Nebraska City school is go-to resource for blind and visually impaired

MARCH 16, 2015 7:00 AM • BY ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

NEBRASKA CITY -- Few schools have bowling alleys.

Rarer still are bowling alleys for blind and visually impaired students.

In Nebraska City, a school that has both is celebrating its 140th anniversary Wednesday with an open house from 8:30 a.m. to noon.

Those who attend will not only see the two-lane bowling alley sandwiched between walls lined with books in Braille, but will also learn how the Nebraska Center for the Education of Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired helps educate and improve the lives of about 800 students across the state.

The school, founded by Samuel Bacon in 1875, sits on a nine-acre campus at 824 10th Ave. that was once an apple orchard. Part of the original school built by Bacon and a few apple trees survive. A large brick building houses classrooms, dormitories and apartments, a kitchen, a resource center of instructional materials, offices and an exercise area.

"Many families consider this a home away from home," said campus administrator Sally Giittinger.

About 25 students can be found at the school on any given day. They might stay for a day, a week, or longer depending on their individual student programs. The school works closely with school districts statewide to assess the educational needs of its students, which can include learning Braille, how to use the Internet and electronic devices, daily living skills and job exploration.

The school serves students ages 5 to 21, and also works with younger children to assess their needs before they are ready for school. Many of the students have multiple disabilities in addition to being blind or visually impaired, Giittinger said.

Educational Service Unit 4 in nearby Auburn operates and manages the school and its statewide outreach program.

"No other school for the blind in the United States is operated by an intermediate agency such as an ESU. It works very well," Giittinger said.

The state-supported school has an annual budget of $1.8 million and a staff of 40 that includes teachers, paraprofessional educators, house parents, staff for a resource center,
outreach department, office, food service and maintenance.

Glitteringer said the school does not have enough teachers to cover Nebraska, so it tries to recruit teachers to help, especially in sparsely populated rural areas. That's not easy because under state law, a teacher must have a master's degree or special education endorsement for the blind and visually impaired.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers a program to help teachers get the endorsement and Glitteringer and her staff use it as a recruitment tool. In areas where no qualified teachers are available, teachers from the Nebraska City school travel and fill the gap, she said.

About 50 teachers in the state are qualified to teach blind and visually impaired students, Glitteringer said, and that's not enough to serve about 800 students.

"Some kids don't need a teacher all of the time," she said. "But we have pockets in the state where we don't have anybody."

School districts, ESUs and special education teachers rely heavily on the school because of its vast collection of instructional materials, which are mostly in Braille. They have everything from algebra to zoology.

Most of the materials are supplied by the American Printing House for the Blind based in Louisville, Kentucky. Teachers can order and return the materials without paying any shipping because they are for the blind.

The school is open year-round and offers a summer camp for students and their families and eyesight evaluations by ophthalmologists and optometrists. It also hosts statewide Braille competitions, training conferences in the spring and fall and a high school prom for area special needs students in April.

Glitteringer said the prom is a great opportunity to teach life skills. Girls learn how to shop for dresses, boys learn formal manners and everyone has a great time. Many students stay overnight.

"Our dorms -- you can hardly breathe with all the cologne, perfume and hair spray," she said.

The school doesn't have an athletic program, but it does have stationary bikes and other exercise equipment as well as the popular bowling alley.

Many of students have never been in a bowling alley, so one of the first things they do is walk the lanes and feel the gutters and pins, which are dropped in place by hand by volunteers.

"They have no concept of the size," Glitteringer said. "They know this is here and they love it."