Superintendent getting the word out about services offered at Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired

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For the first time in its 153-year history, the campus at the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired on Government Street is going to have an elevator.

In fact, it's going to have six elevators in its various buildings to serve students who use wheelchairs and walking devices. In the past, services for those students have had to be grouped on the ground floors.

The school's also going to have a new, expanded computer lab. And a dormitory that had been closed due to low enrollment is being reopened and fixed up.

"We're trying to spruce up the campus," said Janet Ford, who will mark her first year as the school's superintendent in May.

Ford came to the facility following the retirement of Richard Day.

The number of students attending the school — which also serves others through outreach programs all over the state — has grown 40 percent this year to 63.

Ford credits some of that growth to renewed efforts by herself and the staff to get the word out about the services the facility provides.

"The bottom line is (that) people don't know we're here," said Ford. She hopes to change that.

The Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired is a state agency and one of three schools serving children with special needs in the state. The others are the Louisiana School for the Deaf, also in Baton Rouge, and the Louisiana Special Education Center in Alexandria.

The first School for the Blind was built at the current LSVI location at 1120 Government St. in 1852. Many years later, a school for African-American children opened at Southern University. The two schools combined in 1978 to form LSVI.

The Government Street campus has some original buildings, and others built to match the existing architecture were added in the 1950s, said Ford.

Almost all of the school's students reside at the school during the week. A few area residents attend
students dusted off and cleaned up a little beauty shop that had fallen into disuse. There the older girls teach the younger ones how to take care of their hair and skin. 

“I love that,” said 15-year-old student Desiree Taylor, who recently went shopping with Ford for supplies for the beauty shop.

In the evenings, school staff will take students out to practice using the city bus system or negotiating a mall or a big store like Wal-Mart.

At a recent meeting of the Downtown Baton Rouge Lions Club, whose members volunteer at the school, Ford said that the “kids want to do a car wash ... keep in mind that most of them are low vision.”

Speaking of how the school’s wrestling team had recently won second place in a regional competition and how the cheerleaders had also won top honors in a regional meet, Ford told the club members, “They have a great time. They’re just like your kids.”