

School for the Deaf's odd year

No one graduating for only 2nd time

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The Rochester School for the Deaf is a very small institution. That comes with benefits and drawbacks.

There are sometimes fewer than five students in a classroom, allowing for an intimacy unrivaled at larger schools. But such low numbers can also be a cause for concern.

This year, for only the second time in its 139-year history, the school on St. Paul Street has no official graduating class. The oddity reflects a national decline in the number of students classified as hearing-impaired and the resulting struggle for schools for the deaf to maintain their enrollment.

The only other year with zero official graduates was 1970, according to the school's best historical records.

Lining up a graduating class can be complicated. Some students delay their graduation thanks to a state law that allows students with disabilities, including hearing impairment, to stay in school until age 21 to work toward a diploma or other credential. Others get a certificate that is available only to students with multiple or severe disabilities and is not considered an official graduation for state reporting purposes.

Dwain Pratt, 18, has decided to strike out on his own. He is leaving the School for the Deaf to enter Project SEARCH, a national program affiliated with UR Medicine that helps people with disabilities train for careers.

He completed his program at the School for the Deaf but decided not to pursue a Regents diploma. For that, the school counted him as a graduate, even if the state does not. He was the only student to walk across the stage in cap and gown at the school's end-of-year

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awards ceremony Thursday.

"This was not usual," principal Nancy Perry said of his solo act. "(But) we'll still make it special for him. One of the nice things about our school is that we're kind of like a family, and we treat each other that way."

Enrollment factors

School officials characterize this year as a blip — there is a healthy class of prospective 2016 graduates — but fluctuations in enrollment can weigh heavily on a special school with only 75 students in grades K-12.

The factors weighing on enrollment are national as well as local.

U.S. Department of Education statistics show the number of children ages 3-21 with a hearing impairment has been stable — about 80,000 — for at least 30 years. But the proportion being served in mainstream classrooms rather than special schools has been rising steadily and now stands at about 86 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

A school's most basic charge under federal law is to provide students with disabilities with an appropriate level of support while keeping them in the "least restrictive environment" possible. In general, students wind up at schools for the deaf after an individualized review by their public school district concludes they would be better served outside general education.

Integration into general education is seen as a worthy goal for special education, but for the deaf, "full inclusion" can be cause for protest. That is because, unlike those with some other disabilities, the deaf and hard-of-hearing have a choice between two vibrant and viable cultures, each anchored by its own common language.

In a position paper, the National Association of the Deaf writes: "Schools for the deaf are unique and provide a community of genuine membership for many deaf children. ... Educating children indirectly through interpreters or technologies is not effective or efficient, especially with respect to the initial steps of language acquisition."

New Rochester School for the Deaf Superintendent Antony McLetchie, who is deaf, agreed and said students with hearing impairments often face subtle discrimination in general education settings.

"Will (deaf students) have access to extracurriculars and deaf role models and be able to develop their social skills if they're in a mainstream school?" he asked through an American Sign Language interpreter. "I doubt it. ... Families cry with joy when they come here and see 80 kids at lunch, signing. And the kids just light up."

State regulations

The New York state regulations concerning admission to schools for the deaf make it more likely that hard-of-hearing students will stay in general education schools.

A New York student cannot attend a school for the deaf unless he has lost 80 decibels of hearing capability (barring some extenuating circumstances regarding multiple disabilities). In most other states, the threshold is 55 decibels lost.

As a result, many New York children who would be attending schools for the deaf in other states are instead taught in public schools, even if ASL is their primary means of communication at home.

McLetchie said he plans to push for a change to that law as part of a broader focus on increasing enrollment.

A state Education Department spokesman did not respond when asked for the reasoning behind the 80-decibel threshold. Chris Suriano, a former state special education official who now leads the Rochester School District program, said it is part of the push for integration.

In 2014-15, 41 deaf or hard-of-hearing Rochester students attended city schools compared with 19 at the School for the Deaf.

"If they need a full-time interpreter, they get a full-time interpreter," Suriano said about mainstreamed students. "It's pretty much whatever they need for access. ... If they're being socially isolated, it would be something (the student's committee on special education) needs to address."

The two Rochester-area BOCES provide services for 111 students between them. Among those students are the two daughters of Mike Doughty, who is both the deputy superintendent of Monroe 1 BOCES and the president of the School for the Deaf's board of directors.

"When we first found out our older daughter was deaf, I thought there'd be a recipe for helping her, but it's actually really different in every case," Doughty said. Both his daughters first attended the School for the Deaf, then switched to Hilton public schools.

McLetchie took over as superintendent of the School for the Deaf in April. He said boosting enrollment in the face of the national trend is one of his top priorities.

"My first goal is to have Rochester School for the Deaf be the first choice of any deaf or hard-of-hearing student in the Rochester area," he said. "That's not the case right now."

Pratt attended the School for the Deaf in early childhood and kindergarten, was mainstreamed for eight years, then returned in ninth grade when he decided he'd rather be around other deaf students.

He took a particular interest in a culinary arts class and hopes to use the job training program to launch a career in the kitchen, eventually owning his own restaurant.

Pratt acknowledged it felt strange to be the school's only exiting senior, but said through an ASL interpreter: "I've just accepted these are the circumstances, so I'm going ahead with it."

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