

## EQUAL SCHOOLING FOR ALL

*Parents want better education for their autistic children in Chapel Hill schools*

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CHAPEL HILL — Eric Mihalyi, 16, and Matthew Harris, 17, spent the past five weeks transitioning to high school. For them, the shift has been especially challenging. They are autistic, and some of the services needed for a smooth transition were not in place prior to the first day.

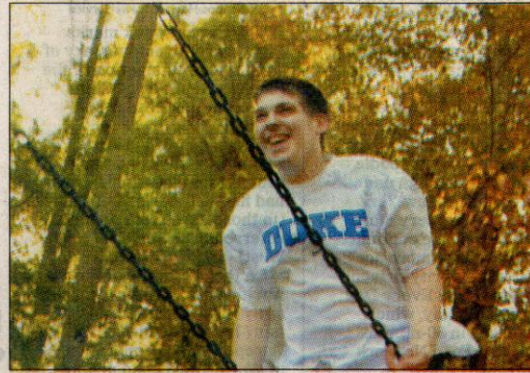
At the beginning of the school year, their parents tried in vain to make an appointment to speak with administrators about their concerns. They wanted to work as a team to resolve the issues quickly.

"The superintendent's office would not speak to me and Susanne Harris," said Lyda Mihalyi, Eric's mother.

Mihalyi said she called to set up an appointment and was redirected to the assistant superintendent, whom she e-mailed. Susanne Harris, Matthew's mother, said she e-mailed the superintendent's office. After no response, the women went before the school board on Sept. 17.

There they addressed concerns regarding teacher training, reviewing of individualized

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Eric Mihalyi, who is autistic, attends East Chapel Hill High School.

# AUTISM

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education programs and lines of communication between administration and parents.

Mihalyi said she noticed teachers lacked adequate training to handle her son's classroom. She was careful, however, to praise the teacher for desiring the best for the students, adding that she merely lacked the necessary tools.

"They need to be trained in structured teaching," Mihalyi said. Currently teachers are spending more time addressing behavioral issues because they aren't trained to structure the class in a way that suits the children.

"It's basically containment," Mihalyi said. "That's what we want to see changed. We want to see them get a learning environment."

Lines of communication and perceived prioritization of children with special needs were other points of concern for Mihalyi and Harris.

Harris said she had to take extensive measures to ensure that the terms of her son's individualized education program were met. He needed a one-on-one assistant in the classroom.

"I had to send a certified letter," she said. "Which is ridiculous."

Harris said she believes she saw action because her concerns were legitimized under the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

She believes parents of special needs are often pushed aside when trying to raise issues with administrators.



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**Matthew Harris, 16, walks with his mother, Susanne, on Monday. Matthew, 16, is autistic.**

"They assume that because you are an EC parent that you are this emotional, irrational parent who can't think or do anything for your child other than rant and rave," Harris said.

After the school board meeting, Denise Bowling, instructional services department superintendent, and Lorraine DeTrude, executive director for exceptional children and student services, met with Harris and Mihalyi to discuss their concerns. At that meeting they outlined plans to address teacher training issues.

DeTrude said she encourages face-to-face meetings when possible and communicates with parents via e-mail and telephone.

She said autism program specialists within the district are working in conjunction with teachers enhancing the classroom experience. This process is ongoing.

DeTrude said the specialists already have gone into the classroom to train teachers and model approaches for instruction that may be more effective. The system is also considering bringing in substitute teachers for a day to allow the teachers to receive outside training.

"We find that it is much more effective to have a hands-on approach here and have it modeled in the classroom," DeTrude said.

Rather than seminars and workshops, the sys-

tem prefers to work internally to train its teachers. Still with ongoing plans to improve the learning environment, Harris is concerned that children with special needs are low on the priority list. She said she also worries administrators will not communicate effectively what they are working on.

Ultimately, Harris wants children with special needs to receive the same consideration as other children in the district.

"Don't treat our kids like they are third, fourth, or fifth priority," Harris said. "They deserve just as much attention as the kid who is going to go off to Harvard or Yale."