The school year is winding up in the Moab area, and for a portion of the community, the Moab Valley Multicultural Center (MVMC) is playing a crucial role in the back-to-school preparations.
According to the 2017 U.S. Census, 8.5 percent of Moab’s population is Latino, many of whom speak English as a second language. An Associated Press article on July 28 reports that there is a low number of Latino educators in Utah: just 2.5 percent of educators are Latino, compared to 17 percent of the state’s Latino student body.

“I do believe that we have a shortage of Latino educators,” Grand County School District Superintendent JT Stroder said. “It’s beyond Moab, but it’s definitely an issue here, as well.”

In Grand County, the school district is bridging the gap between Latino educators and its Latino students by working closely with the staff at MVMC.

“We help the parents get registered,” MVMC Education Coordinator Quincy Masur said. “They have all these packets that they have to fill out, so they come (to the multicultural center) and, especially if they don’t speak English, we help them to do that.”

Once the school year begins, MVMC staff members go to the schools to offer assistance.

“We serve as interpreters with teachers, counselors and for IEPs (individualized education plans),” Masur said.

Within the Grand County School District, Stroder said there is just one Latina educator.

“She works with both the high school and the middle school, but outside of her, I can’t think of any others right off the top of my head.” Stroder said.

The relationship between the Grand County School District and MVMC means that the staff members from MVMC are frequently in the schools helping to interpret for parents.

“We provide a lot of second-language support for the school. Last year we interpreted at something like 100 parent-teacher conferences throughout the school year,” MVMC Executive Director Rhiana Medina said.

Those interpretations ranged from parent-teacher conferences in preschool to high school.

“It’s amazing and it’s been helping the kids have more success at school and the parents can understand what’s going on with their academic world since it can be really confusing all the testing and things they have to do,” Medina said. “We’re really proud to be able to provide that kind of support.”

The six-person staff at MVMC have all worked, in some capacity, to interpret and translate for students and parents within the Grand County School District.

“People are often surprised at how much we offer and that we offer our services for free or low-cost. That’s pretty rare, I think,” Masur said. “We can put on all these different hats and do all these different jobs and people are surprised by that, that we can help them out in so many different capacities.”
In order to track the community’s use of its services, the multicultural center has implemented a data tracking system to better understand which services are being used more than others.

“We wanted to define what we were doing, so we started looking at our data a little closer,” Medina said. “At this time, in 2018, we have several years of data, and we can look at trends and see what services we’re providing more or less of, and why that might be. This way, we can focus our own limited resources toward those programs.”

Stroder affirmed the importance of MVMC to the schools and the community, and said there are low numbers of educators in general.

“If you add Latino educators on top of that, it’s really a big concern,” Stroder said.

The reasoning behind the lack of Latino educators in Utah may be because post-secondary education is financially difficult to attain for immigrant families, Medina said. With less bilingual or Latino educators within the school district, more pressure is put on outside groups to help meet the community’s needs.

“I think it would be fantastic if we had more bilingual educators,” Medina said. “I think we’re going to start seeing it more and more, but in the meantime, I’m glad we’re meeting the gap in the language barrier here in the schools.”

Medina said that the MVMC staff works really hard to ensure that students don’t have to act as interpreters.

“I hope because we have six translators willing, ready and able to help here, that we avoid that situation most of the time,” Medina said.

Masur also speculated on the reason for the lack of Latino educators in the community, and said maybe there is a stigma around speaking Spanish that is deterring young adults from pursuing bilingual education as a career choice.

“We’ve got a lot of students that come here and speak both Spanish and English and I hope they realize how lucky they are and what an advantage that is going to be and I hope we can encourage that, too,” Masur said. “The other day a little girl was saying, ‘I don’t want to speak Spanish, I only want to speak English.’ If we can encourage people and let them know that that is a really important skill to have, then we’ll have a huge population in a couple years that are ready to work and speak both languages.”

While the MVMC provides many crucial services to the Moab community, their resources are limited in some areas.

“I mean, even with the Navajo people, we don’t have anyone who speaks Navajo here at MVMC, and that’s a large segment of our community,” Masur said. “That’s a challenge, and we want to be able to meet that need, but right now we can’t. So, there’s always room for improvement.”

MVMC COMMUNITY EVENTS AND CULTURAL EXCHANGES
MVMC also organizes community events and cultural exchanges throughout the year. Many of these programs are geared toward youth and scheduled throughout the school year. Offerings include the backpack program, which provides an opportunity for families who struggle to afford adequate school supplies for their kids.

“Shopko gives us a yearly grant and we really appreciate them, and it’s fun because the kids get to come into our office and pick their own backpack,” Medina said. “It’s their own thing instead of someone just giving them one they didn’t get to pick out.”

St. Francis Episcopal Church funds the backpack program and is also a member of the Interfaith Coalition that will also be running a school supply drive that will provide a portion of school supplies to families.

Additionally, MVMC also organizes Spanish conversation tables, Spanish classes, BEACON clubs, summer camps, and “Amigos y Amiguitos,” where children younger than 9th grade are mentored by young adults in their teens and 20s once per week.

The Amigos y Amiguitos program offers older students the opportunity to mentor someone younger and also build their resume for college while doing it.

“We do the Amigos y Amiguitos program every Wednesday during the school year and we’re always looking for more amigos and amigas to be mentors for the little kids,” Masur said. “The idea is that they come, we have some free time, we do a craft, we read, and they get to hang out with their mentor. We have a lot of Spanish-speaking students that come, and it’s an awesome resource for the parents and for the kids. We took them on a rafting trip this summer. We do all kinds of stuff with them.”

Another large part of MVMC’s school programming includes their BEACON after-school clubs, which change themes every trimester.

“BEACON After-School Program is a major partner of ours. We do after school cultural enrichment clubs all year round,” Medina said. “That could be anything from language to food to arts and crafts to games and more.”

The MVMC’s summer camp offers low-cost activities for kids during the summer months when school is out.

“We’re finishing up our summer camp where we’ve ‘traveled’ to a different country every week,” Masur said. “It is a really low-cost summer camp and we provide scholarships as well as lunch.”

The multicultural center offers extensive programming and services for both Moab’s Latino community and the general public that are unique to Moab. For now, the problem of having low numbers of Latino educators in Utah and Grand County is being solved by the staff at the multicultural center, who serve as the main resource for interpretation, translation and bilingual activities in the Moab area.

School superintendent sees a lack of Latino educators in Grand County
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