Written by By Deswood Tome Sun Correspondent
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A new school is now open for pre-school aged students at the Indian Hills Elementary School in east Gallup who are deaf and hard of hearing.

The new school opened on Nov. 6, as officials for the New Mexico School for the Deaf, and officials from Gallup McKinley County Schools were joined by faculty, parents, and community members for a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

“No deaf child is to be left alone,” Dr. Rosemary Gallegos said to the audience of more than 50 at the dedication. “I thank the early intervention staff, the school district, and Indian Hills elementary staff.”

As the ribbon was cut by a preschool student joined by Gallegos and Charles Long, president of the Gallup McKinley County Schools Board of Education, the audience applauded. However, the usual sounds of claps were instead replaced with hands extended straight up with a waving motion, the American Sign Language signage showing applause.

“We are teaching another language and communication,” Gallegos said.

The new preschool will use a bilingual approach in education – written or spoken English and ASL. It is the most accessible way for children who are deaf and hard of hearing to learn.

“It’s very hard for me to think of this type of education,” Long said. “I want to learn ASL,” drawing applause from the gathering. “The school for the deaf is officially open.”

Kari-Lynn McBride, public relations director for NMSD, said the proper terms for the hearing challenged are: Deaf and hard of hearing.

“Hearing impaired is not used in the deaf community,” she said. “It implies that they are broken.”

Gallup is the fifth site chosen by the NMSD for a preschool for the deaf and hard of hearing. Other locations include Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Farmington, and Las Cruces.

“We look at numbers of children who are of pre-school age,” Gallegos said, who serves as superintendent for NMSD. “We have early intervention through our parent, infant, and child program.”

Enrollment at the new school was successfully achieved by the Early Intervention and Involvement Department, a statewide agency. It is a program that assists in identifying children who are deaf and hard of hearing at an age as early as six months old.

Since April, the NMSD has worked with the Gallup McKinley County Schools and New Mexico Public Education Department to make the determination on whether Gallup would be an idea location for a new school.

The superintendent and school board approval were obtained over the Summer months.

Gallagos noted that it was a smooth transition.

“Scott took over and did the follow up meetings and did everything the district asked for,” Gallegos said of Scott Mohan, principal for NMSD’s early childhood, elementary, and satellite programs.

Once the students turn five and advance into elementary school, the school might expand or place the students on an IEP. An IEP is an Individualized Education Plan usually used for students who are gifted and talented or those with special needs in education.

“We will have to revisit for each child,” Gallegos said. “Another option is for students is to attend the school for the deaf in Santa Fé. Onsite home cottages are available for students living and housing.”

Funding for the new preschool for the deaf and hard of hearing is shared between the school district and NMSD. Other costs are eligible for reimbursement through the state Public Education Department.

Funding for NMSD comes from annual state appropriations. The NMSD is special state school, similar to the school for the blind. Other funding for the school comes through the land and permanent fund beneficiary state designation.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, statistics for the deaf and hard of hearing in New Mexico is at an estimate 3.1 percent. Nearly 39,000 in New Mexico are deaf and hard of hearing.

A day following the ribbon-cutting ceremony the school began its preschool class with the enrollment of three students.

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Sun Correspondent