Speech-language pathologist Heidi Authement likes working with kids who have communication difficulties.

“You help them with their speech and language skills, and it feels like you’re molding them into a child who can communicate with others using their oral skills and their writing skills,” she said.

Authement works at the DuBard School for Language Disorders at the University of Southern Mississippi. Before that, she spent 10 years working as a speech-language pathologist with the Petal School District.

She says she finds her job very rewarding.

“The children are so grateful,” she said. “Even though they cannot say it, what they do when they learn something new, that says, ‘thank you.’”

There are more than 800 speech-language pathologists who serve more than 40,000 children in Mississippi’s public schools.

In the Pine Belt, some of those children with speech and language disorders end up at the DuBard School.

The DuBard School employs 16 full-time speech-language pathologists to serve 80 full-time students from 17 to 22 public school districts from around the area.

In Authement’s classroom, 7-year-old Zion Payton works on her reading and pronunciation.
She stands at the blackboard and reads sentences:

“This is Jason. He is a boy. He has brown hair.”

“Good!” Authement says.

Authement then asks her to read a more complicated sentence and recite it from memory. Zion manages to do it all with no problem.

“(The speech-language pathologists) are providing intensive language, speech, listening and academic therapy,” said Maureen Martin, director of the DuBard School and president of the Mississippi Speech-Language-Hearing Association. “How that’s delivered is going to be based on the needs of that student or client.”

Speech-language pathologists are the professionals who treat all kinds of speech, language and related disorders. They hold at least a master’s degree and are certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. In Mississippi, they also are licensed by the state.
At the DuBard School, the speech-language pathologists use a phonetic multi-sensory approach called the DuBard Association Method.

"One of the things that’s unique about our speech-language therapy is it’s not only to help the person speak correctly and understand what’s said to them, but also to help with reading and written expression," Martin said.

Martin said she considers speech-language pathology an attractive field.

"It’s a great field for people to go into because it’s rewarding to know you can change someone’s life by the services you provide," she said.

But she said there are some challenges for speech-language pathologists who work in the public schools.

"If people are salary driven, salaries are higher in the medical world, however, in the schools, the schedules can be more amenable to some. (Also), young speech-language pathologists with families often like having the same schedule as their children," she said.

The Hattiesburg Public School District employs 11 full-time speech-language pathologists who serve a total of 430 students. The average caseload is 48 students.

Deborah Martin, who oversees HPSD speech-language pathologists, says they provide individual, group and center-based therapy to the students, as well as serving them in a classroom setting.

"Students who have communication disorders often experience difficulty with reading and math," she said in an email. "Speech-language pathologists play a vital role in helping students overcome articulation, fluency and language impairments that can have a negative impact on (their) ability to demonstrate performance of basic skills."

Martin said the speech-language pathologists’ role is vital to the students’ academic performance.

"Collaboration between the speech-language pathologists and the teachers is an ongoing process throughout the school year," she said. "As a student’s ability to communicate effectively increases, academic achievement increases also."

In the Lamar County School District, 18 speech-language pathologists work with about 750 students, carrying an average caseload of 50 students.
Cook said the speech language pathologists work in consultation and collaboration with the teachers.

"(They) work closely with teachers in identifying effective instructional methods in the areas of reading and language, as well as providing direct instruction to improve a student's listening, speaking, thinking and learning skills," she said. "These are the skills necessary for students to access the curriculum required, whether it is vocabulary used in math class or comprehending a passage read in science."

Martin said the improvements made by students with the help of speech-language pathologists affect not only academics but their whole lives.

"The benefits of speech therapy are evident within the home as students begin to express their wants and needs to family members, problem solve and make decisions independently," she said. "Overall, speech therapy greatly improves academic, social and emotional outcomes for students with disabilities, (as well as) their families."

Authement is well aware of the impact she, as a speech-language pathologist, has on her students' lives.

"There is power in communication," she says. "If I can give that to someone — what an awesome gift."