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## Nonprofit seeks funding to open a private school

Alternative to public education arises amid debate about autism

By Heather Woodward

The Olympian

An Olympia-based nonprofit agency is trying to establish a private school for special education students in response to a growing swell of parents who say local public schools aren't meeting their children's needs.

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The Wyatt Holliday Foundation - an organization devoted to helping families of children with special needs - is exploring the possibility. Therese Holliday of Tumwater created the foundation in memory of her 9-year-old son, Wyatt, who had Asperger syndrome - a high-functioning form of autism - and died in a car wreck in 2003.

Holliday has scheduled a meeting Saturday for families interested in learning more about establishing an

alternative school for special education students in Thurston County.

The move comes as some Olympia School District parents have raised concerns about what they perceive as a lack of knowledge among educators about how to handle their autistic children. A chief point of controversy has been the district's use of timeout rooms to help some autistic students calm down if they become agitated at school.

That's a tool allowed by state law under certain circumstances that's also used in North Thurston Public Schools but not in the Tumwater School District.

Holliday said she has heard complaints from parents in school districts across Thurston County.

"We're saying this is not acceptable," she said, referring to options for special education students in local public schools, "and we're going to do something about it."

The private school probably would start out as a K-4 or K-6 year-round school that would offer flexible schedules to about 10 to 20 students and their families, Holliday said. She also would like to offer swimming and horseback riding therapies and eventually expand the school to a high school.

But other details about the possible school have yet to be worked out, including where the money would come from.

Holliday said she likely would have to rely on parent donations and tuition to pay the \$15,000 to \$20,000 monthly payroll expenses. That doesn't include other costs, such as rent, insurance, curriculum and more. Meanwhile, Holliday still is looking for a site to buy or lease that would fit the school's needs.

"I really wish we could say that cost was not an issue and we could take anybody, but we're not being funded by anybody," she said.

Though Holliday would like to start the school by fall, she knows that will be challenging.

"This is one of those fast-track things," Holliday said. "I'm willing to push to no end to get this going."

Jennifer Flinton has a 4-year-old son, Jimmy, in a preschool program for autistic children at McLane Elementary in the Olympia School District. She said she's happy with McLane's preschool program but wants to find a specialized private school for Jimmy by the time he's ready for first grade.

"I don't feel that any of the school districts in the area are able to meet my son's individual needs," Flinton said. "I would think that a private school would be able to more individually meet my child's educational needs. ... That would give him the best chance at eventually having a normal life."

Trina Westerlund, founder of the 29-year-old Children's Institute for Learning Differences (CHILD) in Mercer Island, has started consulting with Holliday and plans to attend the Saturday meeting. CHILD provides services to special education students through contracts with and funding from 19 Puget Sound-area school districts. It also educates special education students whose families pay private tuition.

There are no plans yet for CHILD to collaborate on Holliday's proposed school, Westerlund said, though she didn't rule it out as a future possibility.

### **If you go**

A meeting about the feasibility of starting a new private school for students in special education will be from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. Saturday at Mud Bay Coffee Co., 1600 Cooper Point Road S.W., Olympia.

For more information, call 360-507-0944 or send e-mail to [info@wyatthouse.org](mailto:info@wyatthouse.org).



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