

Speech therapists shine despite shortage in schools

By: MATTHEW DANELO

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Annie Sullivan, celebrated teacher and the "miracle worker" who taught Helen Keller to communicate, once said it's easier to feel sorry for those without the ability to communicate than it is to try and help them.

Now, more than a century later, local speech-language pathologists are still trying to remedy that notion.

"They are miracle workers. They do miracles," Beth Miller of Vidor said about her daughter's speech pathologists.

Katie Miller, 7, has been in speech therapy for about five years. She is one of around 200,000 students Texas Speech-Language Hearing Association (TSHA) estimates is undergoing speech-language therapy in public schools across the state.

Language impairments like Katie's are the most common childhood learning disability, said Dr. Monica Harn, associate professor for Lamar University's Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences.

During the academic year, Harn and other professors at Lamar's Speech and Hearing Center shepherd approximately 25 graduate students, each earning the 400 clinical hours needed to become a certified speech-language pathologist.

Harn and other faculty watch over the students as they meet with children in small-group settings at Lamar, and even travel to satellite sites in the Port Arthur and West Orange-Cove school districts.

Katie Miller was one of their former clients.

When she was 2 years old, her pediatrician noticed she could only say three words, Beth Miller said. After performing several tests, Katie's doctor discovered fluid in her ears had been affecting her hearing.

"We put her in speech therapy after she got tubes in her ears and she's been in (speech class) at school ever since," said Miller.

Since enrolling in the speech class, "a switch flipped inside" her daughter, Beth Miller said, adding Katie talks non-stop.

"I used to never know what was going on in that head of hers, now I feel guilty for telling her to be quiet," she said.

Harn said parents concerned their children might have speech problems should be mindful of how their children try to communicate. Are they getting overly frustrated? Are they more impatient than usual?

"It can be something as simple as a problem with articulation," said Denise Barringer, TSHA president.

Barringer said sometimes children know what they want, but because certain things haven't developed in their minds, they have trouble working out exactly how to ask for it. In speech therapy, educators can have the children perform simple exercises that involve steps and sequences to develop these traits.

"It can be as easy as making trail mix," said Harn. "There's a sequential recipe the kids have to follow so they get used to going step-by-step."

Harn said almost two-thirds of preschool students with language impairments are likely to have lower grades, be placed in remedial classes or require special tutoring when in middle school if they do not have some kind of speech therapy.

"Speech pathology is vital in public schools," she said. "If these issues are not identified during the preschool, kindergarten or first grade years, the impact on the community is significant."

Across Texas, speech-language pathology students - including the ones at Lamar - are encouraged to move into the Texas public school system after completing their clinical hours.

"Approximately 20,000 students may not be receiving services for speech-language or hearing disabilities in public schools because of a lack of speech-language pathologists," Barringer said.

During the most recent legislative session, state lawmakers passed HB 518, which would have created an assistance program to help graduating speech therapists with school debt if they worked in Texas public schools.

Even though the bill unanimously passed both the House and Senate, Gov. Rick Perry vetoed the bill, saying in his veto statement that he's opposed to the creation of any new loan assistance programs.

The bill was one of 35 bills he vetoed out of 1,706 bills and resolutions that passed his desk.

Katherine Cesinger, a spokesperson for Gov. Perry, said in an e-mail that, "At Gov. Perry's request, lawmakers this session increased (general) financial aid for all qualifying Texans across all concentrations, which include speech-language pathology."

Still, the vacancy rate for speech-language pathologists, which Barringer said recently rose to 7 percent in Texas - 9 percent for bi-lingual pathologists - means that families who can't afford speech therapy or don't have insurance that will cover it, might think their kids have no other option.

Not so, said Harn.

Lamar's Speech and Hearing Center runs a summer language program designed to accommodate families of all socioeconomic backgrounds and is dedicated to working to provide services to any family that needs them.

"There's also the satellite services in Port Arthur and West Orange," said Harn, and added that educating parents as to how to handle this issue is just as important as educating the kids.

Barringer said that identifying the need for speech-language intervention early on can make all the difference.

"The sooner you can have your child evaluated and identified by a speech pathologist the more powerful the therapy can be."