



How to Choose the Right Special Needs School for Your Child

Finding the right school for your child with autism, ADD/ADHD and other special learning needs might seem like a challenging task. After all, there are a wide variety of public, charter, magnet, private and independent schools that offer supportive services. And while there may be no “perfect school,” there should be one that’s a best fit for your child and your family. Whether you are the parent of a preschooler or an older child looking to make a positive change, the following guidelines should make your search process easier.

Know Your Child’s Needs

This may sound obvious, but the services your child requires may not be offered at all schools. Be upfront about your child’s IEP and any disability when speaking to a school. While public schools must accept all children and fully accommodate their IEPs, private ones may not be equipped to meet the needs of children with particular disabilities. Similarly, while some schools teach children on all ends of the spectrum, other schools may limit their enrollment to higher functioning students. Knowing this can save you a lot of time and effort. Do not get discouraged, you will find a school that meets your child’s needs.

Physical needs. If your child uses a wheelchair, make sure the school is wheelchair-friendly. Find out if it’s a single-floor school or if there is an elevator. If your child requires physical assistance or help using the bathroom, make sure the staff is trained and certified to provide this level of support. If PT/OT is medically required, ask if these services are offered through the school.

Speech and language needs. If your child has a speech and language disorder, find out whether he or she will have access to a speech-language therapist.

Sensory and other needs. Perhaps your child shuts down with too much stimulation. What do the classroom walls look like? Are the classrooms quiet? Is there too much color or stimuli for your child to handle? Conversely, some children require a lot of stimulation to keep their minds and bodies busy. Look around to see if the school's environment will overstimulate or understimulate your child. If your child requires a sensory diet, find out what types of activities can be integrated into their day.

Establish Your Child's Goals

Goals may already be developed and written into your son or daughter's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), but it's important to communicate to the school what your child's strengths and weaknesses are to find out how they can help your child reach any unwritten goals. These might include everything from practicing socialization skills to becoming more independent. Find out what types of intervention strategies are used and how socialization is promoted. In addition, determine what benchmarks are employed for assessment and how often the assessments take place to ensure students are progressing.

Ask About the School's Classroom Sizes / Teacher-to-Student Ratios / Inclusion Approach

Small classroom size is one advantage that private and independent schools usually have over public schools. Teacher-to-student ratios will vary by grade level, with early learners typically having a lower ratio. Some special needs schools have a population of students who learn and function best in small, self-contained classrooms. Other schools take the approach of integrating special learners with their peers for certain classes or activities. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. You will want to weigh your child's needs against the socialization factor.

Learn How Students' Behaviors Are Handled

A good school will have a positive behavior program in place. Find out what model they use to reward good behavior and modify poor behavior. Children with autism or other disorders exhibit different behaviors that shouldn't be looked upon negatively. Ask the school if they allow these children to hum, fidget, stand, or use tools such as therabands or putty to expend energy. If so, are these types of behaviors or tools accepted in the early grades and then gradually modified as students get older?

Find Out What Enrichment Activities Are Offered

Just because your child may require special support or intensive services doesn't mean he or she shouldn't be having fun! What opportunities are available for them to build character, practice their leadership skills, exercise, and participate as valuable members of a group?

Activities to inquire about include:

- Academic, social or community-based clubs
- Adaptive PE program
- Regular family events
- Theater or music program
- Regular and adaptive sports
- Adaptive playground

Schedule a Tour

Maybe a school has mailed you a nicely designed brochure. That's great, but go see it for yourself. Take your child with you to see how he or she reacts. Ask what they thought about it afterwards. Visit as many classrooms as you can and pay attention to whether the students are engaged or if any of them are sitting idly. Does it seem like a friendly place? Overall, are the students' behaviors being managed? Is the building quiet or chaotic?

Ask Lots of Questions

Don't let these important ones slip by:

- Is there a waiting list?
- Children thrive on structure. What will your child's daily schedule entail?
- What is the student culture like? Is it a blended environment or do most students have challenging diagnoses?
- What core curriculum is taught?
- What are the teachers' levels of education?
- Who else is in the classroom besides the teachers?
- Does the school provide busing transportation?
- What hands-on learning methods or materials are used?
- What therapies are offered?
- Do the students wear uniforms?
- Is there a vocational or life skills component to their programs?
- Is the staff trained in American Sign Language (ASL) or Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)?
- What is the staff turnover?
- What is the school's security policy? Are all outdoor entrances locked? Are all classroom or hallway door locked? How to parents gain access?
- Do the hallways and classrooms have closed circuit monitoring?
- Does the administration have an open door policy?
- Do teachers practice daily home-school communication?
- If K-8, how do they help students transition to high school?
- If K-12, how do they help students transition to adulthood?
- Is there a school nurse on site?

- How is medication handled and who administers it?
- Do they offer parent training or any other parent supportive services?
- Can they provide parent testimonials or parent contacts?
- If there is a cultural language barrier, how is that addressed?

Research What Types of Scholarships and Funding Are Available

Unfortunately, many parents assume that enrolling their child in a special education school is not something they can afford. In Ohio, there are three main scholarships that parents of children with special needs should know about: 1) the Autism Scholarship Program; 2) the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program; and 3) the EdChoice Scholarship Program. Each of these scholarships are funded through the Ohio Department of Education. You will need to make sure the school you are interested in is a registered scholarship provider. In addition to these Ohio scholarship programs, private or independent special education schools may offer their own form of financial assistance to families who need it. Many special education schools make it their policy to provide support to students regardless of the family's ability to pay tuition, so don't exclude private or independent schools from your search list. A school's admissions office should be able to guide you through the scholarship process.

Make Your Final Decision

The right school will be the one where your child feels most comfortable. It's the school that will give him or her the best education experience possible. And it's the place where he or she will be challenged to achieve goals that are beyond expectations. Good luck!