

"There's a natural commonality, but nothing is concrete," Meeder said.

Another challenge is determining exactly what the needs of the children are, said Bartholomew. Special needs encompass anything from severe or profound mental retardation, to autism, Down's Syndrome, or cerebral palsy to a child whose learning ability, physically or mentally, is impaired or developmentally delayed because of an injury.

Bartholomew's daughter, Sally, 9, suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) when she was an infant. As a result, she is developmentally delayed and functions at the level of a three-year-old.

No facility exists in the Lowcountry that focuses solely on children with mental, physical or developmental disabilities. Parents currently have two options: public school or to home school.

Bartholomew said it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how many special needs children live in the Lowcountry area; however, he estimated there are hundreds of children who might benefit from a school such as the one parents are trying to start. The school could pull students from Hilton Head Island, Bluffton, Beaufort, Savannah and surrounding rural areas, he said.

Parents stressed the fact that they are not dissatisfied with the schools in any way, but rather that they are looking for a better alternative that focuses solely on children with special needs.

"We want our kids to have the same opportunities to achieve their potential - whatever that potential might be," said parent Michael Mack. "They just learn and perceive things differently." Mack and his wife, Sandy, have a son, Michael, who has cerebral palsy.

Michael, 13, attends McCracken Middle School in a special education class and is mainstreamed with other students for art and music classes. He walks with a walker and communicates through gazes and sounds.

Added Bartholomew, "We are looking to provide a loving, caring, nurturing environment as well as a state-of-the-art educational experience."

Tom and Doné Reed have a 21-month-old son, Cole, who has Down's Syndrome. "My gut told me I needed to get involved," Reed said. "By the time he's ready to go to school I want him to have a school to go to."

"At this stage we are still gathering information," Reed continued. "Where it winds up we don't yet know... But I'm optimistic that we'll be able to bring this vision into a reality."

"Support and resources for public school teachers and staff are limited. By building our school with parents and community leaders along with love, faith and support; we hope to create a strong foundation for unlimited success," said Kevin Sekula. Kevin and wife, Linda, are adopting nine-year-old Samantha, who was abused in the past and suffered a traumatic brain injury while in an out-of-state foster home. "Our goal is for a high level of personalization and priority with potential for mainstreaming."

Hope for the formation of the school fully gelled at the groups March 4th meeting, when a name was chosen for the school, "Lighthouse Hope Academy." Moving closer to their goal of establishing this resource in the community, the group created four working committees to establish research, enrollment, PR/Marketing, and governance.

The next scheduled meeting will be April 29th at the Church of the Cross, Parrish Hall on Calhoun Street. Anyone interested in helping this wonderful cause through donation of time, money, or resources can contact Kevin Sekula at 298-5154 or R.J. Bartholomew at 298-2201.

- Rebecca Walters



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