Speech and Language Therapists in Short Supply

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Last week the Kodiak Island School District accepted two speech and language pathologist contracts during their regular board of education meeting. While the contracts were approved just in time for the school year to begin, Superintendent Stewart McDonald said a shortage of speech therapists nationwide has made the hiring of these individuals a lot more difficult.

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"Speech and language therapists as well as physical therapists and more specifically occupational therapists, and as well as school psychologists are definitely a shortage across the country," McDonald said. "And many of the school districts in Alaska will literally share some of these people when the find them and they will often purchase a contractor service where the service will provide a speech and language therapist, or some other specialist as it's needed. But you might necessarily get the same person each time they come out. It's not preferred, we prefer to actually hire somebody who will live among us and be here and work with us and work with our kids, but we do as we must as many people in Alaska must do."

McDonald said Kodiak copes with these personnel shortages in a unique way.

"And what we've done in order to be as innovative as we can is we've actually trained some paraprofessionals to become speech and language pathologist assistants. Where they work directly under the supervision of a speech and language therapist. And we currently employ two speech and language therapist and have several of these speech and language assistants that we grew at home with our own programs, working with some universities. And then we are, in order to meet our own IEP needs, we've had to contract two more speech and language pathologists to come in an help us with the supervision of those SLPA's."

Those are the two contracts that were approved by the district last Monday. McDonald said Kodiak's method of training assistants seems to be working, but the reality is there is still a shortage of these professionals.

"It's very interesting becaseu these are specialty areas that once upon a time schools hired and people started their career off just to work in a public school. And now more and more those individuals with those kind of credentials can pretty much independently contract and either work through a hospital or a clinic or on their own and find that they have a marketable skill that gives them more flexibility and more freedom and that seems to be one of the largest driving directions."

He said there are also not as many people entering the speech and language pathologist profession as there used to be. For now, KIBSD is safe, but McDonald said if these trends continue then the struggle for finding speech therapists will only get worse.

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