

Choosing a School: An Overview of What Parents Need to Consider

(National Center for Learning Disorders – www.nclld.org)



As the parent of a child with LD (learning disabilities) and/or AD/HD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), you're well aware of how crucial it is that your child goes to the "right" school. The right school is a place where your child feels accepted and supported, a school that provides your child the special services he or she requires to succeed. No school is perfect, but maybe you've grown concerned about your child's current school.

Ask yourself: Is my child

- reluctant to go to school?
- weary and unhappy at the end of most school days?
- stuck in a cycle of underachievement or failure?
- complaining that school is boring and that teachers don't care about him or her?
- lacking close friends at school?
- stressed out during the school year?

If your answer is yes to one or more of these questions, the school may be a poor fit for your child. What can you do?

You Have Choices

Today's parents have considerable say about where their children go to school. Kids do not all attend their neighborhood school, as they did in the past. Most districts allow students to attend any of their schools and any school outside the district, provided space is available. Public school options may also include charter schools and magnet schools. Families can consider private schools, some devoted to the education of children with learning disabilities, others with well-established special education services. Homeschooling is increasingly popular, and there are many high-quality online schools.

Where do you start? You know you have specific requirements for a school. Your child needs special services, informed and sympathetic teachers and administrators, and a suitable atmosphere for learning. How will you find the school that suits your child best? What rights does your child have for special education services, particularly if you're looking at private schools? You need to know

what your state offers because school choices vary from state to state. Most important, though, are the things you and your family find most valuable in a school.

What Is Most Important to You and Your Family?

It's a good idea to sit down with your family and make a list of the important features of a new school. After you make the list, decide on the priority of each item, from nonnegotiable to "nice but not essential." From this list, you will see questions you'll want to research and then discuss with staff members when you visit schools. Here are some suggestions:

Practical Matters

- Do you need a school that offers after-hours childcare or an extended day program?
- Is location of the school important? Can you drive your child or arrange for other transportation if buses aren't available?
- Are you considering a private school? If so, what are your family's financial requirements? (Remember that most private schools offer scholarships.)

Academic Program

- Will your child learn better in a traditional, back-to-the-basics curriculum? Or will your child be more successful with a collaborative, noncompetitive approach; project- or theme-based learning; hands-on teaching?
- What special learning assistance does your child require? Does your child need tutors, a resource room, classroom aides, assistive technology, small classes, teachers licensed in special education? Do regular classroom teachers need to be knowledgeable about both their subject matter and learning disabilities?
- Does your child need flexible scheduling to allow for extended time and other accommodations?
- Is it important to see opportunities for students with learning disabilities to demonstrate their strengths?
- How important to you are a school's test scores?
- Are you looking for a rigorous curriculum that includes opportunities for gifted children and for Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs—and a school that makes these opportunities accessible to children with learning disabilities?

School Facilities and Culture

- How important is cutting-edge technology — wired classrooms, laptops, smart boards, and so on?
- Which extracurricular opportunities are important to your child's happiness? (If necessary, can you arrange those activities outside school?)
- How important are facilities like a modern building, wireless Internet access, playing fields, a gym, an auditorium?
- What kind of environment would be best for your child? Which are most important: diversity among students and teachers, recognition and display of all students' achievements, firm discipline policy, school's philosophy or mission, a conflict-resolution program, an anti-bullying initiative?
- Which opportunities for parent involvement are most attractive to you? For example, would you like an active PTA or PTO, volunteer opportunities, a well-established parent communication system (e.g., newsletters, web-based programs, regular and easy contact with teachers), the expectation that parents will be deeply involved in their children's education?

Top of the List: Your Child's Needs

What your child needs from school is probably more important than any other factor. Consider what you know about how your child learns best, what her or his major learning challenges are, any social issues that get in your child's way, your child's interests and passions, and teaching techniques or strategies that help your child succeed. If you are transferring your child from another school (rather than looking for a preschool or kindergarten), talk with teachers and administrators who know your child best. It's also crucial to talk with other parents of children with learning disabilities, both at your current school and at other schools. How satisfied are they with their child's school?

A Challenging, Rewarding Task

Changing schools can seem like a daunting project! It does take time and effort to identify the best fit for your child. But nothing is more important, and that will motivate you to take on what will ultimately be a highly rewarding search. For information on your options, see "Choosing a School: Understanding Your Range of Options." For a worksheet of questions to ask and things to look for when you visit a prospective school, download "[Visiting a School Worksheet: What to Ask, What to Look For.](#)"

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