

Braille is vital to literacy for the visually impaired

By Gwen Sadler CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Lisa Billings/Chesterfield Observer Clover Hill High School student Jennifer Shields reads Braille during her visit to Barnes & Noble's Commonwealth Centre location earlier this month. Shields and her mother gave a program there to promote the teaching of Braille to the visually impaired.

On Jan. 4, 1809, the future for visually impaired people changed in ways they couldn't have imagined. On that day, Louis Braille was born in France.

Having been blinded in an accident at the age of 3, Braille was given a scholarship when he was 10 to attend a special school for the blind. While there, between the ages of 15-20 years old, he created an alphabet by arranging bumps on paper in particular ways. Braille reading through touch became a way to connect to the world that had eluded the visually impaired before that time. It enabled the blind to read, spell and write.

Almost two centuries have passed since Braille became a mainstream learning tool for visually impaired people, and we now celebrate National Braille Literacy Month in January. But Chesterfield resident Janet Shields, along with other Braille advocates, is concerned that it may be replaced in schools by other communication methods.

"I'm trying to alert people about the crisis with blind children and teaching Braille," Shields said. "Braille is becoming less available in schools. They want to teach more auditory methods, but we still need Braille."

Shields' 15-year-old daughter Jennifer is in the fight with her mom. Jennifer, a ninth-grade honors student at Clover Hill High School, has been blind from birth. The duo recently gave a presentation at the Barnes & Noble bookstore at Commonwealth Centre. They offered facts about and samples of Braille literature, and Jennifer and a friend demonstrated Braille reading. They also shared information about a Louis Braille commemorative coin that will be minted this year.

The Shields aren't opposed to using listening methods to teach visually impaired children in schools, but they want to be sure Braille survives.

"[Blind] children don't learn to read or spell when they're being taught electronically," Janet said.

And the ability to listen, she said, doesn't mean blind people are literate. They need to be able to read and write - with the Braille code - to be counted among those with literacy skills. According to the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), only 10 percent of blind children in the country are learning Braille.

For visually-impaired students in Chesterfield County Public Schools, Braille is a prominent teaching method, and those teaching Braille are certified to do so, according to Shawn Smith, assistant director of community relations.

"Other methods may also be used [to instruct the visually impaired]," he added, "such as assistive technology and accommodation. It depends on individual students' needs."

The NFB points to studies that show a "significant relationship between Braille literacy and academic success, higher income and employment."

"Statistics show that while approximately 70 percent of blind persons are unemployed, of the 30 percent who hold jobs, 90 percent of them are literate, meaning they use Braille as a primary communication medium," Janet said.

In addition, the NFB claims the number of legally blind children is increasing, due largely, they say, to improvements in medical care for premature babies.

About 85 percent of blind children in the U.S. attend public schools.

The Shields believe special education teachers who instruct visually impaired students should be certified in Braille, and teach it in the schools. When Virginia's General Assembly dealt with laws pertaining to special education about 15 years ago, there was no competency examination for Braille available, according to Janet. Since that evaluation does exist now, making teacher certification in Braille a possibility, the General Assembly should amend the code to reflect that, Janet said.

The inequitable allocation of special education funds, which shorts blind children, is also disturbing to the Shields.

"We're not asking for more money [to educate blind children]," Janet said. "We'd just like to see that the allotment of special-education funding be the same for blind children as it is for children with other special-education needs."

The Shields and others whose lives are affected by impaired vision recently traveled to the General Assembly to present their case for Braille certification for teachers of blind children and for equitable allocation of special-education funding for blind students in public schools.

Jennifer, who was able to read Braille by the age of 3 and hopes to be a writer or journalist, wouldn't be who she is without Braille.

"I hope people will be aware of how important Braille is for independence," she said. "It's the only equivalent to print [for blind people], and that makes it so important."

For more information about these issues and others that affect visually impaired people, visit NFB at www.Braille.org.