

Speech-pathologists, audiologists wanted in Texas public schools

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Kristi Marino is a public school's dream.

A first year graduate student in Lamar University's Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences, Marino, 23, wants to become a speech-language pathologist.

And better yet, she wants to work in the public schools.

"I enjoy working with the little ones," said Marino, of Port Arthur. "They're so fun and they have good energy."

These days, people like Marino are so hard to come by that the state's professional organization will meet with Texas legislators in an effort to promote incentives to lure more qualified professionals into the field.

According to the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association, more than 2 million Texans have some type of speech, language or hearing disorder.

Almost one out of 10 children has a noticeable speech disorder by the first grade, according to an association news release.

It's the therapists in speech-language pathology and audiology who help these people, young and old, overcome the disorders.

A speech-language or hearing disorder encompasses a spectrum of different situations.

It can be the person who struggles to pronounce the letter "r," someone who stutters or someone with a more serious issue, such as autism or cerebral palsy.

It can be a child who was born with the disorder or an adult who suffered brain damage or is dealing with a disease, said Monica Harn, assistant professor in Lamar University's Department of Speech and Hearing Services.

When a child is diagnosed with a speech-language or hearing disorder, a school must provide some sort of therapy.

This has become a challenge for some school districts as they struggle to retain qualified professionals.

Bob Finch, of the Little Cypress-Mauriceville Consolidated Independent School District, said the shortage stems from a policy change made in the early 1990s.

Finch, who is director of special programs at LC-M, said people used to be able to work as speech therapists with only a bachelor's degree and a certification in speech therapy.

Now to become a licensed speech-language pathologist, a person must have a masters degree in the field. But that also creates a problem.

"These folks that have more credentials, they can make more money in the hospitals than they can in the school districts," Finch said.

That's where the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association comes in. About 600 members from the state association will descend Thursday upon the Capitol to promote several pieces of legislation.

The first aims to align the pay for pathologists and audiologists with teachers. The second would call on the state to repay education loans for grad students who choose to work in Texas public schools.

Local professionals say this would be a much needed boost to the field.

"If it comes into play, it would make the schools as a choice of where to work for speech pathologists, it would make that more attractive," said William Harn, chair of Lamar's Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences.

Finch said the incentives have worked for other education positions and would likely help in this specialty.

For Marino, incentives or no incentives, she's sold.

"I mean to impact someone that young is tremendous," she said. "It's a big influence for them."

http://www.beaumontenterprise.com/news/local/speech-pathologists_audiologists_wanted_in_texas_public_schools_04-01-2009.html