

Speech therapists signal for help

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April 11, 2009

The Herald-Zeitung

An estimated two million Texans currently are dealing with speech, language or hearing disorders.

In efforts to bring these cognitive battles to the forefront, the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Association (TSHA) has taken its cause to the Capitol.

Following the 2009 annual conference in Austin, TSHA members and local speech pathologists are hopeful that many ideas proposed to the legislature will be passed in order to better accommodate and help Texans living with speech and auditory disabilities.

The proposed Capitol bills cover areas from early screenings to insurance coverage and increased benefits for speech pathologists working in public schools.

Judith Keller, TSHA president and assistant professor at Texas Tech's Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Services, says the passing of each bill will help many Texans, including those suffering from speech or auditory disorders, families and speech therapists.

"With House Bill 4627, we are asking that all athletes in public high schools are screened for cognitive data," Keller said. "In the event of a head injury, we would have a basis for how that child was before damage occurred."

House Bill 2714 would allow for parents who would like their child to receive additional speech therapy outside of the school system to possibly gain more insurance coverage of those expenses.

Comal Independent School District lead speech therapist Lisa Walton says HB 2714 would be highly beneficial.

"Even though we do provide services through the school, some children need additional or significant help," Walton said. "Sometimes insurance companies don't cover this type of treatment. This is a great piece of legislation that I think can help these kids and families."

Senate Bill 1211 and HB 1995 would exempt any licensed speech therapist or pathologist who volunteers his services from any type of liability or lawsuit, while SB 1141 and HB 3576 proclaim the state should help repay education loans to encourage speech-language pathologists and audiologists to seek employment in Texas schools.

"There are many people who are interested in completing a master's program for speech therapy but are hesitant because of the cost," Keller said. "We believe the state should help repay those loans at 20 percent for every year that a person works in a Texas public school. We have a serious shortage of speech pathologists in Texas, and this is one of many important solutions to alleviating that problem."

New Braunfels Independent School District lead speech therapist Angie Pickett feels all of

the legislation, including SB 209 and HB 3029, that would include speech pathologists in the same raises many teachers receive, will bring positive results to students, parents and speech pathologists.

“Speech pathologists in the public schools system are either titled as instructional or professional,” Pickett said. “If you’re listed as a professional, that can be beneficial in terms of money, but when you’re instructional, you might get left out of the raises given to other teachers. We’re a very diverse field covering everything from speech to autism, and I believe the speech therapists and pathologists should be rewarded for all they do.”

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