracker houses



Owen learns to pour his own juice



Talitha making Snow Cream with Mrs. Williams



Owen gets his yogurt from the fridge independently



Oliver and Talitha building together

Oh the Places We Will Go!

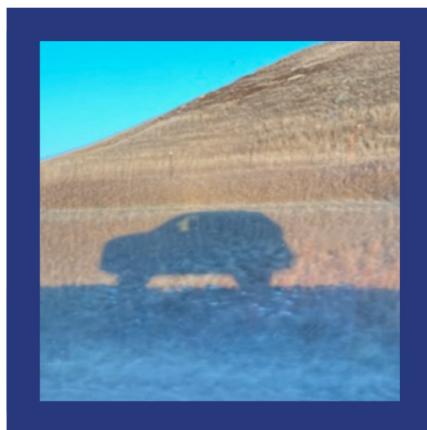
by Barbara Peterson, Outreach Vision Consultant

MONTANA, nicknamed Big Sky Country, is loved by so many because of its vast natural beauty, wide open spaces, and abundant outdoor recreation opportunities like fishing, hunting, and skiing, with a lifestyle focused on nature and tranquility. With a population of just over 1 million, Montana continues to grow. It is the fourth largest state in the nation made up of approximately 147,040 square miles in land area grouped into 56 counties. In 2022, Montana reported to have 402 school districts and 826 schools serving 149,198 students. Indeed, Montana is a beautiful state, and I can personally attest to my love for Montana having lived here for over sixty years. I cannot express enough my deepest connections to this state and the many memories I have had living here.

The Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind Outreach Program spans Montana's diverse population pallet, under the guidance of our Outreach Director, Miranda Briggs. Sixteen consultants, highly committed to their work serving 1,175 children with sensory impairments, cover every corner of the state using their cars as "mobile offices". The ability to serve children who are deaf & hard of hearing and blind & visually impaired in their schools and homes, allows them to remain in their communities and neighborhood schools. All Outreach Consultants are trained, certified and knowledgeable in their area of specialty. Some services offered by our consultants include recommendations and consultation to classroom teachers and specialists, home-based consultative services, provision of resources and specialized instructional materials, conducting assessment, and offering in-service and training to schools, daycare centers, and other agencies supporting children with sensory needs. Additionally, the Outreach program also plans and provides specialized events on the MSDB campus each year including Family Learning Weekends and Campus Enrichment Days to enhance the lives of families and students.

Oh the Places We Will Go (and have been to)! What a joy it has been and continues to be for both us and those we serve in the Outreach program. For more information, visit our website msdbmustangs.org, and check out the Outreach tab to find a complete list of the Consultants and identify those to contact in your area.

**Photo taken by Emily LaSalle,
DHH Outreach Consultant,
driving from Medicine Lake to
Plentywood, MT (Fall, 2024)**



Mustang
Express 5

New Clubs Increase Problem Solving

by Missie Williams and Mikhael Rosenberg, Co-club Sponsors



Marissa and Myra connecting to the Sphero mini

Last year we revamped Jogging Jokers to become Moving Mustangs. This club would be focused on movement, health, and problem solving. The students loved the change. The club continued this year to keep that momentum going. Students were sent on a scavenger hunt to find various articles on campus and then, in teams of three, they had to use the items to create a specific machine. The items ranged from rubber bands to sticks, bolts, crayons, and rope. The only guidelines were that all items must be included and it needed to fly 10 feet. It was wonderful to see the excitement and creativity!

This year, we decided to build on their problem solving skills, as well as strengthen one of our Journey of A Learner goals, which was to be a digital learner. In order to do this, we needed to work with them on responsible tech usage. We also introduced AI and how to use it responsibly. Then we broke out the robots. Through Donor's choose and an anonymous donor, we got 12 Sphero-mini robots. The students got to play around and get comfortable with them and then they began learning to program them from a phone or iPad. The sky is the limit with the excitement and interest we are seeing! Watch out world, we are problem solvers!!



Bridger, David, and Elijah operating the Sphero mini by voice



Angelina, Alana, Elijah, Noah, and Morris working on their creations



Elijah, Morris, and David attempting to fly

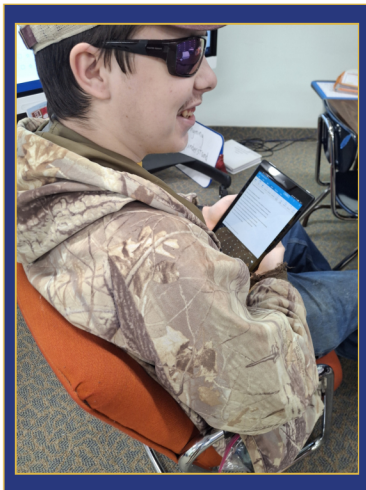
Genius Hour

by Naomi Witham-Travers, VI teacher

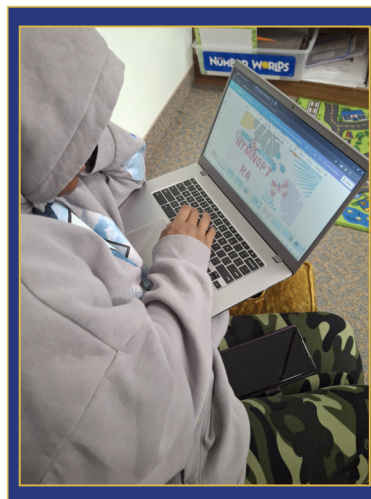
This year, to begin the school year, the staff of MSDB participated in a professional development opportunity with Adam Welcome. He was very enthusiastic and excited about teaching students and the energy he exuded was contagious. One of his many ideas was to share what he knew about the concept of the Genius Hour. According to Kesler Science, the idea originated at Google. Employees spend 20% of their work time on special, self-chosen projects. They discovered that the allotment of this special work time not only improved morale, but it also improved work production. The concept has continued in the field of education. Give students the time and resources to research something meaningful to them, and they will become more knowledgeable on the topic and work harder.

My first period class this year is a room full of high school seniors. The Genius Hour idea was explained to them, and their interest and creativity did not disappoint. They each established a “Driving Question,” a concept about which they sought to gain a deeper understanding. After establishing this question, they began researching their individual concepts and planning presentation modes to share that information with others. You might assume high school students would be silly and seek out information about their favorite band or food, but they were really quite impressive and intellectual in their pursuits. Levi has chosen to research how the brain creates dream sequences. Dirk is investigating how prosthetic limbs can be connected to the brain to create thought produced movement. Amerra is pursuing the topic of bee evolution.

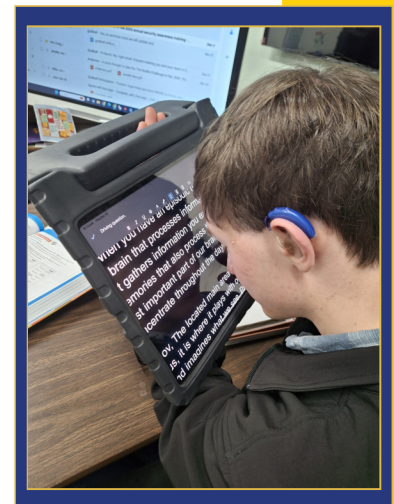
The Genius Hour project is a year-long undertaking, but projects are already in full swing. When completed, the projects will be shared with our MSDB family so we can all benefit from the research conducted by our students. I look forward to seeing what our students have learned and sharing it with others!



Dirk



Amerra



Levi

Genius Hour



MONTANA SCHOOL
for the DEAF & the BLIND

FOUNDATION

Montana School *for the* LIFTING STUDENTS



Greetings to the MSDB Community

My name is Todd Carmichael, and I am the incoming president of the MSDB Foundation. I have lived in the Great Falls community for more than twenty-eight years, and for twenty-five of those years I have driven by this wonderful complex that is the home to MSDB, but I really had no idea what an impact that MSDB has on the lives of the students and families that we serve.



I came to the MSDB Foundation Board by way of an invite from our out-going president Mark Willmarth, and the last two years under his leadership have just been a whirlwind of activity. We have seen great things accomplished, both on our campus and around the state with the out-reach programs that the school provides, but there is still so much more that can be done. We have an outstanding group of board members who have great enthusiasm “to lift our students beyond what the world expects”.

Deaf & the Blind Foundation

BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

Even with this, we as the MSDB Foundation need to continue to work with a tremendously dedicated staff at MSDB to fund the activities, programs, and equipment that provide an enriched life to our students.

I am also a member of the Great Falls Lions Club, and one of the goals that I hope to achieve is to build a stronger relationship with the Lions Clubs from around Montana. I am totally amazed that MSDB serves well over a thousand students throughout Montana with its outreach programs. Its vitally important that the Foundation finds way to get the word out how MSDB can provide services that enrich the lives of the visually impaired and hard of hearing community.

In closing, I would like to invite you to reach out to any of our board members, and let us tell you more about the Foundation, and of the great things that can be done with your help. It is with your help that we can make a difference in the quality of life of our students. Thank you



“Individually, we are one drop. Together we are an ocean.” –Ryunosuke Satoro

How You Can Help

With your help, the MSDB Foundation has been able to provide funds for services and equipment not covered by state funding. The Foundation is committed to funding academic and extracurricular activities that help prepare students for independent lives.

Please join us in that commitment by making a tax-deductible donation to www.msdbmustangs.org or mailing it to:

MSDB Foundation P.O. Box 6576 Great Falls, MT 59406

For more information, please call 406-771-6040

MustangExpress

DONATE TO A GOOD CAUSE

CAMPS

Summer camp for VI-
\$5000
Summer camp for DHH-
\$5000

CLUBS

Performing Clubs-
(Expressions of Silence,
Flying Hooves, Visually
Impaired Performers)
\$5000

AWARDS, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Student awards- \$5000
Staff awards -\$7000
Continuing education for
staff-\$30,000



TRIPS/SPORTS

Ski trip- \$4000
Senior Trip- \$7500
Academic Bowl- \$10,000
NW Association of Blind
Atheletes- \$12,000

CELEBRATIONS

Campus cottage holiday
celebrations
(Christmas, Easter,
Halloween)
\$2500

EQUIPMENT

Audiology testing
equipment- \$16,000
Hearing Molds- \$3500

The Archery Project: Inspiring a Life-Long Hobby through 4-H Membership

By Megan DeSilva, Cottage Counselor

Six of our cottage 4-H members are doing the Archery Project. We have archery practices every week, and each member is getting better and better! Some members have had previous experience with archery, but many are brand new to the sport.

I came to discover that there is blind archery, also known as para archery, at the Paralympics. The Paralympics are a series of international multisport events for athletes with disabilities. To participate, archers shoot over a distance of 30 meters using tactile sights with the help of assistants to help load arrows and score. It's all about control, practice, posture, and mental focus—essential skills that don't focus on vision.

4-H has been great with accommodating our students in 4-H Archery. One of our 4-H members loves to participate even though he is blind. 4-H adapted a laser light that is connected to the compound bow to assist the volunteers helping the member who is blind aim when he shoots. This is only temporary, though. In the near future, he will have a tripod set up next to him to help aim on his own by touching his hand to the tripod stand. He will also have a device on the ground to help him with his stance.

An interpreter attends every practice to assist the members who are deaf or hard of hearing. 4-H's introduction to archery could trigger a life-long hobby for members. All of the members' archery fees have been paid by the MSDB Foundation, and we are so grateful for their support. MSDB staff love that students get to participate in this challenging sport!



Dirk preparing to shoot an arrow



Carter ready to go



Angelina shooting her bow



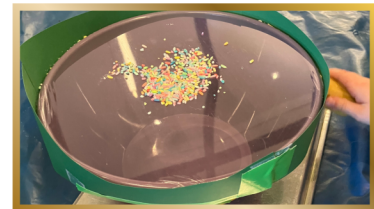
Angelina, Ayvia, and Bill

ASL and Music Come Alive for Storytime in Bozeman

By: Katie James, Deaf/Hard of Hearing Outreach Consultant

A wonderful collaboration occurred last fall when the Montana School for the Deaf and Blind partnered up with the Bozeman Symphony, Montana Shakespeare in the Parks, and the Bozeman Public Library. Cierra Wallace of the Bozeman Symphony had an idea that several people helped bring to life. The Bozeman Library regularly hosts a Family Storytime event and offered that Cierra could present for one of the days slotted for the event. I learned from a Bozeman colleague that Cierra was wanting assistance with a Deaf community component for her event. I contacted Cierra who shared her vision for the event. We planned and coordinated. I reached out to Char Harasymczuk, a Deaf Mentor for MSDB, and secured an interpreter from the Bozeman area to ensure accessible communication for all. Char was thrilled to join in for the storytime and began to prepare for the big day.

After much planning and rehearsing, the big day finally came. The room was packed elbow-to-elbow with families, including 3 MSDB Outreach families, some of whom had traveled several hours just to attend the event. Others from the local Deaf community came and joined in the fun. Montana Shakespeare in the Parks' Associate Artistic Director Riley O'Toole and Char co-read two books. The books, *Moses Goes to a Concert* and *Cesaria Feels the Beat*, featured Deaf characters who experience music in their own way. Riley read in English and Char signed in ASL. Both readers have quite the theatrical talent, making the stories come to life. Bozeman Symphony percussionist Jeffrey Vick played various percussion instruments as music was referenced throughout the stories. After the stories were read, families were able to explore the percussion instruments with Jeffrey, feeling the vibrations, and checking out other music activities set up around the room using their senses of touch and sight. How wonderful to see the gift of music experienced in a fun and accessible way!



Percussion vibration



Riley and Char



Char and Jeffrey

A Book A Day...

by Sherri Widhalm, MS, CCC-SLP, LSLs Cert. AVEEd.

Speech Language Pathologist and Listening/Spoken Language Specialist

If you read just one book a day to your child, they will have experienced 1,825 books by their 5th birthday. That is a lot of books! Story time is important for brain development, even for babies who do not talk yet. Research shows that consistent reading is essential for the development of speech, language, and listening. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages parents and caregivers to start reading to their children at birth and continue reading to them through at least kindergarten.

For very young children, parents should read with energy, animation, and enthusiasm. Read books with rhyme and rhythm. Read books with repeated patterns. Use specific book language (i.e. the title, author, turn the page, the end). Look at and describe the pictures while naming and pointing and encouraging the child to do so also. Books are an amazing way to expose a child to rich language and vocabulary not typically used in conversations. Make reading part of your daily routine!

For the slightly older child, reading is a time that can strengthen family bonds. Grab a good book and sit on the couch together. Take the opportunity to talk about the book, share thoughts and feelings, and ask questions. Sharing books with children, and not just reading to them, means using the story to spark a conversation. It is through conversations about the book that children can learn the early literacy skills that prepare them to become skilled readers and writers. Remember, even older children enjoy having a book read to them!

Whatever the age of the child, every book read aloud counts! Open a book and fall into a conversation. Open up a new world by choosing different kinds of books. Reading aloud allows children to practice sitting, listening, and paying attention: all things that will help them learn in school. Reading books with a child is one of the most important things parents can do to help grow the child's brain. By reading aloud with a child, you will be introducing rich new words, providing a model for fluent reading, and helping the child see how wonderful books can be. Always remember, a lot can be gained by reading just a book a day!

Sherri reading to Elijah,
Myra, and Morris





Feeling motion
with a tire



Giant UNO



Motion with robots

C.E.D. - Campus Enrichment Days by Lace Lesofski, DHH Outreach Consultant

Twice a year, MSDB hosts Campus Enrichment Days (C.E.D.), bringing students to campus for a unique opportunity to explore MSDB, collaborate with peers who share similar vision or hearing needs, and make new friends. In the fall of 2024, MSDB's Outreach team introduced an exciting change by merging the Visually Impaired Enrichment Weekend (VIEW) and Deaf Enrichment Weekend (DEW) into the first-ever combined enrichment event. The rebranded Campus Enrichment Days took place on November 15–16, 2024.

Over 30 students from across the state participated in the event, which embraced the theme, The Sky's the Limit! On Friday, attendees joined campus students for classes and lunch, fostering connections and collaboration. Saturday featured hands-on sessions led by special guests from the Civil Air Patrol, offering participants an exciting introduction to flight simulation, drones, and rockets.

The event was a resounding success, with students engaging, learning, and building friendships in an inspiring environment.

A heartfelt thank-you goes to the families who brought their children to campus, as well as to the campus teachers, cottage staff, administrators, and kitchen team for their invaluable support in making this event memorable! Save the Date!

Our next Campus Enrichment Days will take place on April 4–5, 2025, with a Kentucky Derby theme. Stay tuned for more details **from the Outreach Consultants!**



Story time



Checking out MSDB
campus



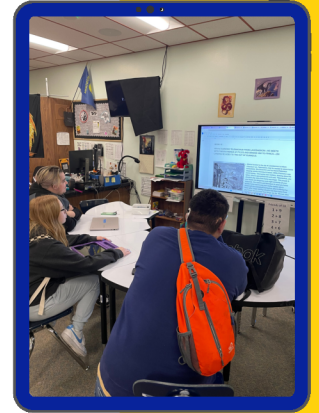
Braille Cards

Using AI to Make Literature Accessible

by Jessteene Clifford, DHH Teacher

Who doesn't remember their high school English classes and the classic stories that you were able to immerse yourself in, Romeo and Juliet, Great Expectations, The Odyssey. The language was challenging and somewhat archaic but that made it all the more intriguing and motivating. However for many students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing the language of those stories is just so challenging that the struggle to read it overshadows the interest and excitement of the story, which then hinders the student's acquisition of essential reading skills. Many teachers have resorted to rewriting the text at the target level of the students but this is an arduous and lengthy process that is difficult to find the time to accomplish.

Now with the advent of Artificial Intelligence we are able to take a lengthy text, like the Odyssey, and have AI convert it into a translation that is challenging yet accessible. The AI tool that I discovered was able to take the Butler translation of the Odyssey and still keep the style of the text, rendering it into a more palpable read. I was able to choose the exact grade level of text that would be challenging but not overwhelming for the students. Now instead of struggling with each paragraph we are able to be absorbed in the story, examine the nuances of Odysseus's character, discuss selected vocabulary that is challenging, examine literary devices and make connections. AI has begun to equal the playing field for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students and assist teachers of these students to better accommodate their needs. I know that my students have definitely benefited from this technology.



David,
Marissa,
and Marias

Fun Basketball Activities

by Darreck Hale, Cottage Counselor

What a wonderful weekend to have fun activities in the cottage at MSDB. This weekend the staff took all of the cottage students over to the gym to have a good time. It was exciting to have our gym to play games in and to keep us all interacting. We decided to start with a basketball game called Thunder. This was a quick activity that got us all smiling and laughing together as we enjoyed the energy and adventure. After a while, it was decided to play the game horse together and enjoy some relaxation.

All of the basketball activities were going very well at the gym. However, we reached the right moment to change things up a little and play an intense game. We decided to play a challenging game we called legs on the wall with a ball. We all laid down on the ground and put our legs on the wall. We then took one ball and passed it between our legs to the end of the gym in a race. The students loved this game so much that we ended up doing it multiple times until we could no longer lift the ball.



Darreck
cheering
on Morris,
Ayvia,
Madison,
and Angelina



**Montana School for
the Deaf
and
the Blind**

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From the Editor

Missie Williams

As I sit in my classroom in the early morning working on paperwork, I stop and think about how far this school has come. When I started here 10 years ago as the special education coordinator and science teacher, I remember thinking that this school was so different compared to where I had been teaching. There were not a lot of elective classes and many of the academic classes were paper and pencil based. The students had some disability-specific classes that they also attended. I look at all the students who have graduated in that time and realize how lucky we all are for this school. In the past ten years, we have had some staff changes, got a new principal, and a superintendent that pushes the school towards greatness.

We introduced a wood shop, where the students are learning to make cabinets and do wiring. We have ECC classes that teach students many life skills they need to be independent. We started a financial literacy class, which I teach, that will prepare students for budgeting, taxes, social security, and retirement. We teach our students to travel safely, speak clearly, communicate through different modes, and be all they can be.

I am not only proud of the students for all they achieve, but I am also extremely proud to be part of a staff that cares enough to go the extra mile, both in and outside of the school.

Missie Williams mwilliams@msdb.k12.mt.us
Special Education Coordinator/Indian Education Coordinator/
Science Teacher/ Mustang Express Editor

WHERE IN THE 406?

These are places and things seen by our Outreach consultants on their many travels around the state.

Can you guess where this is located?



Butte, Montana



**Watch for updates on
our Bowling Alley on
campus!!**



Let's get social!



#MtSDB



@msdbfoundation

**16 Mustang
Express**

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