

Mothers support parents of special-needs children

By Paulette Lash Ritchie, Times Correspondent

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When Kaitlyn Pierce was 8 years old, she was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia. Her mother, Nikki Pierce, didn't know what to do.

She researched federal and Florida laws pertaining to special-needs students so she could learn what her child's rights were and how to ask for them.

Kaitlyn is now 9 and in fourth grade at Chocachatti Elementary School. She uses technology to help her with her writing, which is affected by dysgraphia. Pierce said it wasn't until she educated herself to learn how to ask that her daughter was able to get what she needed.

Stacy Walsh is a parent with a son, Gavin, 9, who has Asperger's syndrome, a mild type of autism. He's a fourth-grader at Challenger K8.

She was organizing an autism awareness walk and contacted Pierce. "After that we just kind of clicked. Stacy and I got involved together at the end of the last school year," Pierce said.

Both women now coordinate the Special Students of Hernando Support Group. She and Walsh work with the Hernando County School Board as a community partner with the exceptional student education department.

"Our goal is to educate parents on the proper procedures to get what is appropriate for them," Pierce said.

Nikki Pierce lives in Spring Hill with her husband, Todd, a firefighter; Kaitlyn; and Kyle, an 8-year-old Chocachatti third-grader.

Stacy Walsh lives in Brooksville with her husband, Harry, who works in communications; Gavin; and Savanna, 11, a sixth-grader at Challenger K8.

When she started, Pierce formed the Dyslexia and Related Learning Differences Support Group. She realized, though, that parents of children with all kinds of special needs had to deal with the same issues, so the group was changed to Special Students of Hernando Support Group.

Pierce and Walsh have a Web site with contact information, related links, event notices and other information.

"We are here to help support and educate parents on their student's (child's) rights in the educational system. We are not attorneys — we are parents helping parents. We are all at various stages in our children's educational career and are willing to help other parents who may feel 'lost in the system,'" Pierce and Walsh say on their site, www.specialstudentsofhernando.com.

Nikki Pierce can be reached at nikki@specialstudentsofhernando.com and at (352) 584-5512 . Stacy Walsh is at stacy@specialstudentsofhernando.com and (352) 232-1239 .

They said they are happy to help any parent, caregiver or educator with questions. Both are volunteers.

"The primary focus of Special Students of Hernando is education of the Federal Special Education laws (IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504: Civil Rights Law, and similar). We want to help parents form a productive relationship with their child's school while understanding the correct process and procedures under the law. We want to see children obtain the most appropriate education, regardless of their disabilities or learning differences," the women state on their site.

The women are advertising a January conference sponsored by Special Students of Hernando and the Hernando County School Board Exceptional Student Education Department.

>>Fast facts

Weightslaw Special Education Law & Advocacy

A two-day conference for parents, educators, advocates, attorneys and professionals

9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Jan. 16-17, 2009, GlenLakes Country Club, Weeki Wachee.

For information, go to www.specialstudentsofhernando.com.

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