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Superintendent of New Mexico School for the Deaf caps long career

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Rosemary Gallegos, superintendent of the New Mexico School for the Deaf, is retiring after being with the school since 1984.
Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

It's hard for Rosemary Gallegos to talk about the New Mexico School for the Deaf without tearing up a bit.

A portrait of Gallegos, painted by one of the school's kindergartners, rests behind a desk in her house.

To Gallegos, the school has been like a second home for decades. But after working there since 1984 and serving as the school's superintendent since 2015, she is retiring.

It's a bittersweet feeling, for her roots at the school and love of education and the deaf community are apparent.

Gallegos, 62, is not a native American Sign Language speaker, nor is she deaf. She is adamant: She doesn't speak for deaf people, only the school.

"What I know is what I know from 36 years of being immersed, or 40 years really, immersed in deaf education and every day having interactions with the deaf," she said in a recent interview.

Gallegos said she sees her position as superintendent as a privilege that never would have come to be without the approval of the deaf community.

In the fall, Jennifer Herbold, the school's director of instruction, will become superintendent.

"It's really going to be nice for the school to ... have a deaf superintendent who can really understand and speak from a deaf perspective, because that's really important," Gallegos said.

"I have full confidence she is going to continue the excellent work of the school," she added.

The School for the Deaf is the state's oldest public school. It operates on a bilingual, bimodal model — meaning students are immersed in English and American Sign Language, which has its own rules for pronunciation, word formation and word order.

The school's main campus on Cerrillos Road near the Railyard District serves nearly 145 students in kindergarten through 12th grade, with cottages on-site for kids to fully immerse themselves in the language and the social beliefs, traditions and arts of the deaf community.

But its reach extends far beyond that.

As soon as a hearing loss is diagnosed, New Mexico babies are referred to the school and families are offered at-home visits to start language learning by 3 months of age. During the 2019-20 school year, the School for the Deaf orchestrated more than 4,600 home visits. During the pandemic, the visits were virtual.

The school also hosts preschools across the state and an outreach program for students who are deaf or have hearing loss who attend classes elsewhere. During the 2019-20 academic year, the school conducted 270 consultations with more than 40 districts statewide.

The school serves around 700 children in New Mexico.

“There’s a sense School for the Deaf has really become the center of culture and expertise for the state over the years,” Gallegos said. “And I’m really proud of that because I think I was part of making that happen.”

In the school’s 135-year history, Gallegos is only its ninth superintendent. She’s also the first woman — and first Hispanic woman — to serve as superintendent. When she started at the school as part of the early intervention team making home visits, she never thought she’d someday take the helm.

“I had a lot of opportunity growing up, but being a Hispanic woman, I think there was always [that] push I had to do better and be better to get ahead,” she said. “I think more and more women are taking on leadership roles.”

A flautist with a love for the mountains, Gallegos was raised in Taos by parents with lineage reaching deep into New Mexico’s history. Her father, banker Eloy Jeantete, was mayor of the town in the early 1990s. She credits the stability of her formative years for giving her the confidence needed to take the lead, and for introducing her to the language by which she loves to be surrounded.

The daughter of her godmother was the first deaf person Gallegos met. She later studied special education in school, and found herself interested in American Sign Language.

Gallegos eventually taught deaf children in Anthony, N.M., on the Texas border. She loved it and later pursued a master’s degree in deaf education at the University of Arizona.

Gallegos said she sees communicating the needs and accomplishments of children who are deaf and hard of hearing as one of the biggest challenges in leading the School for the Deaf.

“Because it’s not that common, sometimes helping the community at large understand the impact — and what’s needed and necessary for a student who is deaf, to have fluid, complete access to [an] educational system — takes a lot of explaining,” she said. “We’re constantly explaining that and helping people to understand.”

Under Gallegos' leadership, she's helped raise learning standards and saw more deaf staff members join the school.

She's particularly happy to see earlier interventions for children with diagnosed learning loss, as early childhood is a crucial time for kids to be immersed in American Sign Language so they can communicate and connect with the deaf community.

Keri-Lynn McBride, the school's director of development and community relations, has worked with Gallegos for nearly three decades. She lauded Gallegos' abilities as a mentor.

"Dr. Gallegos has done an extraordinary job leading the way," McBride said, "and her lifelong commitment, passion and love of our infants, toddlers, students, families, staff and the entire state of New Mexico is evident."

During the pandemic, the School for the Deaf, like others in the state, had to switch to virtual learning. Gallegos marveled at how elementary students helped the teachers navigate Zoom.

Gallegos pointed out that for people who are deaf in a society designed for people who hear, lack of language access can be isolating. And for deaf kids who stayed at home with hearing parents, the pandemic was difficult.

"For our deaf children, it was doubly impactful, I think, because they are brought together through the common denominator of language and communication and deaf culture," she said. "What the school provides is so unique in that manner, in that we have a critical mass."

The school reopened in April, much to the delight of students and staff. Gallegos said she feels she is leaving at a good time. She still plans on attending games and school events.

"The school is so important to the state. ... I just want to make sure that this school is here for children in New Mexico," Gallegos said, again fighting back tears.

"See, I told you I get weepy."

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