An ASSERT student works in his cubicle with his teacher.

A preschool that serves young children on the autism spectrum will soon open its doors to members of a program that offers interdisciplinary training for service providers and healthcare professionals.

From October 21-25, the ASSERT (Autism Support Services: Education, Research and Training) preschool at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities becomes a training site for the URLEND (Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities) Autism Enhancement strand.

URLEND is a joint effort of Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, the University of Utah School of Medicine Department of Pediatrics and the Utah Department of Health’s Bureau for Children with Special Health Care Needs. Trainees are located in Utah, Idaho, North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming and are engaged in disciplines such as audiology, early intervention, general medicine, psychology, social work and speech-language pathology.

Trainees complete 300 clock hours in didactic, clinical and leadership training. Participants in the Autism Enhancement strand complete an additional 150 hours, while participants in clinical audiology and infant pediatric audiology have additional requirements.

ASSERT uses applied behavioral analysis to change the negative behaviors of children with autism. According to program coordinator Lyndsay Nix, URLEND trainees attend a week-long training at the clinic and receive the same training as staff members. They work with the children in the morning and have didactic sessions in the afternoon, which discuss topics such as role play, challenging behavior, script training, naturalistic teaching and curriculum.

“They learn the policies, techniques and strategies we use so that when they leave, they have the full experience and have been trained as ASSERT staff,” Nix said. “Those who aren’t on the AE track are still welcome to set up observations as often as they like to get as much of an experience as they want.”

Of the trainees in the 2012-2013 cohort, more than 90 percent said they were satisfied with the knowledge and skills gained from ASSERT training, and more than 80 percent said their knowledge of behavior analysis increased.

“I thought the balance between class and in vivo experience was well-struck,” wrote one trainee in an evaluation. “The gradual increase in working directly with the kids was perfect in terms of my own anxiety and awareness with the program counterbalanced by the practical education that can only be provided with hands on immersion.”

Another wrote, “I was able to come up with a curriculum for the Diagnostic Kindergarten at my internship based upon what I learned at ASSERT. I loved the training experience and think it was extremely valuable to my work as a school psychologist.”