



Staff photo by Don Himsel

David Keating, an autistic student at the New Searles Elementary School in Nashua, chases a balloon around the school's tennis court Tuesday. David's parents are members of PASE, Parents Assisting Special Educators.

Parents offering special help to district's special educators

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NASHUA – David Keating is a runner.

When the 9-year-old autistic student gets on the playground at New Searles Elementary School he runs. He runs away from his teacher. He runs away from the school. He runs through back yards.

And when he runs, he runs fast. The only way to get him back to school is to catch him.

That's why David stays inside in the school's special education resource room while most of the other students play in the sunshine. His parents, David and Carol Keating, don't complain about their son's situation.

As members of a new group of parents intent on bettering the education of special needs students, the Keatings hope to get a fence put up at his school that would allow David to play outside.

"Why complain about something?" said David Keating Sr. "We acknowledge there's a problem. We're here to help."

ON THE NET

Parents Assisting
Special Educators
www.pasenh.org

Golf tournament
registration forms are
available online.

The organization they are members of is called PASE, which stands for Parents Assisting Special Educators, and is a "let's-get-things-done" type of organization, according to its founders, Neil and Lori Rogers.

According to its mission statement, the 7-month-old group "focuses on the positive process of getting things done while avoiding the negative trappings of waiting for someone else to do it for us."

"It's not an us versus them system," said Keating. "We know we have to work together with them to help them help our kids."

PASE members are not saying the School District doesn't give their children enough resources. What they are trying to do is provide the extras that can help, just as other parent-teacher-organizations try to supplement what the school can afford.

"The PTOs are in every building in the district," Rogers said. "We're stepping into the same role."

Simply put, they think this is the best thing a parent of a special-needs student can do.

"The schools does this much," Rogers said holding his hands apart. "Our kids need this much more. We're not bitching and moaning about it, we're just trying to bridge the gap.

"We're trying to take as much a load off the teachers so they can just teach," said Rogers said. "We're trying to provide a solution."

A special day

Tuesday wasn't a typical day for David. The school was having an outdoor celebration and his teacher Joan Leonard wanted to take him outside. Leonard and David's everyday caretaker, Tracey Rosen, held him tightly by the arms as they walked him down from the school to the tennis courts across the street where other children were playing.

As they walked he repeated what they said. "Walking." "Happy." "Balloon."

When he got to the tennis courts David ran free. He went right to the balloons tied to the fence and pulled one off. It popped. He liked that.

It was an example of cause and effect, Leonard said. So he popped some more.

He ran around the court, laughing and smiling and blended in with the other children.

Rosen kept a close eye on him. On her side was a walkie-talkie in case he got out and started to run.

When it was time to leave and David showed signs of being tired, Leonard, Rosen and Laurie Duclose sat on the grass with him as he ate popcorn and twirled another balloon. "David is calm," he said. "David is calm."

Rosen held up a yellow card with a stick figure man and the word walk on it. It was a sign for him to get ready to go back inside. Instead it was back into the tennis court for a few more minutes before heading up the hill to the brick-walled school.

On a normal day David would have stayed inside while other students bounced on the playground equipment that was provided by the school's parent-teacher organization.

PASE is trying to find a way to get all kids to be able to use the equipment. But not all fences can be put up in a day, even if PASE is willing to pay for it and install it.

"We appreciate that PASE would support that, but it really needs to be a balanced decision," principal William Pimley said of the fence.

Generally, Pimley said it's nice that PASE is there.

"It's clearly a plus to have educational support groups of all types," he said.

Rogers figures only 10 percent of the people in the school district know PASE exists.

But PASE has no plans of stopping. They want more people to help the organization grow. PTOs never stop, Rogers said, and neither should PASE.

Core group

It's not just Neil and Lori Rogers who are PASE. There's a core group of 10 or so families that "have jumped in with both feet," the Rogers said.

Once a month, the members of PASE get together and there's only one rule: no complaining. In fact Neil Rogers starts each meeting with an announcement that all newcomers are welcome unless they came to gripe. If they did, he says, go to someone else's meeting.

The initial motivation for the Rogers was their own autistic child.

Seven years ago, Craig Rogers needed sensory integration equipment at Broad Street Elementary School that the School District didn't have.

Rather than wait for the school to pay for the costly equipment, the Rogers decided to pay for it themselves. They held a fund-raiser for the Autism Society of New Hampshire and got the \$1,500 to pay for it. The equipment is still at Broad Street.

Each year since then, the Rogers have held a fall fund-raising dance. Last year, for the first time as their own organization – PASE – they raised \$20,000.

The key to PASE is raising money and then pumping it back into the schools to meet children's needs, explained Neil Rogers. And they're not just looking for money; more members mean more can get done, he said.

One thing PASE was able to do recently was have a Nashua High School student to intern at a home with a special needs student. The Area Agency for Developmental Service of Greater Nashua was the student's employer, but PASE put up the cash for the project.

That's an example of something PASE did to help one family, but the organization is trying to do more to help hundreds of kids.

This year PASE sent out wish lists to special education teachers throughout the district. Up to \$500 in supplies was theirs. All they had to do was ask.

At first teachers were skeptical. They wanted to know what the catch was. Neil Rogers told them there was no catch. PASE just wanted to help. "People are dumbfounded when we tell them that," said Neil Rogers. The teachers ordered what they wanted and soon after packages were delivered to the school.

'Like Christmas'

"It was like Christmas," said Joan Leonard. "It was the coolest thing ever. It was almost unbelievable."

Why was it such a big deal?

"It's easy not to feel appreciated," Leonard said. "That made me feel like I have a voice, that I'm respected." Jennifer Dolloff, the School District's special education coordinator, was among the skeptics at first. She said she approached PASE cautiously, but has been pleasantly surprised.

Now when Dolloff meets with other special education directors she brags a little about PASE. She said the South Eastern Regional Education Service Center hopes PASE can spread to other communities.

She said in her 15 years in special education, "PASE is probably the most surprising, positive support I've experienced. It's the first time I've seen a group get together and say 'how can we assist.' "

Leonard used her wish list to buy software that allows her to print pictures of everyday items, such as clothes, animals or food. She can print out real-life pictures of jungle animals, farm animals or household pets.

That type of visual stimulation helps the children, most of whom do not communicate verbally, to communicate and learn about the world around them.

It's not that the district wouldn't buy the program for her, Leonard said, it was something extra, something new that she wanted to try with the students.

"It's just like a booster club," said Leonard, who went to a PASE meeting to thank the group for the supplies. "The marvelous thing about this group is they're using that model and applying it to special education."

In the future, PASE members want to offer paid training to the teachers and paraprofessionals who assist special needs children in schools. They want to offer the kind of professional development that may be considered too costly for the School District.

A child with Down's syndrome may have different needs than an autistic child. PASE hopes to give paraprofessionals that training and pay them for it.

The way Rogers sees it, the more money PASE raises, the more children it can assist. So this year PASE is hosting a golf tournament, which will be held Friday at Green Meadow Golf Course in Hudson.

Right now PASE distributes money mostly to the people who are the squeaky wheels. "If the money is there and there's a need to be filled, let's do it," Rogers said.

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