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Ormond Beach Teacher Hopes for Autism School

Mimi Lundell, a language arts teacher at Ormond Beach Middle School and executive director of Chase Academy, has been trying for 2 years to develop a local private school for children like her son, a 9-year child with autism named Chase. Lundell hopes to team up with existing private schools and tap into state vouchers for children with disabilities.

Early attempts to find a building to house The Chase Academy fell through after organizers couldn't locate enough parents able to afford the \$21,500 tuition, even with a state McKay Scholarship -- or voucher -- covering part of the cost. Chase now attends fourth grade at First Presbyterian Day School in DeLand with a McKay Scholarship for children with disabilities paying part of the cost.

Chase was one of 293 Volusia children in 17 private schools receiving McKay Scholarships as of February. Lundell said most of those schools don't have specially trained teachers on staff to work with them. That's where she figures a partnership between Chase Academy and the private schools could pay off for autistic students.

For now, Lundell is partnering with an Ormond Beach child care center to offer a "developmental play camp" this summer that would be open to autistic children aged 3 to 10. Each weekly session between June 8 and July 31 would cost \$125, with eight to 12 children enrolled. The program will meet at the Ormond Beach Union Learning Center, 56 N. Beach St. More information is available by calling 386-677-0494.

Autism is a developmental disorder marked by problems with social interaction, communication and sometimes behavior. An estimated one in 150 children have been diagnosed with autism. Lundell is hoping to persuade administrators at some of the private schools to contract with Chase Academy to work with their autistic students and their teachers, with the McKay Scholarships covering the added cost.