

Lilia Syed to lead MUSD's special education department

Educator makes move from Simi Valley

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As a school psychologist and program specialist for 12 years, the Simi Valley resident provided counseling and community resources to students of all grade levels in both the La Cañada Unified School District and the Simi Valley Unified School District.

“What I appreciate most about (being a program specialist) is supporting the school teams and trying to find resources for children,” the 37-year-old Simi Valley resident said.

Now Syed will bring her expertise to the Moorpark Unified School District as its new director of special education. She replaces Diane Weis, who is retiring after 41 years in education.

In her new position, Syed will work with parents, special education staff and administration at the district's 11 campuses to ensure students receive the support they need to succeed in the classroom. She plans to enhance the special education programs through ongoing training for teachers, paraeducators and even parents.

Doing so, she said, will help improve overall student achievement in and out of the classroom.

“I hope to empower teachers, to provide them with professional development and to help them guide their kids to become productive members of society,” she said.

Faced with a growing number of special education students in the district, Syed is asked to do more with less, as state funding for special-ed programs continues to lag behind need. It's the same problem seen across the county and state.

During the 2016-17 school year, just over \$4 million of the \$11 million the district spent on special education was supported by state and federal funding.

Syed said her first plan of action will be to support the current special education programs in the district and continue professional development for teachers and support staff to improve student growth.

“Early intervention for our kids goes a long way,” she said. “I would also like to consider how we can improve inclusion for students with special needs when appropriate.”

Experience in special ed

The married mother of three discovered her passion for education as a student at UCLA. While she was studying psychology, Syed volunteered at a UCLA clinic where she worked alongside professionals to support children with special needs.

“I fell in love with the idea of a team approach, and I started investigating and interviewing school psychologists and became enamored with this field,” she said.

Syed earned a master’s degree in educational psychology and her pupil personnel services credential from Chapman University.

“I first began my career in graduate school I was over at Chapman University in the school psych program,” Syed said. “While I was doing that, I was working as an instructional assistant for a special education day class.”

After finishing her graduate work in 2006, Syed worked as a school psychologist in the La Cañada school district for six years.

She moved to SVUSD in 2012, where she provided individual and group counseling to general education and special education students.

Four years later, she became a program specialist and worked with elementary, middle and high school students. She also oversaw the district’s Circle of Friends program, an inclusion program that builds friendships between students with special needs and their general education peers.

“I have a passion for collaborating with the various stakeholders and developing programs, so I’ve appreciated the Circle of Friends program that I’ve overseen,” Syed said.

As she takes on the director of special education role, Syed wants to expand similar offerings in the Moorpark district.

“I hope to bring in the knowledge that I have and support them in improving their programs,” she said.

She also hopes to continue the district’s partnership with agencies in Ventura County—including the Ventura County Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), an office within the Ventura County Office of Education that provides public education to all students with disabilities—to give additional coaching to teachers.

“I love living in Ventura County, and I feel that as a county we have several resources that other counties do not have,” Syed said. “The outside agencies work well together and we have a positive working relationship, so I appreciate that about Ventura.”

