

How to Select a Private School for Your Child with Special Needs

By Julie MOWER, MAEd

When it comes time for children with special needs to start school, there is perhaps no question more important than where they might go. For parents living in areas with multiple private schools available for students with special needs, making a firm and final decision can seem monumental—and stressful.

Those parents should know two key things: first, they are not alone. While selecting a school can be time-consuming, on the other side of that decision is a healthy environment and community excited to welcome you. Second, know that even taking the time to carefully consider the options at hand means parents are proactively stepping in the right direction to lay the foundation for their child's growth and success.

Nonetheless, choosing a private school for children with special needs can be a daunting and unique task. To offer discerning parents some helpful advice, below are illuminating questions parents might ask in their quest for the right school for their child.

Does the school highlight and make space for your child's gifts?

All children with special needs possess singular talents and skills, so to lump them all into one category would both undercut their education and stifle their growth. Your child will be happiest where he/she can be inspired by a knowledgeable staff and those around him/her. As such, it is necessary to find a vibrant and dynamic environment with a diversity of teaching styles and activities so your child's potential can be met, and he/she feels excited about going to school each day.



Does the school involve and engage with students' parents?

A quality school for special needs does not only include serving its students. Instead, it is vital parents also be included in a school's community and receive frequent communication about school going-on,

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parent training and workshops, and students’ progress. Teachers spend many months—and sometimes years—alongside the students with special needs they dutifully serve and educate. As such, these teachers become an extended part of a family’s community, so it’s crucial parents feel involved and welcome in school news and events.

Does the school’s staff lead from a place of compassion and expertise?

There might be days where the given school’s teachers and administrators see your child for as many hours as you do, if not more. This means it is important your child is entrusted to the right group of people. These educators will understand children with special needs can struggle in social settings. From there, seasoned teachers will pinpoint the strongest learning style for each student—be it visual, aural, or kinesthetic—and help your child succeed by fostering an environment where he/she learns to implement social skills in both familiar and new places. Meet these educators and observe their teaching styles.

Does the school offer transition programs for post-academic life?

A good school helps students with special needs grow on a daily basis; a great one also prepares them for life beyond schooling. Whether your child will move on to a supported employment opportunity, join the workforce, or initiate some other life chapter, parents should ensure the schools they’re browsing offer transition programs to smooth the path post-graduation. If schools offer training programs or hands-on activities with local places of employment, all the better! Don’t be afraid to ask what services a school could provide for post-21 options, or for testimonials from former students and their parents on how well prepared those student alumni were.

If you were your child, would you want to attend this school?

This is arguably the most significant question to ask yourself as you narrow down your search and seek out a private school for your child. As parents of children with special needs often do, you must put yourself in your child’s shoes and consider where he/she will feel most comfortable, and where you see him/her flourishing. Practicing this empathetic task will also allow parents to relate to their children throughout their school years, better understanding—and appreciating—their improved social skills, realized potentials, and personal growths.



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