Mustafa Karakaplan, co-investigator and cost-benefit study lead for the Start Smart project, visited New Mexico five times during his first three months of employment at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities. Start Smart, a project of the CPD, measures the outcomes of children in New Mexico who receive an extra 25 days of school for grades K-3.

Karakaplan received a Ph.D. in economics from Texas A&M and had worked in San Marcos at Texas State University before moving to Corvallis, OR. He and his wife, Sunny, spent six months in Corvallis before moving to Logan at the end of February.

“Utah is a better home for us,” he said. “It suits us better. We love the people.”

The couple, originally from Turkey, also love the Utah weather.

“In Turkey, there are four seasons,” Karakaplan said. “We’re kind of used to snow. I don’t think it will be an issue.

Data for the Start Smart project is collected in New Mexico, so Karakaplan has made several visits and found the cities to be as varied as the landscape.

“It has been an experience I didn’t expect to see in the United States,” he said.

Karakaplan’s first visit to the state was during the move from San Marcos to Corvallis.

“After El Paso, the landscape looks very different,” he said. “It looks really poor. Texas is really rich, but New Mexico is like a contrast to that. You feel the poorness when you cross the border.”

His first trip for Start Smart came two weeks after he started working at the CPD, with a visit to Albuquerque.

“It looks like a midsize to large U.S. city, but the Spanish architecture is really unique,” he said. “It has old-style Spanish-European style of houses.”

Santa Fe was next, and it felt very different than Albuquerque, he said.

“The streets are so small, and the buildings are so short,” he said. “They want to preserve that style. It’s very unique. I liked it. There’s no place like Santa Fe in the United States. It’s like medieval Europe or a Spanish colony in Mexico.”

Gallup is a poor town economically, Karakaplan said.

“There is nothing there in terms of resources,” he said. “It’s all desert and casinos ... it felt like the edge of the world. I was curious about how they’re still here. There should be something, otherwise these people wouldn’t be here.”

Deming and Gadsden are nice, smaller towns, but again, he had the feeling of being in the middle of nowhere.

By the time he made it to Roswell, he was used to the desert, he said.

“Roswell is famous for aliens, so I was really surprised,” he said. “Roswell is really well-developed, with beautiful houses and trees everywhere. I didn’t really expect that in the middle of the desert.”

Hobbs is close to Lubbock, and smells like the oil rigs that dot the landscape, he said.

“You start feeling like you’re in Texas,” he said. “It felt like it was a Texas town, really well developed. There is huge revenue generated by the oil rigs.”
The purpose of the first round of trips, Karakaplan said, was to introduce himself to the people he will be working with.

“You wouldn’t talk about the cost of teachers and salaries with someone you wouldn’t know,” he said.

Future trips will be to gather data for the cost analysis, he said. There are two questions to be answered: first, does the summer program improve student achievement, and second, is the program cost effective.

“The cost component is crucial,” he said.