**Camp helps teach visually impaired students valuable life skills**

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**By JAMES BELL**  
*Hays Post*

Last week, visually impaired students from across central and western Kansas traveled to Fort Hays State University for a weeklong extended school year camp that brought together learning, fun, and comradery with the goal of helping students become fully functioning members of society.

The camp was organized by the Kansas State School for the Blind, which brings instructors from across the state to help teach the students a variety of life skills.

***A student and teacher sitting at a table with laptop. Both are looking up toward the ceiling. In back ground a student sitting on the floor with laptop. A teacher is standing near her holding a drone. ***

*Bob Taylor, field services specialist for the Kansas State School for the Blind works with a visually impaired student to launch a drone during an extended school year learning camp on the FHSU campus last week.*

“For a person who is visually impaired, there are additional skills they need to learn in order to be productive members of society,” said Anna Cyr, field services specialist, Kansas State School for the Blind.

The camp focused on nine areas of learning that a visually impaired person needs as they transition to adulthood including, independent living skills, assistive technology, compensatory skills, such as Braille and large print, recreation and leisure, orientation of mobility, and social skills.

“We have been doing a variety of activities all week to address all of those areas and increase these student’s skill so that they can continue to learn and grow both in school and in life,” Cyr said.

Students that participated in the camp ranged in ages from 10 to 16, an ideal age Cyr said for their first experiences away from home and to work on developing skills they will need as they move towards college or the workforce.

“They are learning a lot of life skills,” she said. “They also have the opportunity to interact with other students that are visually impaired,” Cyr said.

Along with practical skills learned, the students are also getting valuable time interacting with others who share their experiences.

“Especially in western Kansas, it is pretty common to have one student who is visually impaired in a school district, so it’s not very often that they have someone else who also uses a white cane, or also reads Braille, or uses the technology that they interact with on a daily basis,” Cyr said.

Abrienda, a second-year attendee of the camp, said she was having fun A student sitting in a chair looking at a teacher who is sitting on a desk and pointing to a computer screen.  interacting with the other students and practicing different skills.

*Bob Taylor, field services specialist for the Kansas State School for the Blind works with a visually impaired student to type with a braille input device during an extended school year learning camp on the FHSU campus last week.*

“Basically it’s (an) extended school year. You get to learn different things that maybe your school doesn’t teach,” she said. “You get to learn how to do different things, while you are cooking, or while you are out and about.”

She also enjoyed working with the technology available during the camp that helps visually impaired students develop communication and navigation skills.

“Technology is a lot different than what other people have,” she said. “So that’s kind of a new experience.”

But while she enjoyed the learning aspects of camp, she was a particular fan of a more leisurely activity.

“My favorite part of camp so far would probably be the art, because we are learning how to weave and do other things,” she said. “It’s a really good experience.”

Bob Taylor, an education technologist who is another field services specialist for the Kansas State School for the Blind, worked with the students over the week to learn and use specialized technology that helps the students adapt to the larger world.

“If we can get the kids talking about this stuff and what the outcomes are, they can self-advocate,” Taylor said. “We are trying to go ahead and get a lot of these kids to not be afraid and to self-advocate.”

If the students learn to ask questions and develop basic skills with the technology, it will help them to branch out into other educational opportunities.

In particular, he uses the technology to teach navigation skills and as a fun motivational activity to help the students self-advocate, by asking making them ask for things to use the technology.

“If they can self-advocate they can do other things,” he said, “if they are interested.”

During the camp, Taylor said he is often in awe of the abilities and experiences the students bring with them.

A student sitting on the floor using a coding robot with a blue and white base and a long neck type connector. “The more I do this, the more I bring in,” Taylor said. “Actually the students are teaching me.”

A visually impaired student puts together a specially designed learning toy during an extended school year learning camp on the Fort Hays State Campus last week.

During the camp, the students also traveled into the community visiting local shops, restaurants and the Sternberg Museum.

“A big initiative of the Kansas School for the Blind in the last five years and beyond is to bring more of our services out to the students in their home areas,” Cyr said.

[To learn more about the Kansas State School for the Blind visit their website at kssb.net.](http://www.kssb.net/)