



Jessica Selby • Daily Times

Chuck E. Cheese himself made a visit to youngsters at Blackrock Elementary School in Coventry. Mr. Cheese was at the school to motivate the kids to support the school system's efforts to raise funds to benefit the Autism Project.

Schools team up to tackle autism

JESSICA SELBY

jsselby@ricentral.com

COVENTRY — Every school in Coventry is joining forces to raise money for one common cause; a cause that teachers say is affecting a growing number of students — autism.

“Autism is growing in population faster than cancer, we are just overwhelmed with the diagnoses in Coventry,” said Cara Capalbo, who teaches a self-contained classroom with students in grades three to five at Blackrock Elementary School.

According to information provided by Capalbo from Autism Speaks, “one in five individuals today are diagnosed with autism, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined.” She also had facts from The American Autism Society that indicated that “every 20 minutes another child is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.”

Teachers and students from every grade in all Coventry Schools have formed a unified group known as “Team Tolerance” and have coordinated various events and activities in hopes of raising funds to support the Autism Project and its mission

“to empower parents and professionals to educate and support individuals with Autism, Pervasive Development Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, Asperger Syndrome and related disorders.”

The various events began last month and will continue into May.

Jennifer Cohn, an integrated preschool teacher at Blackrock Elementary School, and Capalbo are co-chairing the team and overseeing the various events. Both said the support for the cause from every school in the district this year is immense.

“Everyone has really just taken off with their own projects which is wonderful because it is such an important cause,” Capalbo said.

“We have done this project in the past, but it has never been as successful as it is this year,” Cohn said. “This year absolutely everyone is doing something.”

Blackrock School sponsored a Chuck E. Cheese Night. On that night, Tuesday, March 31, the company donated a portion of all of the proceeds that they made from customers who went to Chuck E. Cheese and mentioned they were there as part of the Coventry Schools’ project.

There were similar events like that happening throughout the month. There was one at Papa Gino’s, on Thursday, April 16, at Chelo’s on Monday, April 27 and at Applebee’s on Saturday May 2. All people have to do when they go there is say they are supporting the Coventry Schools’ project and a portion of the money that they spend there will be donated to the cause, Cohn said.

Certain schools are holding events in their own buildings to raise money too. Oak Haven School, for example, had a Crazy Hat Day on April 24, during which students who donated \$1 were allowed to wear a hat of their choice for the school day. Washington Oak School had a Sports Day on April 8 in which students who donated \$1 were allowed to wear a sports jersey of the team of their choice for the entire school day.

An eleventh grade student at Coventry High School, Patrick Crowley, has even adopted the project as his capstone graduation requirement project. He is following the progress of the district and even organized a fundraising event of his own to support the cause. Crowley, who plays in a band, “The Remnants of Tomorrow,” held a benefit concert at the Hour Bar in West Warwick on



Schools look to raise \$11K or more

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Saturday, April 18. All proceeds from ticket sales and raffle and door prizes were gifted to the cause.

"All of the ideas this year are great and we really hope that everyone participates so that we can beat last year's totals," Cohn said.

This is Coventry Schools' third year participating in the Autism Project fundraiser, but last year the district raised \$11,000. The goal this year, Cohn said, is to beat last year's amount.

Not only will all of the proceeds benefit the project, but the more the town raises, the more that they benefit too, she said. If the district raises \$8,000 they can send more than

two dozen teachers, administrators and other staff to attend a five week training for working with students with autism. If the district raises \$10,000 they can send the same amount of teachers to a nine week training.

Last year's fundraising secured 30 spots for 30 teachers and teacher's assistants in the nine week program with Project Rhode Island.

"This educational opportunity is extremely beneficial and motivating," Cohn said.

And an opportunity that none of those teachers would have enjoyed without this program. Cohn said it is estimated to cost close to \$500 per person for this training and clearly, she said, there is just no money in the district budget to support

that this year.

Capalbo and Cohn said because the team has set such high goals they are doing everything they can to motivate participation among students and faculty in the district. At Blackrock, the two team chairs even secured a visit from Chuck E. Cheese himself on the day of Chuck E. Cheese night in an attempt to motivate the kids into coming to the Chuck E. Cheese Night.

They said they have also distributed many flyers and letters encouraging participation in the program. They said that the team has set up a Web site, www.firstgiving.com/teamtolerance, which allows visitors to learn about what the district is doing and also to make a direct donation.