

Introduction to the MEDIAN Project: Strategies for Special Education Leaders to Enhance and Expand Autism Evaluation Capacity

New Mexico Public Education Department,
Office of Special Education
Director's Academy, Winter 2026

January 14 and 15, 2026



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New Mexico State University

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Presenter Bios

Dr. Ann Branscum, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and a nationally certified school psychologist (NCSP). She started her career as an elementary teacher before practicing school psychology in several states. She completed her predoctoral internship and two-year postdoctoral psychology fellowship at the University of New Mexico Center for Development and Disability (CDD) in the Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Division (AODD). She is currently an associate professor and psychologist with New Mexico State University's Autism Diagnostic Center (ADC). Dr. Branscum is the creator of the Medical and Educational Interagency Autism Network (MEDIAN) Project which addresses barriers to care through innovative partnerships between schools and medical providers. She is a proud native New Mexican who grew up in rural south-central New Mexico.



Dr. Marybeth A. Graham, PhD is a bilingual (Spanish) licensed clinical psychologist and is currently a professor in the department of Communication Disorders at New Mexico State University. She has been on faculty at the University of New Mexico in the departments of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and Pediatrics. Dr. Graham has provided comprehensive autism diagnostic evaluations for children and adults as well as treatment for neurodevelopmental and psychiatric disorders at Programs for Children and Adolescents and the Center for Development and Disability at UNM and currently works at the Autism Diagnostic Center at NMSU as they expand services and build capacity in the southern part of New Mexico. Dr. Graham has provided ongoing trainings, presentations, didactics and clinical supervision to practicum-level, intern and postdoctoral psychology trainees, pediatric and psychiatry residents and fellows as well as other professionals and caregivers across the country.



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Learning Objectives

The learner will:

- understand how a school-based autism evaluation team collaborated with a medical provider to address barriers to the autism diagnostic process.
- learn about the Medical and Educational Interagency Autism Network (MEDIAN) Project.
- understand how they might be able to participate in the MEDIAN Project to address their community's specific needs.



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About Our Center



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Raise Your Hand

- If you knew there was an autism center at NMSU?
- If you knew if we have an adult autism clinic also?
- That we have interventions and community events in addition to evaluations?
- That we offer free programs for families across the state that are available via telehealth?



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Papen-Aprendamos Autism Diagnostic Center's Mission

To serve and celebrate our community with compassion and innovation



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Papen-Aprendamos Autism Diagnostic Center



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Evaluation Services Across the Lifespan



BIRTH-TO-5 CLINIC THAT FOCUSES ON EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND DIAGNOSIS



5-AND-OVER CLINIC THAT FOCUSES ON SCHOOL-AGE DEVELOPMENT AND DIAGNOSIS



ADULT CLINIC THAT FOCUSES ON INDIVIDUALS 18 AND OVER AND DIAGNOSIS

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Evaluation Process

Caregiver Interview (2 hours)

Developmental history gathered from caregiver(s) with diagnostic team

Evaluation (2-4 hours)

Clinical Observation/ Assessment
Administration/Scoring

Feedback (1 hour)

Results and Individualized
Recommendations

Family Support

Follow-up sessions based on individual need

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Need for Services

- Over 800 currently on our combined (child, adult) wait list
- Our current wait time: 12-18 months
- UNM waitlist
- Proactive planning in place to avoid increased wait times



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Intervention Services Across the Lifespan



PARENT-COACHING PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AGES 1-8



SCHOOL AGE SOCIAL SKILLS PROGRAMS AND COMMUNITY EVENTS



ADULT CONNECTION EVENTS

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RUBI – Parent Training for Disruptive Behaviors: 12-14 weeks

RUBI Focuses on prevention strategies and teaching positive replacements for unwanted behaviors.

When parents have more skills to handle autism specific behaviors, children have less disruptive behaviors.



Core Sessions:

Behavioral Principles
Prevention Strategies
Daily Schedules,
Reinforcement 1&2
Planned Ignoring
Compliance Training
Functional Communication
Teaching Skills 1&2
Generalization and Maintenance

Optional Sessions:

Crisis Management
Sleep Problems
Time Out
Toilet training



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Telehealth
Options Available!

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Feeding Assessment and Collaborative Treatment (F.A.C.T)

Provide feeding assessments, feeding intervention, training and additional resources to help southern NM families

Nearly 90% of children with autism face feeding difficulties because they are only comfortable eating highly processed, carbohydrate-dense foods (Ahearn et al. 2001; Bowers 2002; Collins, et al. 2003; Cornish 1998, 2002; Field et al. 2003; Schreck et al. 2004).

- Multidisciplinary Team
- Individual and Group Formats
- Create goals with families to increase children's healthy food repertoires
- Students from each discipline work under licensed professionals



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PEERS - The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relationship Skills: 16 weeks

Teens learn to:

- Use appropriate conversational skills
- Use humor appropriately
- Use electronic communication
- Enter & exit conversations
- Be a good host during get-togethers
- Be a good sport
- Handle arguments and disagreements
- Change a bad reputation
- Handle rumors and gossip
- Handle rejection, teasing and bullying



Parents learn to reinforce skills across social setting and support their teens' social independence.



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Telehealth
Options Available!

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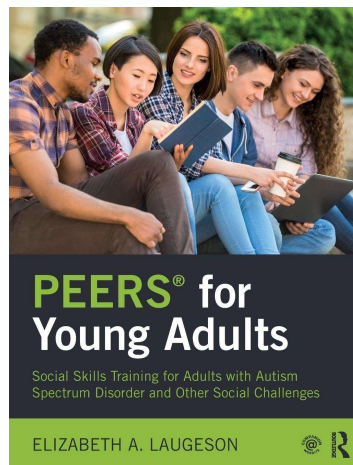
PEERS – Social Skills Program for Young Adults

The program focuses on:

- Conversation skills
- Humor
- Friendship building
- Friendship deepening
- Intro to dating
- Handling social negativity

Classes are offered virtually in the fall and spring

For more information contact us at ADCoutreach@nmsu.edu or follow us on Facebook and Instagram



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Telehealth
Options Available!

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Community Events


- Celebrate the Spectrum
- Teen Spectrum Socials
 - Museum of Nature and Science, Creepy Creatures, Baking Fun
- Adult Autism Social Gatherings
 - Coffee, Conversation, and Community



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Like. Follow. Share.



NMSU Autism Diagnostic Center





facebook.com/ADC.NMSU





nmsupaadc



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Trends

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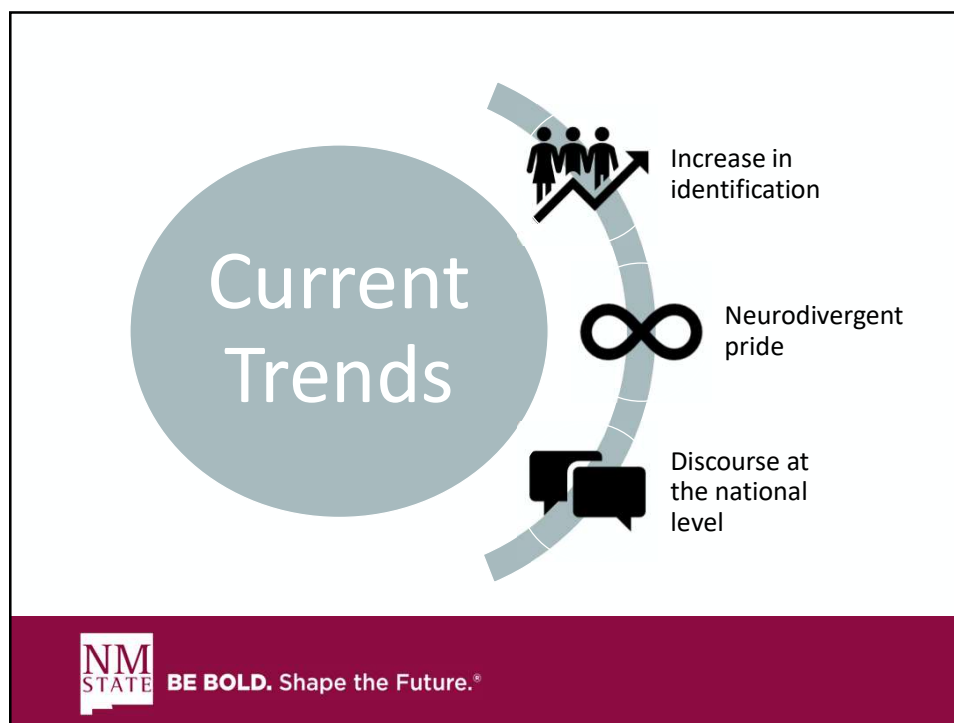
Table Discussion

- What have you noticed in your workplace that has changed over time with autism?
 - E.g., more students identified, more awareness, increased litigiousness
- What are the issues your district is facing related to autism?
 - E.g., parent requests for evaluations, students who are not “obviously” autistic, difficulties with considering support needs, IDEA/504 implications, students receiving medical diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder, not enough providers



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Are We Overidentifying Autism?

- NM has an overall higher special education enrollment rate (**18%**) compared to the national average (15%), as well as our neighboring states (Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Texas: 13%; Oklahoma: 17%).
- Of the 315,023 public school and 24,440 private school students in New Mexico in 2022-2023, 5,5054 (**11%**) of these students received special education services as a student with Autism.
- However, only **11%** of NM students are identified under the Autism eligibility, falling short of the national average of **13%**.
- This suggests that we are possibly under-identifying or mis-categorizing autism.
 - Developmental Delay percentages: US: 7%, NM 11%



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Table Discussion

- What is your district doing that is helping this population of students (i.e., what are you doing that is working)?
- What are your ideas about how to help current issues your district is facing related to autism assessment/supports?



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Our Collective Why



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The Need



- Less likely to have a timely diagnosis of autism if:
 - Rural
 - Poor or near poor
 - If non-White
 - Female
 - Have expected cognitive and language skills
 - Have less frequent interactions with medical providers
 - 26 out of 33 counties are rural/frontier
 - In 2021, NM had 3rd highest poverty rate in US
 - ~65% are non-White – minority-majority state
 - Documented gender bias (research & identification)
 - Schools more likely to assess for nuanced presentations
 - Many counties considered medical deserts

(Antezana et al., 2017; Daniels & Mandell, 2014; Estes et al., 2015; Mandell et al., 2005; Palmer et al., 2005; Shattuck et al., 2009; Whitlock et al., 2020)



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The Land of Enchantment

- Medical desert
- Insurance-covered therapies available after a medical diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder from an Autism Evaluation Provider (AEP)
- Long distances for many families
- Travel considerations

“... strategic approaches to combat racial, ethnic, and economic disparities in medical-family-school coordination are needed”
(Stoiber et al., 2024, p. 401).



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Importance of Early Identification

- Provide interventions that shift lifelong trajectories including:
 - Cognitive skills (Ben Itzhak & Zachor, 2011; Estes et al., 2015)
 - Social and communication abilities (MacDonald et al., 2014; Mazurek et al., 2012)
 - Adaptive behavior (Baker-Ericzen et al., 2007; Estes et al., 2015)
 - Verbal abilities (MacDonald et al., 2014)
- High quality individualized education program (IEP) is a strong predictor of improved student outcomes
 - Make progress towards their goals (La Salle et al., 2013)
 - Positive academic and functional outcomes (Burns et al., 2023; Gee et al., 2020; Kleinert et al., 2015)
 - Increase student engagement and self-advocacy (Arndt et al., 2006; Mason et al., 2004)



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Our Response to the Need: Ed/Med Evaluations



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What is an Ed/Med Evaluation?

- Partnership between NMSU Papen-Aprendamos Autism Diagnostic Center (ADC) and an interdisciplinary school evaluation team
- Schools facilitate a medical evaluation while collecting their own evaluation data
- One eval in then able to consider:
 - School eligibility of Autism
 - Medical diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder
- Benefits
 - Comprehensive evaluation data available (e.g., naturalistic observations, educator input)
 - Reduces cost and travel barriers for families and the state
 - School teams have access to specialized autism clinicians
- What it is **not**:
 - School teams (alone) being able to medically diagnosis autism spectrum disorder



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Related Work

United States

- Pediatricians/primary care providers

Washington

- School and Medical Autism Review Team (SMART)

Oregon

- Project ACCESS (Assuring Comprehensive Care through Enhanced Service Systems for Children with Autism)

North Carolina

- Project INTERProfessional Autism Collaborative Training (INTERACT)



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Getting Started: Relationships and Key Players



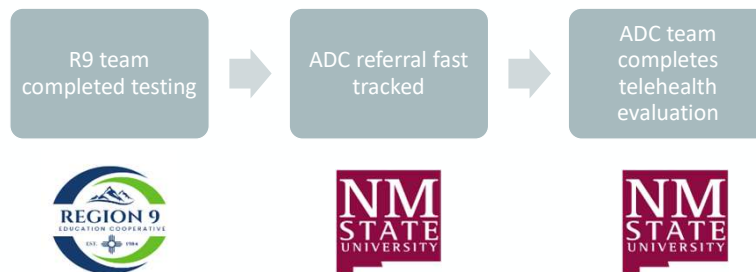
- Buy-In
- Engaging university/community relationships
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
 - Between R9 and NMSU
 - MOU Key Players:
 - College Dean
 - Provost
 - General Counsel
 - University Controller



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Asynchronous Ed/Med Pilot Stage: 2023-2024 School Year



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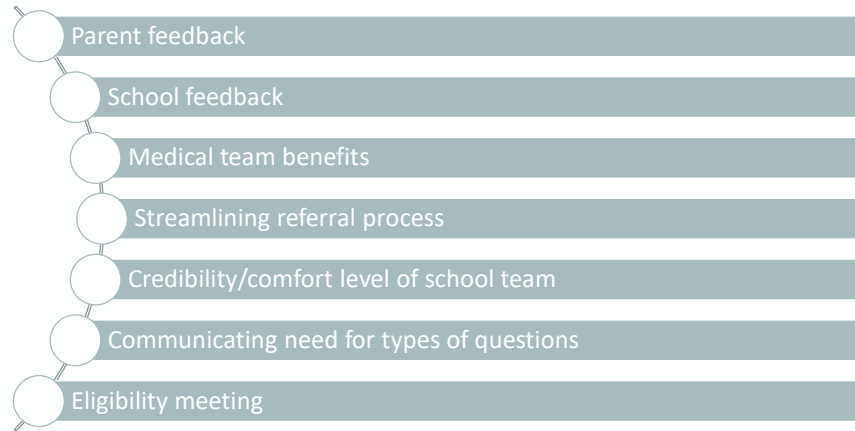
Synchronous Ed/Med Implementation: 2023-Current



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Ed/Med Lessons



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Key:

- ★ = Academic medical centers
- ☆ = Ed/Med evals conducted.
- ★ = Ed/Med evals available.



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Table Discussion

- What are your thoughts on Ed/Med evaluations?
- Is this something you might be interested in for your district?
- What barriers do you see?



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It's Working... Now What?

"There is an increased need for school district special education teams to have specific expertise in the identification of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and implementing evidence-based ASD identification practices" (Aiello et al., 2017, p. 68).



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Creation of the MEDIAN Project

Medical and Educational Interagency Autism
Network (MEDIAN) Project



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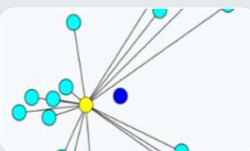
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me·di·an

/ˈmēdēən/

3, 3, **6**, 7, 8,

Median = **6**



Arithmetic Median:
The middle value in a set of numbers when they're arranged in order (i.e., the middle point).

Geometric Median:
The point that minimizes the sum of distances to all the other points (i.e., finding the "center of gravity" of the points).

Highway Median: The strip of land between the lanes of opposing traffic on a divided highway.



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MEDIAN Project Goals

Intensive training in best practices for autism evaluations

- Concerns about training adequacy in evidence-based autism assessment (Aiello et al., 2017; McKenney et al., 2015)
- Potential missed identification by less experienced evaluators or with non-comprehensive evaluations (Daniels et al., 2011; Rosenberg et al., 2009)
- 2017 study: 23% of school psychologists used evidence-based assessment practices, with higher training levels associated with better practices (Aiello et al., 2017)
- Training of school psychologists in autism is associated with increased knowledge, multidisciplinary team involvement, and accurate identification (Rasmussen et al., 2009)

Provide access to ongoing learning and consultation

- Extension of Community Healthcare Outcomes (ECHO) Learning Community
- Evidence-based model that is a virtual learning network of providers offering real-time access to autism and behavioral experts

Ed/Med evaluation expansion

- NMSU ADC partner with LEAs from around the state



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MEDIAN Project 2024-2025 School Year

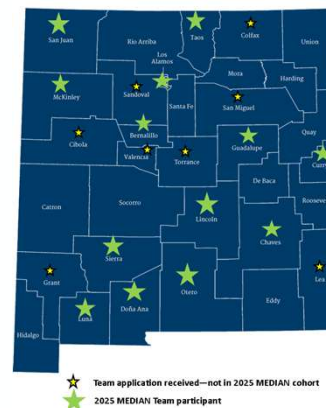
Winter Kickoff

- February 2025
- Program introduction
- Cohort relationship building
- Gather data

Summer Training Institute

- June 2-6, 2025
- Two days ADOS-2 training
- Three days of intensive autism evaluation training

MEDIAN applicants by county



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Raise Your Hand

- If you had providers that participated in the MEDIAN Summer Training Institute in June 2025.



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MEDIAN Cohort 1

98% female

Variety of disciplines:
Diagnosticians, school
psychologists, speech and
language pathologists, social
workers, occupational
therapists

96.2% work in medically
underserved areas

Experienced providers:
68% had practiced 5 or more
years

30% spoke languages
besides English
(American Sign Language,
Diné, French, and Spanish)

Variety of self-described
ethnicities (e.g., Hispanic,
Latina/Latino, Mexican,
Native American/Indigenous,
Spanish, White-Non-
Hispanic)



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Why Attendees Participated



Professional Skill
Development



Personal Connection
to Autism



Addressing
Community Needs



Early Identification
and Support



Interdisciplinary and
Holistic Approach



Advocacy and
Empowerment



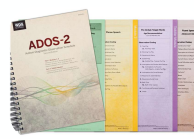
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What Improvements Attendees Thought Could Be Beneficial



Professional
Development



Learn the ADOS-2



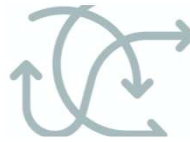
Interdisciplinary
Team Collaboration



Resource and
Staffing Constraints



Specialized
Knowledge Gaps



Evaluation Process
Challenges



Parent and Family
Engagement



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Quantitative Results

Program Satisfaction:

- Most rated training as useful or very useful
- Highest “very useful” ratings included:
 - Adapting evaluation practices for cultural responsiveness (86.5%)
 - Understanding nuanced presentations (84.6%)
 - Differentiating autism from other disorders (84.6%)
 - Gathering information through observations (84.6%)

Self-Efficacy:

- Significant improvement in overall self-efficacy/confidence (moderate effect size)

Multicultural Competence

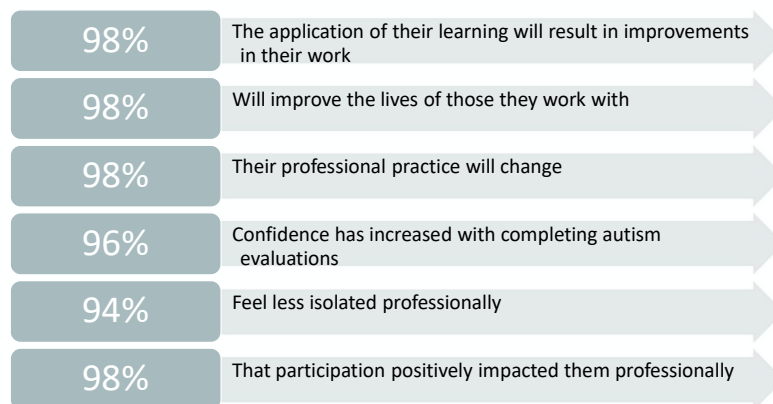
- Statistically significant improvement in multicultural competence with autism assessments (moderate effect)



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Practice Changes



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Participant Perceptions of Most Pertinent Learning Topics

- ADOS-2 assessment and coding skills
 - Have a better understanding of ADOS-2 administration and what it is looking for
- Understanding autistic masking and nuanced presentations
 - I learned a TON about masking and what it looks like and more about what autism looks like in girls
 - I feel able to more accurately assess for masked and nuanced autism, which I felt unsure of prior to this training
- Listening, trust, and relationship building
 - The most important thing I learned overall is listening, validating, and creating trust is integral for autistic students and their families
- Importance of lived experiences
 - I feel that learning from parents and self-advocates was extremely eye opening to me. That is an experience that college did not provide me
- Importance of interdisciplinary evaluations
 - An interdisciplinary approach to an evaluation can provide a more robust understanding of the student, a clearer picture of a student's strengths and needs



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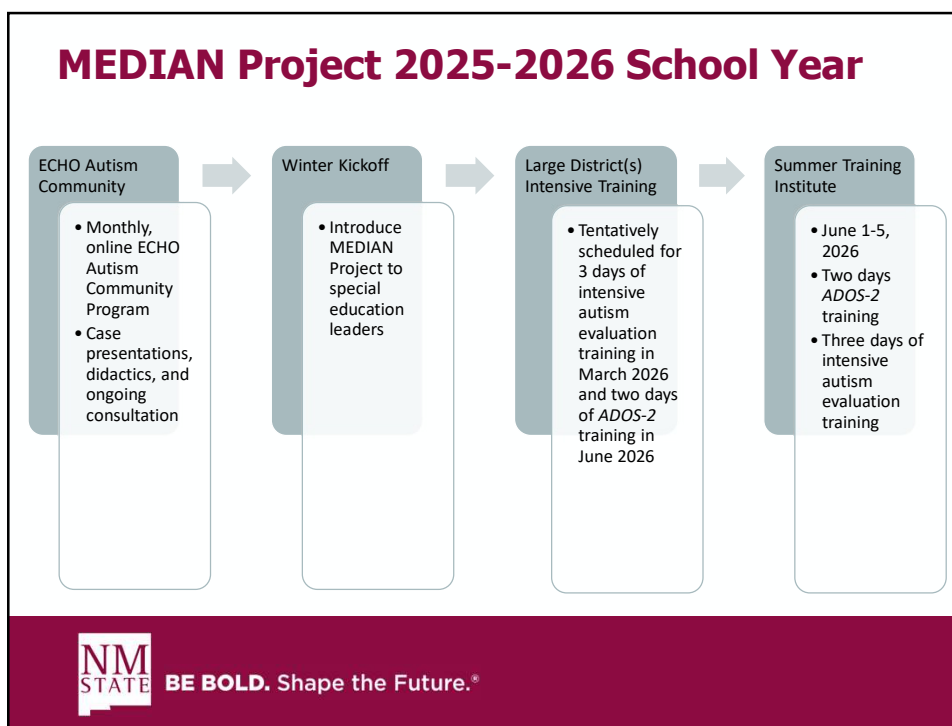
Participant Perceptions of Practice Change

- Neurodiversity and Strengths-Based Approach
 - While I have always been very positive in my verbal interpretation and include strengths in the written report, I now have a better vocabulary to describe ASD behaviors that are not deficit based. I can use that language in my reports, interviews, observations and interpretation
- Shift to Interdisciplinary Approaches
 - Build a collaborative interdisciplinary team to support diagnostics
- Enhanced observation practices
 - I will include improved practices for observations and include new data collecting tools
- Cultural Responsivity
 - I feel that I will be more cognizant of cultural background, differentiating between eligibility differences, and identifying the proper tools to investigate the suspected disability
- Improved Parent and Family Engagement
 - Approach that is more parent friendly and inclusive



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Table Discussion

- What questions do you have about this project?
- Do you have any concerns/barriers?



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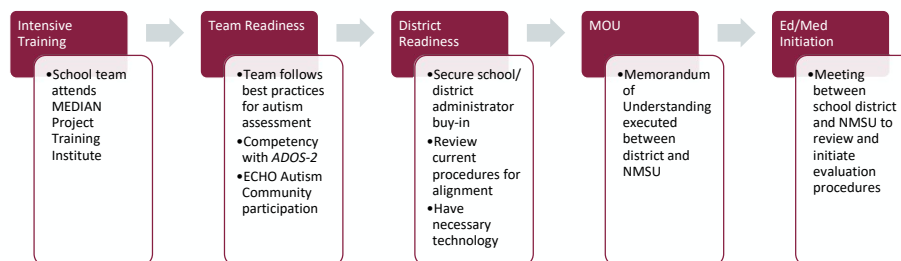
Continued Ed/Med Evaluation Process



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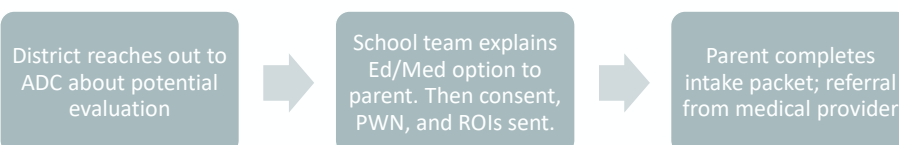
Ed/Med Evaluation Implementation Overview



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Ed/Med Evaluation Initiation Process



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To be considered for the 2026 MEDIAN Project Cohort, a full team must fill out the forms below

Special Education Director



Related Service Providers



Director: <https://forms.gle/D1SYaY37w2dW79Ud6>
 Related Service: <https://forms.gle/aPdP96BSU7ZCPPYs7>



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Contact Information

For further information about the New Mexico
Autism Project and/or the MEDIAN Project,
please contact:

autism.project@regionix.org



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Future Steps



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MEDIAN Project Next Steps

- **Paper:** Streamlining Autism Evaluations Through Educational-Medical Collaboration: Initial Evaluation of the MEDIAN Project (Branscum, Graham, & Schaner; in press)
- **Research partnership**
- **Diversified funding**
- **National presentations**
 - National Association of School Psychologists (NASP):
 - 2026: Breaking Down Silos: Transforming Autism Evaluations Through Innovative Collaborations. Chicago.
 - 2025: Ed-Med Autism Evaluations: Decreasing Barriers Through Educational and Medical Partnerships. Seattle.
- **ECHO**
 - 2025: The Role of ECHO in the Medical and Educational Interagency Autism Network (MEDIAN) Project. MetaECHO 2025 Global Conference Re-Imagined.
 - 2025: The Medical and Educational Interagency Autism Network (MEDIAN) ECHO Autism. Autism Care Network, ECHO Autism: ECHO for ECHO.
 - 2025: MEDIAN Project: Leveraging Innovation to Increase Equitability with Accessing Autism Evaluations. Autism Care Network, ECHO Autism: Center Engagement Series: Generating Equitable Access to Autism Diagnostic Best Practices.
 - 2023-24: Med-Ed Evaluations: Increasing Access Through Partnerships Between Medical and School Providers. Autism Care Network, ECHO Autism: Center Engagement Series.



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Questions or Comments



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Let's Network!

- Ann Branscum: branscum@nmsu.edu
- Marybeth Graham: mgraham1@nmsu.edu



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Special Education Director

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