

# Small rural districts battle to keep special ed students close to home

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It started four years ago with a kindergarten boy who didn't quite fit in. He was bright and in the top of his class, but Andrea Valadez, student services director at Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District, noticed he didn't behave like the rest of his classmates.

The boy had autism, and his presence in the classroom piqued her curiosity. How many more students, she wondered, were like him.

The answer, it turned out, was "lots." In the five years before 2012, the district's tally of children with autism increased by 96%.

That prompted Valadez and the district to start a special education program tailored to the needs of young children with autism. Called **SHINES**, for "Strategically Helpful Intervention Nurturing Educational Services," the early-intervention program caters specifically to students from preschool to second grade. The kindergartner became part of the program's first class.

Now in its third year, the program has been hailed as a success by the district because it allows the eight participating students to get the specialized educational program they need close to home.

Yet for many high-need special education students from rural areas, getting the services they need can be a challenge — and often can require a long ride from home.

Unlike the Valley's larger urban districts, small rural districts often don't have the money — or enough students, or even teachers — to float their own programs. So they rely on the Fresno County Office of Education to hire teachers and organize classroom programs for those students. The downside: It can entail an hour-long bus ride to get to the program. That can be a deal-killer for some parents.

These faraway districts are used to having to stretch their dollars and often look for creative ways to serve as many of their special education students within the district. Sometimes it means creating a new program altogether like Firebaugh-Las Deltas.

Valadez said the SHINES program has curbed the number of referrals sent to the county.

"It gives us a lot of independence to serve our own students," she said, "which is what we want to be able to do."

## County steps in to fill 'severe' needs

Rural Fresno County districts typically serve their special education students through two funding sources: the district's budget and the county office's Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), which serves 30 districts outside Fresno and Clovis Unified.

Usually, these districts front the money to provide services for students with minor disabilities — the bulk of their special education population — while the county steps in to serve students with the most severe disabilities, including students who are emotionally disturbed or have autism.

Trina Frazier, Fresno County SELPA and special education administrator, said it's the most cost-effective arrangement

for rural districts, which on their own might not have either the resources or the numbers to justify those expenses.

This is where the county has the flexibility individual districts don't. The county hosts classes for severely disabled students at both their special education centers or "integrated sites," say a classroom at a school site that gathers its students from neighboring schools and districts.

### **The Fresno County Office of Education talks about special education services offered.**

Kerman High School, for example, hosted a class this year that included severely disabled students from Firebaugh and Mendota schools.

"We can do it on a larger scale," Frazier said. "We're able to cross boundaries with our districts."

This year, more than 1,300 students used a county-provided service, about an even mix of students in a SELPA class or who utilized itinerant services, such as a deaf and hard-of-hearing teacher who goes out to the districts to help students in general education classes.

Ten students from Firebaugh-Las Deltas are in county-operated programs. Valadez said the help her district receives from the county is "crucial" in their efforts to serve their students.

But at the end of the day, the goal remains to keep as many students as possible in their own district.

### **Distance affects families, services**

Perhaps the greatest enemy when it comes to executing rural special education services is the long commutes students have to take if they need the severely disabled services that are provided mostly outside their districts. There is no way around it.

It's one of the biggest reasons why parents who originally consent to a referral for their child get cold feet about sending them off to receive those services.

The county provides transportation for students who use its programs. But "one of the most difficult challenges" for Valadez has been finding alternatives for students whose disabilities make it hard to sit through a daily two-hour, round-trip commute from Firebaugh to Kerman, the site of one of the county's severely disabled classes.

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Andrea Valadez, Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District

"Understandably, parents don't want to put their child on a bus for two-plus hours a day," Valadez said. "They're little."

Richard Nielsen, a special education teacher who teaches adult transitional classes at Sutherland Center in Kerman, subbed in for the Kerman High class on a recent Thursday. He said location sometimes can limit the functional skills he tries to instill in his students, some who have lived as far away as Five Points, an unincorporated community in the county 21 miles south of Kerman.

"I've had students who've not been able to start their adult training program because of transportation issues," Nielsen said. "There's only so many vans."

Later that day, he planned on taking a group of students on a "field trip" to the Costco on West Shaw Avenue off Highway 99 in Fresno to show them how to shop for groceries.

Because county-operated services are need-based, it means the number of similar referrals dictates where certain classes will be hosted. Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified will have it a bit easier next year when a class for severely disabled students opens in Mendota. The two Firebaugh students who are enrolled in the Kerman High class will

instead be making a shorter commute to Mendota.

But a homegrown program like SHINES is an example of a district attempting to serve rural students close to home. The district, in which 215 of its 2,200 students are in special education programs, will expand SHINES to more preschools next year — which means the number of referrals will almost certainly increase.

## **An uphill teacher recruiting battle**

This much has always been a trend, experts say: in the fight for a limited field of special education teachers, rural districts have long been the underdog to bigger, urban-based districts that simply are perceived by most job applicants as more attractive.

Nationwide, there is a shortage of special education teachers. But rural districts — like many of the low-income, Spanish-speaking Hispanic communities that orbit around Fresno and Clovis — don't necessarily carry the same appeal as a city job.

Belva Collins, chair of the special education and child development department at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, said when it comes to rural teaching shortages, "I hear every state tell the same story — it's a huge problem nationally."

Collins, editor of the [Rural Special Education Quarterly journal](#) and former director of the American Council of Rural Special Education, said the turnover for special education teachers at rural schools is higher than those of urban schools.

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Belva Collins, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

"I was one of those people who went to a rural area and taught for five years and then left," she said. "Most people do leave if they're not from there."

Collins said the success stories of special education teachers being retained in rural districts are most common when the teacher is native to the area they serve.

A report released in March by California's Statewide Task Force on Special Education, "One System: Reforming Education to Serve All Students," found small districts and schools "have great difficulty procuring highly qualified staff who can serve the range of students with disabilities whom the entities are charged with serving."

The class at Kerman High is one that uses "peer tutors," general education students who help with the class for credit. The class promotes integration between special education students and the general student population, a model that has been praised by special education authorities and advocates as a necessary and effective cultural shift.

The peer tutors sat down with the disabled students and played games with them on a recent Thursday aimed at helping them with functional skills such as identifying foods.

Mike Butts, a special education program manager with the county, observed the Kerman High class in action. He is a veteran educator who started as a special education teacher and worked his way up to an administrative position with the county office.

There's a reality to teaching special education students. A person needs to have a certain combination of passion, patience and compassion, he said.

"It's not a career, it's a calling."

That much was reaffirmed inside Kerman High's Room 407.

Nielsen, the soft-spoken special education teacher, reflected on a long career teaching his students how to live like full-functioning adults despite their struggles. He could easily retire by now, but he still enjoys the job very much.

"I don't think retiring is a possibility for another few years," he said. "The program is really rewarding."

Nielsen walked around the room, letting the free spirit of the classroom run uninterrupted. Butts stood in the back and enjoyed watching the interactions between the peer tutors and the students.

At one table, two peer tutors were playing educational board games with a pair of students. At another, a student was listening to a music book with another peer tutor. One peer tutor stood out to Butts.

Her name was Gabriela Fonseca, a senior who played on the varsity volleyball team. She was reading a boy "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," a children's book that tells the tale of an overweight caterpillar's transformation into a beautiful butterfly.

"Come here," she told the boy in Spanish, giving a gentle tap on the shoulder, motioning him to take a closer look at the collage-like illustrations.

Butts, watching the exchange, offered a hopeful observation: "She's going to be a teacher someday."

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