

School for autistic students set to open

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By Jamye Durrance

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VOLUSIA COUNTY - Mimi Lundell held the brightly colored poster up against the wall and took a small step back, eyeing the edges, her eyes darting up and down, back and forth.

"If it's not straight, they will tell me," she said before stapling it to the wall.

"They" are the six students of the Chase Academy, Volusia County's first school exclusively for autistic students, which will be opening Aug. 24 in South Daytona.

On a recent weekday morning, Ms. Lundell, the school's executive director, was hard at work in a classroom inside the Community of Christ Church getting things together for the students.

Her excitement is understandable. This would be her third attempt to get the school going, a dream she's had since her 10-year-old autistic son Chase was born.

"This time we had help from the community members," the Ormond Beach resident said. "That made the difference."

The school recently received its authorization from the Florida Department of Education and is already taking students up to middle school.

According to the Autism Society of America's Web site, autism occurs in one out of 150 births in the United States. It is a complex neurobiological disorder that impairs a person's ability to communicate and socialize. There are various spectrums of autism, with each person showing different capabilities.

Ms. Lundell, a former Volusia County School teacher for more than a decade, said even though Chase was in special classes, she didn't think he was getting the proper attention for him to succeed.

Ms. Lundell said autistic children are smart, they just learn in a different way and their social skills often inhibit them from pursuing interaction or more learning. For example, they might be able to solve math problems but cannot tie their shoes.

Public and private schools accept autistic children, but they are often placed into a classroom with students with a variety of learning disabilities or other special needs. They tend to get lost in the shuffle, Ms. Lundell said.

"(They) fit into a model that under-serves them, there's a big crack in the system," she said.

Being able to work exclusively with only autistic students will eliminate any problems, Ms. Lundell said.

"Our focus is on the student's known cognitive disability," she said. "They have the capacity, they just have to get there."

That's something Daytona Beach mom Karen Larson is happy about.

Her son, Skylar, 7, will be attending Chase Academy.

"We really wanted a place where he can learn at his level," Ms. Larson said. "We want to have the best for Skylar."

Ms. Larson said Chase Academy is long overdue.

"We've been praying for this for a long time," she said. "I had to quit my job to take care of Skylar. It's been challenging and disheartening. To have something like this is really exciting."

Ms. Lundell said her goal is to ultimately have Chase Academy teach students all the way to high school, a process that will require accreditation.

"We're looking four years out," she said.

Getting autistic students a real diploma versus the typical certificate of completion is important to Ms. Lundell.

According to the Autism Society of America's Web site, autistic adults cost the United States \$90 billion a year in care, including disability checks and social services. That number is expected to more than double over the next decade.

Ms. Lundell said if they were properly educated and had an opportunity to go to college that number would decline.

She wants Chase to be able to become a chef, his current dream.

"They need to be put in the best position," she said. "My goal is to let every child have the best and most opportunity to be economically viable on their own."

In addition to learning all the academic basics, students at the Chase Academy will also learn social skills.

"We will put forth the effort to help them assimilate so they are comfortable within society," she said.

Ms. Lundell will be one of two teachers at the school. Both are certified exceptional student education teachers and have autism endorsement within Florida. There will also be a behavioral specialist on staff.

"We have to be on the mark," she said. "These kids cannot afford for us to not be on the mark."

Since the Chase Academy is only in its early stages, there aren't any grants available to keep it going. Right now, they are relying only on donations and the \$11,000 per student tuition. Ms. Lundell said there are still many things the school needs and donations are always accepted.

For more information, visit <http://www.tcaofvolusia.org>.