

ESD

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thing,” she said. “How to make friends, solve conflicts, how to calm your body,” she said. “The biggest difference between this and other classes is that we focus on it every minute of class, even when math is happening.”

Though these students spend some or all of their academic time in specialized classes, they join their grade-level peers for classes like P.E., music, and art.

“Whenever we remove a student to a special classroom, we always have a plan to get them back into a traditional classroom,” said B.J. Wilson, Hermiston’s Special Programs director.

Beckley said while their strategy has largely stayed the same since she started in Hermiston 18 years ago, a growing number of students need those services.

“We look at it more from a trauma-informed lens than before,” she said. “The need for kids dealing with trauma has increased. We have an alarming number of students in the foster care system.”

Wilson said to be placed in special programs, a student has to go through an assessment. If a teacher or parent thinks a child might need special services, the district has evaluation specialists who will determine what services, if any they need to receive.

Though Hermiston has



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS
Educational assistant Lijuan Shen helps sixth-grader Nicole Neustal learn to type Thursday, Nov. 1, at Sandstone Middle School in Hermiston.

retained some strategies and many staff members, the way special programs operates is different from the days before it left the Inter-Mountain Educational Service District (IMESD).

It has been nearly four years since Hermiston left the ESD, stating it wanted to have more control over funds the ESD gets from per-student payments from the state. When Hermiston left, it took control of its special programs and services like assessment and evaluation, speech language pathologists (SLPs) and school psychologists.

Wilson said staffing lev-

els didn’t really change. There are about 30 staff members in special programs. But, he said, the level of access between schools and special educators, as well as the roles of special programs staff, are different.

The increased focus on Hermiston let evaluation specialists tailor assessments more specifically to each student.

Wilson said they discovered some of their assessments were culturally biased, and a disproportionate number of students were being identified as special needs when the issue was actually related to language

or culture.

“We’ve tried to tailor our assessments to remove as much cultural bias as possible,” he said.

But hiring speech language pathologists and school psychologists is still a challenge for both entities, and Wilson said there tends to be more turnover in those positions.

He said the district struggled with speech therapy for a while, but quickly realized that speech therapy by video, or “teletherapy,” was not working.

“Parents resoundingly said it was not effective,” he said. The district now uses

an outside agency, called the Hello Foundation, to provide speech therapy, which operates on-site.

IMESD superintendent Mark Mulvihill said the ESD still provides several services to Hermiston.

The ESD funds programs from a few different sources. The majority of the programs Hermiston opted out of are covered by the IMESD’s general fund. About 95 percent of that money went to the schools, based on how many students they have enrolled, and about 5 percent goes to the ESD itself.

Mulvihill said when Hermiston withdrew, they received about \$2.4 million. But the ESD also provides some services that are based on state and federal grants. Hermiston still receives several services, including for autism, deaf and hard of hearing students, vision and traumatic brain injuries.

“We have to serve the kids that reside in those towns, not the districts,” Mulvihill said.

Debbie and Angelo Herrera have a daughter who is now 15, and has received special services in Hermiston since she was a small child.

Angelo said there have been some ups and downs since the switch from the ESD.

“The first thing that comes to mind is the turnover,” he said. “It seems like there’s always an SLP job open.”

Previously, he said, their

daughter had the same SLPs since she was in elementary school.

“Now she has a pretty good rapport with the girls,” Debbie said. “But it took a little bit.”

Another parent, Brandalynn Gorman, has had some complaints. She said her son, who is autistic, had been violent with another student in class, lashing out due to a sensory disorder. After suspending him several times this year, his school attempted to shorten his day. But Gorman said they tried to do so without her permission. She said she was in the middle of working through the situation with the district, but so far was dissatisfied with the way things had been going.

Wilson said he could not comment on the specific incident. He said sometimes staff will recommend a shortened day for a student if they feel it’s beneficial. But he said they will not do so without the input of the parent.

Angelo said he doesn’t feel that services are vastly better in Hermiston now, but said they have the potential to be.

But he added that some people expect services to improve for their child automatically, without advocating for them.

“We get involved,” he said. “You can’t just expect things to happen, there’s got to be some follow through.”

“But when we talk to special programs, they’re usually listening,” Debbie said.

HELP

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own schedules by signing up online for shifts they are willing to cover. They can work 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., 7 p.m. to midnight, midnight to 4 a.m. or 4-6:30 a.m. No one ever works alone, and the building has doors that automatically lock when closed.

Last year, the Hermiston Warming Station pro-

vided a warm place to sleep for 84 individuals. Addie Zumwalt, the board’s vice chair, said she has been volunteering at the shelter for the last three years because she believes it provides an important service to the community.

“I just like the idea of giving people a warm, safe place to stay,” she said.

Board member Steph Jackson said volunteering is easy — it’s mostly just keeping an eye on things and maybe getting some-

one a glass of water.

“After a while you get in a routine,” she said.

Zumwalt, Hill and Jackson were at the house that hosts the warming station on Monday night, making preparations for the season. Zumwalt and Hill were hand-lettering signs with information about the warming station, while Jackson was stapling together packets of information and paperwork for the upcoming trainings.

They have been work-

ing late into the night sorting supplies into tote boxes, setting up rooms and cleaning.

“Steph and I have been here until 4 or 5 in the morning after we get our kids to bed, getting things done,” Hill said.

She said some companies have provided services such as extermination and HVAC inspection for free. They are still looking for someone willing to grade the gravel driveway and parking lot, and need some

volunteers to help finish deep-cleaning the building.

While the warming station serves Hermiston’s homeless population, it is also open to others who temporarily need a warm place to sleep. Hill said in the past they have served people who were traveling through town, got stranded and couldn’t afford a hotel. Families have also shown up after their heat went out.

Men and women sleep in separate rooms on thick pads on the floor. The

warming station does not provide meals but does provide hot chocolate, coffee and snacks. The building is only open in the evenings — guests have to find somewhere else to spend their days.

For more information about volunteering, contact Hill at 541-289-2150. The warming station could also use donations of items such as cleaning supplies, laundry supplies, gloves, hand warmers, socks, snacks, hot chocolate and ear plugs.

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