

## Leath prison inmates make Braille textbooks for SCsDB

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Many of the Braille textbooks used by blind students across South Carolina are produced by women behind bars.

Through a partnership between the S.C. School for the Deaf and the Blind and the S.C. Department of Corrections, inmates at Leath Correctional Institute in Greenwood produce Braille textbooks that often aren't found anywhere else in the country.

The women's prison has been producing Braille textbooks since 2002. Currently, 15 inmates work 37.5 hours per week inputting, embossing and binding the books.

"It's really an excellent program," said Jill Ischinger, program manager of the School for the Deaf and the Blind's Instructional Resource Center. "It gives them a sense of purpose. They're excited to give back and work on this project."

The Braille Production Program was run by the Department of Corrections until about 2007, when it was purchased by SCsDB. The school still runs the program, with representatives at the prison working with Ischinger and Mandy Clayton, program assistant at the Instructional Resource Center.

Each of the workers involved in the program must have a clean discipline record during their time in prison and cannot have committed any crimes against children.

When an order is placed into the Braille Production Program, it is sent to a supervisor and divided among the workers. Braille texts often take months to complete, so books can be shipped to students in segments to keep them up to speed with the classroom's pace.

"We may start by sending the first six or so chapters," Ischinger said. "Then, as they go in class, we get (chapters) seven through 10 to them. When teachers skip chapters or move around the book unevenly, that can create some trouble for us, and the student."

Thanks to technological innovations, Braille text can be embossed on regular paper, not plastic paper like old Braille textbooks. The new method, driven by computer software, is more accurate with sizes, shapes and straight lines.

Ischinger said in her experience, more than 20 years as a teacher, students never cared for the plastic paper. The plastic pages are hard to rub and feel. Students' fingers stick to the page as they try to read lines of text. Regular paper allows for much smoother finger slides and an easier read for students.



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The South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind is the central distribution center for Braille and large print books in the state. Mandy Clayton, left, program assistant, and Jill Ischinger, program manager, show some of the Braille textbooks at the Instructional Research Center at the school in Spartanburg, Wednesday afternoon.

She said the switch to regular paper has helped students' ability to read text, and she said it has improved the amount of time it takes them to complete work.

"Literacy is reading and Braille helps them enhance reading skills," she said. "But, Braille is slow. A good Braille reader can only read about 250 words a minute."

One of the complications the production of Braille textbooks faces is a change in the Braille code. A switch from the English Braille to a universal Braille code is coming.

"It's going to be a long transition period," Ishcinger said. "It will probably be six to 10 years before you see all books with the new code."

While Braille textbooks are often created at Leath Correctional, many large-print textbooks, used by visually impaired students, are created on the campus of the School for the Deaf and the Blind.

The Instructional Resource Center houses about 25,000 volumes of textbooks, with multiple volumes often comprising the entirety of one textbook. Along a shelf at the front of the center's temperature and humidity-controlled storage area is an 87-volume Braille geometry book.

"Braille (and large-print) doesn't go page for page," Ischinger said. "Just one page of text is about three pages in Braille. It can present a huge space issue."

The facility, formerly a warehouse, holds a greater number of large-print textbooks, but about three-quarters of the space is dedicated to Braille books. Books for every grade level and nearly every subject fill dozens of shelves from top to bottom.

"Anything you can take in school, we have it in here," Clayton said.

The Instructional Resource Center was established in 2001. The first year, only about 48 percent of students got their textbooks by the time classes started in August. A few years later, that number increased to around 84 percent. Now, close to 100 percent of students ordering large-print or Braille textbooks from the school have them at the start of the year.

"Every year it got better," Ischinger said. "The systems were in place and teachers learned the benefits of ordering the books early."

Every spring, teachers from across the state place requests for Braille and large-print textbooks housed in the facility.

The books are supposed to be returned no more than two weeks after the school year has ended, but Ischinger said that plan often goes awry.

"I've had to email teachers asking them to please send it back," she said.

Ischinger said she has been amazed by the teachers, staff members and inmates that have committed to providing blind and visually impaired students with the textbooks they need to succeed in education.

"They're all so phenomenal. They can do it in half the time it used to take," she said. "We're all here for the same reason, to get books to the students who need them."

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