

Governor Herbert Visits Students with Disabilities at USU | CEHS

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Utah Governor Gary Herbert visited the Logan campus of USU on November 4, 2016, spending time with students in the ASSERT autism program and the Aggies Elevated program.

To help children with autism reach their potential as they learn to communicate, the ASSERT (Autism Support Services: Education, Research and Training) preschool program at Utah State uses applied behavior analysis, in which children practice appropriate behaviors and receive positive reinforcement. Children are taught to request what they want and to control their environment and get their needs met.

Governor Herbert was pleased to see that the preschool children were demonstrating skills necessary for success in kindergarten and beyond. "Our hope is that every child with autism could benefit from early intervention programs like ASSERT, because it makes a significant difference in their lives," said the governor. "We want to be involved in supporting these excellent programs."

Reflecting on the support from the governor and other Utah legislators, the director of the ASSERT autism program, Dr. Thomas Higbee, expressed his appreciation: "With help from the state of Utah, ASSERT has grown from our tiny beginnings to a larger on-campus program as well as programs throughout Utah that serve many families."

The primary goal of ASSERT is to build the capacity of Utah school districts to provide effective, research-based educational services to children with autism. The applied

behavior analysis method has spread to numerous Utah school districts, including Logan, Park City, and Granite school districts.

A visit to young adults with disabilities in the Aggies Elevated program was the next stop for the governor. Students from all over the nation with disabilities want to have careers, and many are taking college classes at USU. The goal is for each student to find gainful employment leading to a meaningful career path. Several Aggies Elevated students are already beginning careers—at the recreation center, the art museum, USU's Sound Beginnings program, and Common Ground Outdoor adventures. Students in the program are supported by mentors, tutors, study groups, a self-directed plan, and assistive technology.

As he sat down with the Aggies Elevated students, Governor Herbert asked about their long-term career goals, and they were eager to share. "I love animals, and I want to go into animal science," said Hannah Fassmann. "In high school, I trained three guide dogs for the blind."

Berkeley Nero told the governor that Aggies Elevated has helped her focus on her goals. "I'm interested in music therapy—I love to show people how I really feel through singing and performing." Several students also expressed a desire to work with kids with disabilities.

Governor Herbert offered enthusiastic encouragement. "We all have disabilities of some kind, but some are more challenging than others," he told them. "You each have tremendous skills, and you're working hard to develop those skills so you can have a happy and productive life."

Enrollment in college for young adults with disabilities means better employment and better wages throughout adulthood, without dependence on public programs. Sarah Bodily, director of the Aggies Elevated program, stressed the importance of raising expectations before students graduate from high school. "We are working in high schools to increase the awareness that students with intellectual or developmental disabilities can thrive in a higher education environment."

Utah State offers the only traditional residential program of this kind in Utah, and is one of a few in the western United States. With all Aggies Elevated students living on campus, the experience of navigating a more independent life is part of what makes this program unique.

Sophia Shaffer, a first year student, said "My favorite part of being an Aggie is making new friends, like my roommate Brianna." Josh Watts, also in his first year,

said, "It was scary at first because I never lived with roommates, but I got used to it. I love making new friends, and I love that I get to contribute."

Dr. Beth Foley, Dean of the College of Education and Human Services, emphasized a remarkable aspect of the program: "With the help of grants and private donations, we keep the cost at normal tuition. This helps to make the program affordable and sustainable."

Speaking afterwards about his experiences with both preschool children and young adults on the Utah State campus, Governor Herbert said, "When I see the optimism these young people have, it helps me be optimistic, too. These USU programs are very impressive, and we want to support them. We want everyone to get help and have opportunities to improve their lives."

