

School talks up bid to win special status

■ It aims to be centre for communication

■ Help for pupils who struggle to speak

DEBORAH HAILE

A MANCHESTER school is aiming to raise £20,000 to become a specialist centre for communication.

Lancasterian School in Didsbury caters for children with a range of disabilities – many cannot speak and often struggle to make themselves understood.

Now staff are bidding for specialist status, which would bring a £100,000 one-off grant for equipment and a further £60,000 over four years for specialist staff.

Staff say the money would be used to buy special communication aids, so youngsters can communicate more fully with the staff who care for them.

But for the bid to be considered for the government's specialist status, the school – which has fewer than 100 pupils – will have to raise £20,000 by the

end of the year. Staff, parents and pupils have already raised £5,000 through a sponsored 'walk and talk' through Didsbury, designed to highlight the work of the school, and an open day.

Without the support of the local community they will struggle to raise the remaining £15,000.

Now they are launching an appeal for financial support. They have even made a dvd highlighting the work they do.

Assistant head Kira Buhler said: "We are a school for children with physical disabilities

£15,000

Amount school still has to raise

and medical conditions from across Manchester. We get children from the whole of the Manchester area.

"A lot of our children have cerebral palsy or degenerative conditions – they are either born without speech or lose their speech as their condition progresses.

"A lot of our children can't express themselves at all. They can be totally dependent but

not be able to say anything about what they want. The children can get very frustrated and very upset – and they can become much more passive as they get older.

"This would make a phenomenal difference. At the moment we just don't have these resources available. It's frustrating for staff as well as the pupils."

Teaching assistant Stacey O'Sullivan said: "Lots of our children are unable to communicate verbally. They have lots to say inside of them but they can't get it out.

"The aids they need to communicate cost a lot of money.

"Specialist status would mean we could buy the equipment and could have more specialist staff to work with the children."

Parent Nicky Devlin is already drawing up plans for a car boot sale to raise funds for the school's bid.

Nicky, whose six-year old daughter Mackenzie goes to Lancasterian, said: "This could change lives."

» To support the school's fundraising contact Kira Buhler on 0161 445 0123 or email k.buehler@lancasterian.manchester.sch.uk

AFTER 11 YEARS JOSEPH FINALLY FINDS A VOICE



» IN TOUCH Joseph Massey, of Lancasterian School, Didsbury – who has cerebral palsy – in his chair fitted with an £8,000 device that helps him communicate

JOSEPH Massey hasn't uttered a word since he was born – but new technology has now given him a voice.

The 11-year old Lancasterian pupil suffers from cerebral palsy and cannot speak.

But 12 months ago mum Janet bought a £8,000 'communication aid' that allows Joseph to touch a screen to activate a voice box.

He can now call for assistance and say when he is hungry. He has even started to learn how to read.

Janet says the new technology has already made a huge difference and she hopes Lancasterian gets specialist communication status so other pupils can benefit from their own personalised aids.

Janet, 45, from Glossop, said: "Joseph can't speak at all but he understands absolutely everything. Without the aid people used to talk to him like he was a baby and he used to get very frustrated. People used to think that he had no understanding at all.

"He used to have temper tantrums but it was all because he couldn't communicate with people. It was frustrating not just for him but for everyone around him as well.

"He was never included in social situations because people didn't realise he could understand. He was locked in his own little world.

"The difference it has made to our lives has been so tremendous. This gives him a massive amount of independence."

