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NEWS

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Public schools may face shortage of speech-language pathologists

By DAVID WILLIAMSON
UNC News Services

CHAPEL HILL -- North Carolina's supply of speech-language pathologists and their assistants appears adequate at present, but a shortage looms that could hit the state's public school system particularly hard, a new study shows.

Part of the reason, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill experts say, is a recent court decision requiring all of the state's speech-language pathologists to hold at least a master's degree.

"In the past, N.C. schools, which employ about half of all such professionals, countered shortages by hiring individuals with bachelor's degrees," said Erin Fraher, assistant director of the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at UNC.

Data in the center's new report, "Communicating the Trends: The Speech-Language Pathology Workforce in North Carolina," project that the school system will lose about 13 percent of its workforce in the next few years due to the court decision. The court ruled that recently hired speech-language pathologists (SLPs) with bachelor's degrees upgrade to a master's by this year and that those hired prior to 1981 acquire a master's by 2005.

"This ruling could potentially have a large impact on the services speech-language pathologists provide to the growing number of students with speech and language disorders in the schools," Fraher said. "In the past 10 years, the number of students with autism has increased by more than 300 percent, and many SLPs have already voiced concerns about unmanageable caseloads."

Attrition caused by the exodus of bachelor's degree-trained SLPs, coupled with growing demand for services, would drive caseloads even higher, she said. One result could be more SLPs leaving schools to work in more attractive settings such as hospitals or private practice.

The study also found that the state faces a shortage of faculty to teach in speech-language pathology programs, and unless their numbers increase, this could jeopardize the future supply.

"Too few SLP doctoral students have graduated in the past couple of years, and older faculty are now retiring," Fraher said.

Another major issue affecting the profession is that the state's Hispanic population has burgeoned over the past decade, yet few speech-language pathologists speak Spanish, she said. Resolving speech and hearing problems can be difficult enough without adding a language barrier.

"Children in our schools are becoming increasingly diverse, but we're not seeing a corresponding increase in diversity among speech-language pathologists," Fraher said. "Typically, SLPs have been white English-speaking women, but children needing services are more likely than in the past to be minorities such as Hispanics and African-Americans."

Among the report's recommendations is to create a common pool of bilingual speech and hearing specialists to serve as a resource for those who cannot speak English, she said

Demand for speech and hearing services also is increasing because of the new emphasis on early intervention with children, Fraher said. Experts now believe the earlier one intervenes, the more likely it is that such actions will boost communication skills. Also, both the 13- and-under and the 65- and-older populations are growing, and they are key consumers of the services.

Still another issue the report cites is that SLP assistants, who first graduated in North Carolina in 1999, are not being employed sufficiently because speech-language pathologists and their employers do not yet understand their proper roles, she said.

Dr. Thomas C. Ricketts, deputy director of the Sheps center and professor of health policy and administration at the UNC School of Public Health, oversaw the new study.

The data system is funded by the UNC School of Medicine-based N.C. Area Health Education Centers Program and UNC's Office of the Provost for Health Affairs. The new report is part of the Sheps center's larger Allied Health Workforce Assessment Project supported by the N.C. AHEC and the N.C. Council for Allied Health.

An electronic copy of the report can be downloaded at <http://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/hp>.

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