Multicultural training aids states served by TAESE as well as the CPD’s divisions.

North Dakota’s oil boom is causing extreme changes in the demographics of that state, says Juan Carlos (J.C.) Vazquez of Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, and is challenging the school systems as they work with people from completely different cultural backgrounds. Vazquez is a coordinator with Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE), assisting North Dakota’s director of education, and is also the CPD’s multicultural coordinator.

“The makeup of the American population is changing,” Vazquez said, “and we need to understand how to deliver services.”

Helping school districts identify similarities and differences between groups with different languages and fundamental beliefs, such as how each group sees disability within their cultures, helps the districts obtain a deeper understanding, he said.

In addition to the training he has created for the states served by TAESE, Vazquez is also developing cultural competence training for each of the CPD’s divisions.

“One of the main responsibilities of this new position is to be able to develop training materials targeted toward the different divisions in regards to cultural and linguistic competence,” Vazquez said. “I identify best practices, materials and research, combined with some the experiences I’ve obtained in my career, and put it together to present to different divisions.”

“We hope the information is something they are already familiar with, so they can work more effectively with the families they serve,” he said.

Here in Cache Valley, there are many Spanish-speaking people, but also people whose native languages are Arabic, Russian and others.

“Cultural competence allows anyone who provides services with the best tools to enhance communication and deliver services,” Vazquez said. For example, he said, it’s important to know whether shaking hands or making eye contact is a sign of respect or disrespect.

“It’s sort of like a chess game,” he said. “You have to think about the strategy ... When we become more sensitive, we become more appropriate in our interactions with others.”