



The Press-Enterprise

Special-ed teachers' training includes autism

By Janet Zimmerman

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Responding to an explosion in the number of autism cases in the past 20 years, California is requiring thousands of veteran special-education teachers to return to school to learn about the developmental disorder. For many, it will be their first training on the challenging behaviors that often accompany autism.

Autism spectrum disorder, which includes mild to the most severe cases, "is not like any other disorder," said Ruth Prystash, autism specialist for the Riverside County Office of Education. "ASD individuals are completely unique, so the training given to most special educators is not relevant or applicable much of the time."

One parent that Prystash worked with at Rob Reiner Children and Families Development Center in Perris spent her own money to hire a private occupational therapist and a neuropsychologist to help her initiate some changes in her child's classroom, she said.

Cal State San Bernardino and UC Riverside Extension recently were approved as sites for the added training by the state Commission on Teacher Credentialing. About 25,000 special-education teachers in the state must have the additional training in order to have students with autism in their classes, said Catherine Kearney, president of the California Teacher Corps, a nonprofit training group.

School districts must comply with the requirement by July 2011.

For new teachers, the information will be provided in their regular special-education credential courses.

Autism occurs in 1 in 150 children; the cause is unknown and there is no cure. The disorder makes it hard to communicate, form relationships and otherwise function in society. Some people with autism develop obsessive interests or make repetitive movements such as rocking or flapping their arms. Others, with Asperger's Disorder, have extensive vocabularies and sharp cognitive skills but they have difficulties with social interaction.

Schools in California have more than 53,000 students with autism who need specialized services, according to the California Teacher Corps.

Yet most teachers don't know the characteristics of autism, the standard treatments or how to effectively handle the behaviors, said Beth Burt, of Corona, president of the Inland Empire Autism Society. Her 17-year-old son has mild to moderate autism.

During a presentation to educators several years ago, when Burt showed a video of a boy with autism throwing his shoe and yelling, one of the teachers asked what the difference was between "a spoiled brat and a child with autism."

"There are a lot of really great teachers out there with great passion; they just don't have all the knowledge and resources and tools they need," Burt said.

The regulation takes into account a teacher's prior experience and training, so some may need only one class or supervised fieldwork, said Kearney of the California Teacher Corps.

Riverside Unified School District already has begun checking credentials and training some of its more than 100 special education teachers, said Tim Walker, director of special education.

Starting this fall, Cal State San Bernardino will have two 10-week courses and corresponding hands-on work in school classrooms. The pressure on schools to accommodate students will be even greater since budget problems put services on hold at the Inland Regional Center, the state-sponsored agency that coordinates therapies for the developmentally disabled in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, said Stan Swartz, a professor of special education at the university.

"The teachers that teach children with more severe disabilities have always had qualifications, but the vast majority haven't had any training," he said. "I think it will make a real difference in terms of what they're able to do with these children."

Reach Janet Zimmerman at 951-368-9586 or jzimmerman@PE.com