

# Mom Plans School For Autistic Kids in Florida

By Linda Trimble for the Daytona Beach News-Journal  
<http://tinyurl.com/yav82w>

DeLand, FL – Seven year old Chase Lundell can do math problems in his head but he can't tie his shoes, ride a bike or snap his pants.

The contrasts are just one symptom of Chase's autism, the driving force behind his mother's plan to team up with other Volusia County parents of autistic children to develop a private, nonprofit school to serve their needs.

Mimi Lundell has been working on plans for the private school -- to be named Chase Academy in her son's honor -- for more than a year and hopes it can open as soon as August if the right facility and financing can be lined up. Chase now attends Woodward Avenue Elementary School.

Lundell, herself a language arts teacher at Southwestern Middle School, believes public schools are too restricted by legal requirements to focus on children's academic success to foster autistic children's overall development to their full potential.

"I haven't met any public education professional who's any less than dedicated," Lundell said. "My forming of the Chase Academy isn't because I'm a disgruntled parent."

Autism is a developmental disorder marked by problems with social interaction, communication and unusual, repetitive or severely limited activities and interests.

It's the fastest growing developmental disability in the nation, according to the Autism Society of America, and occurs in one of every 166 births with the severity of its effects on the individual covering a wide range.

As proposed, Chase Academy would serve "high-performing" autistic children, including those with Asperger's Syndrome, from first grade through high school.

Its educational program would be based on Florida academic standards but without the high-stakes testing found in public schools.

Requiring children like Chase to repeat third grade or withholding a regular high school diploma if they can't pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test makes no sense, Lundell said.

"It's a ridiculous notion that ESE (exceptional student education) kids can take FCAT and score on grade level," she said. "It's because they can't score on grade level that they're in ESE."

While parents can apply to have their child judged on a portfolio of work instead, Lundell said that would happen automatically at Chase Academy.

The school would hire teachers specially trained to work with autistic

children, Lundell said, and offer small classes and a "quiet environment" designed to limit distractions from learning.

Lundell also envisions the school offering instruction to help children like Chase learn to tie their shoes, ride a bike and follow rules for appropriate social interaction.

None of that is cheap and Lundell expects annual tuition at Chase Academy to run \$23,000. She expects some parents to qualify for state-financed McKay Scholarships to pay part of the cost.

Some also may be eligible for scholarships through the State Corporate Tax Credit program, said Eileen Taft, Lundell's sister and director of funding for Chase Academy. Beyond that, the school is soliciting community donations to underwrite scholarships and will sponsor a fund-raising cruise aboard the Sun Cruz casino boat out of Ponce Inlet on Feb. 10.

Chase Academy supporters also are talking with a representative of Volusia's Association for Retarded Citizens about how the two groups might work together on projects -- including the school -- but no final decision has been made.

While those discussions continue, some parents are already thinking about enrolling their children at Chase Academy for what they believe will be a more individualized learning program than what they're getting in public schools.

"We could tailor the curriculum for him," said Eileen Zimmerman of Deltona, whose 11-year-old son Alex is autistic. "He's an average student with the exception of history. That's his love; he'll quote you anything you can imagine on any world war."