

# Parents urged to demand special education services

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LAS CRUCES — Christina Parra’s 2-year-old son was diagnosed with autism in Albuquerque earlier this year. When she returned to Las Cruces, there were few resources to turn to for help, she said.

“We really felt like there was nowhere for us to go,” Parra said.

“If parents have a gut feeling that something is going on with their child, be persistent, and don’t let professionals brush them off and say they will grow out of it. I hear that a lot,” Parra said. “If parents and grandparents are concerned, find someone who will listen.”

By federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 requires that special education services are provided at no cost to families. Approximately 10 percent of students in the U.S. are identified as having a disability and a majority of these 6.5 million students receive instruction in general education classroom settings with the assistance of specially trained teachers, said Anne Gallegos, department head of New Mexico State University’s Special Education and Communication Disorders program.

Despite the critical needs of students receiving special education services, there is a dramatic shortage of qualified teachers in the field and nationwide; 98 percent of U.S. schools report shortages of special education teachers, with the greatest demand being in low-income and rural regions, Gallegos said.

The U.S. Department of Education lists special education and bilingual education as the two most significant areas of teacher shortages nationwide for the 2010-2011 school year, a problem that has persisted in New Mexico for the past 10 years.

In New Mexico, there are nearly 200 vacancies for personnel positions, which includes speech- language pathologists, physical therapists,

occupational therapists, counselors and school psychologists, according to Gallegos' research.

In Las Cruces, classes are underway, yet the district is in need of 16 special education teachers, including 11 who are speech and language pathologists, Jim Nesbitt, LCPS human resources director, said.

While the district scouts for these teachers, students receive compensatory services, where they take summer classes to make up for services they missed during the school year, Nesbitt said.

“They get the services they need, just not during the regular school time,” he said.

Nesbitt said the district has broadened its recruitment methods and four recent hires for speech pathologists were from Spain and the Philippines. Additionally, LCPS contracts with 14 private practice speech pathologists. Though it's more costly, the district has few other options, Nesbitt said.

“We can't compete with the salaries that the private industry pays – hospitals, rehab centers – we can't touch them. They almost double our pay,” Nesbitt said. “So that's a big stumbling block, too, we just can't pay them enough.”

Shortages are caused by high turnover rates, heavy workload, significant paperwork demands, and the wide variety of job roles given to teachers and therapists, Gallegos said.

### **High turnover, high cost**

The annual attrition rate for special educators is nearly twice that of other educators. In a three- year period, more than 20 percent of special education teachers will likely leave their jobs, according to an April report of the Council for Exceptional Children, an international organization working to improve education for individuals with disabilities or gifted students.

Additionally, Gallegos said the issue is compounded by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the law that governs elementary and secondary education in the U.S., which requires that all teachers are “highly qualified” in the content areas they teach. For individuals preparing to become special education teachers, the law requires that they pass certification exams in both special education and elementary or secondary education content and methodologies, she said.

For most teacher candidates in special education, this means earning a double major, which is both more timely and more expensive, Gallegos said. And around 45,000 special educators nationwide are not recognized as highly qualified teachers as mandated by NCLB, the Council for Exceptional Children said.

School districts can hire individuals wanting to become special education teachers and who have a bachelor’s degree outside of education on the condition that they complete an alternative licensure program in special education within three years, she said. And while the alternative program quickly places more teachers in classrooms, the turnover rate in classes for students with multiple or severe disabilities is high.

Austin Milbourn, a senior at Mayfield High School with autism, has taken compensatory summer classes æsince middle school, his father, Gary Milbourn, said. In addition, Austin takes speech therapy classes at Mayfield and at the Edgar R. Garrett Speech and Hearing Center at New Mexico State University.

In high school, Austin takes both special education classes and standard high school classes. A full-time aide goes to class with him to review discussions as understanding conversational language presents a challenge for his son, Gary Milbourn said.

The school district provides the service as part of his Individualized Educational Program (IEP), which details special education services a student receives under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Milbourn said these services are absolutely critical to his son's education.

“With budgeting issues, it's something you frankly have to make sure is in place, if you just left it up to the system there's a good chance he wouldn't get an aid and he'd be relegated to special ed only type of curriculum,” Milbourn said. “It's incumbent upon parents to make sure the services and assistances are in place for their kids. There are a lot of parents who don't know what their rights are for this kids.”

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### **By the Numbers**

LCPS special education students:

- Gifted: 1,791 students
  - Speech-language: 1,555 students
  - Specific learning disability: 1,237 students
  - Other health impaired (Example, ADD or ADHA): 321 students
  - Emotionally disturbed: 219 students
  
  - Autistic: 109 students
  - Mental retardation: 103 students •Hearing impaired: 53 students
  - Multiple disabled: 49 students •Developmentally delayed: 45 students
  
  - Other impairments with medical diagnosis: 28 students •Traumatic brain injury: 17 students
  - Visually impaired: 12 students
  - Total students, including gifted: 5,539
  
  - Male students: 3,355 students •Female: 2,184 students
  - Total special education teachers: 273 •Total LCPS enrollment: 24,926
- Source: Las Cruces Public Schools

### **Resources for parents and educators**

- Asperger's Lunch Brunch Support Group: noon to 1 p.m. every Monday through Nov. 8. Focuses on issues from handwriting to aggression. Discussions are guided by the book “Parenting a Child with

Aspergers” by Brenda Boyd. To register, call Lori Comallie-Caplan (575) 527-5918.

- The Edgar R. Garrett Speech and Hearing Center, on NMSU’s campus: charges minimal fees for therapy and provides year-round services in English and Spanish. For appointments call: (575) 646-3906

- The Early Childhood Developmentally Delayed Program: a family-oriented program offering social services, family counseling and parental involvement for families of 3- and 4-year-old children with developmental delays. LCPS Special Education Department: (575) 527-5901

- Aprendamos, an early intervention service that identifies children with disabilities ages birth to 3, and assists families. Call for information: (575) 526-6682

- Sensory Kids of New Mexico: provides resources and support for families with autism, sensory processing and other developmental challenges. Call Christina Parra: (575) 635-9481

- The Family Infant Toddler Program of the Department of Health: an early intervention program for children from birth to three years old. At no cost to the families, the FIT program provides therapies, service coordination, and special instruction through three providers in Dona Ana County. For more information visit: [www.trescoinc.org](http://www.trescoinc.org) and/or [www.fitprogram.org](http://www.fitprogram.org) For more information and additional resources visit: <http://www.lcps.k12.nm.us/departments/SPED/index.shtml>Caption:

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