

CHOOSING A SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD WITH DOWN SYNDROME



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*Down Syndrome Association
of Central Texas*

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I AM MOVING TO CENTRAL TEXAS. HOW DO I CHOOSE A SCHOOL DISTRICT?

This is a question we hear routinely, and one for which there is no simple answer. Choosing among school districts can be difficult, particularly because there are approximately 60 school districts in the Central Texas area, each with their own particular strengths.

In this pamphlet, you will find out about state and local resources, learn which questions to ask, and be guided to additional research to assist you with your decision.

Do your homework

Your experience with any school district will be affected by many variables, including but not limited to: the administration, the background knowledge of the child's teacher, attitudes about inclusion, and your own child's particular strengths. Your degree of knowledge and preparation will have a huge effect on your child's education.

Check the state accountability ratings for the district(s) you are considering.

The state rating is designed to hold your school accountable. It shows you, in a nutshell, how your school is performing and where your school stands in relation to other schools in the state. You can find a listing of most recent accountability ratings for Texas schools on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website at:

<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/>

Consider the ratings of the district(s) under No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act also holds schools accountable. Under the NCLB, all public school campuses, school districts, and states are evaluated to determine if they have achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on 3 areas: Reading/ Language Arts, Mathematics, and either Graduation Rate (for high schools and districts) or Attendance Rate (for elementary and middle/junior high schools). You can find the AYP ratings at: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/ayp/>

Speak to a DSACT member

Many of our members are happy to share their experiences with you and answer school-related question.

Joining our Yahoo group and age-specific Facebook groups allows you to connect with DSACT parents in the districts you may be considering.

To join the Yahoo or Facebook groups please contact the DSACT office at (512) 323-0808 or office@dsact.com.

INTERVIEWING A PROSPECTIVE SCHOOL

Before making a decision about which district is best for your child, we encourage you to “do your homework.” This may include making an appointment (or setting up a teleconference) with the special education director, principal, or other personnel for the school district(s) you are interested in. Consider asking the district some of the questions on the list below:

Can I visit the school and observe the classes in which my child would be placed?

You should be permitted to closely observe child-to-child interaction and the interactions of children with multiple staff members in different areas of the school.

Is there a team approach to special education?

An ideal school will have multiple professional (such as speech pathologists and physical therapists) working closely with the children and with each other.

How much communication is there between teachers and parents?

A school should encourage regular parent- teacher conferences and the use of informal, regular communication between parents and teachers. Some encourage use of a “communication notebook,” which you pass back and forth each day.

Does your school offer an Extended School Year (ESY)?

Many private schools and some public schools offer an extended school year that runs throughout the summer months. ESY is designed to keep the children from regressing.

How long is the bus ride?

Many children with special needs have a hard time riding on the bus for long periods of time. Make sure you ask the school how long the bus ride to and from school will be. Check state laws regarding how long a child can be on the bus, what safety features are standard (seatbelts, harnesses), and whether the district would provide an aide. If your child does ride the bus, make sure the bus driver knows how your child communicates, as well as any specific medical or behavioral needs your child may have.

What is your philosophy regarding inclusion? The IDEA and federal regulations call for education in the least restrictive environment. There are several types of placements that may be appropriate for your child:

Inclusion Class

In an inclusion class, your child will be in a regular education class with peers who are the same or similar age. In addition to the regular teacher a special education teacher, aide, or paraprofessional may be assigned to adjust the curriculum. Inclusion placements have the benefit of keeping children in classes with typically-developing peers.

Resource Room

Students who need intensive help to keep up with grade-level work in a particular subject may be placed in the Resource Room, where a special education teacher will work with a small group of students, using appropriate, modified techniques. Resource Room placements can provide help where needed while allowing the student to be primarily educated with his or her typically-developing peers.

Self-Contained Class (“Life Skills” or “ICAP”)

Placement in a self-contained classroom means that your child will be removed from the general school population for some or all academic subjects to work in a small controlled setting with a special education teacher. Students in a self-contained class may be working at different academic levels, with different textbooks and curricula. Self-contained classes can offer structure and routine for students who require a higher level of specialization.

For many advocates, inclusion is an absolute. DSACT and both national Down Syndrome groups believe that all children benefit from some degree of inclusion for several reasons.

First, children learn from each other. The interaction among students in a regular classroom enhances academic learning while building behavioral skills all people need to be successful learners and, ultimately, succeed as adults. Evidence is mounting, however, that all students – not just those with special needs – benefit. Practically speaking, teachers and other students often benefit from the presence of classroom aides. And, where students with Down syndrome learn from other kids, the reverse is also true. Regular ed children learn that the world is a much bigger place – filled with stimulating diversity – than they might otherwise think.

Second, when students with disabilities are isolated, they are deprived of the opportunity to interact with their peers. As a result, both academics and their acquisition of appropriate, helpful social skills suffer.

Finally, research indicates that when individuals with Down syndrome are fully included, they experience significant gains in reading, math, communication, and other skills. Parents should question a practice of routinely assigning children with Down syndrome to a life skills or ICAP class without consideration of inclusion with their typically-developing peers for at least part of the day (particularly in the early grades).

What are your policies regarding positive behavioral supports?

Many children with Down syndrome require some sort of positive behavioral support. Schools may have different policies regarding the methods utilized (non-intrusive, "time outs," "quiet rooms," or physical restraint).

A 1996 study by the National Down Syndrome Society revealed that the most effective form of behavioral support is praise, and that material rewards, time outs, loss of privilege, peer pressure, and contact with parents were sometimes effective. The study revealed that reprimands and punishments, along with ignoring the behavior, were not effective.

Does your district have a special education citizen or parent advisory group?

Some school districts have created a special education citizen or parent advisory group. The purpose of these groups are to provide information, training, and support to parents as they navigate the special education process and advises the district's administration and senior staff on matters relating to special education. Perhaps most importantly, these groups provide parents input about policies and practice that affect children with special needs in their district.

May I talk to a parent whose child with special needs attends the school?

A parent's perspective is a unique one, and talking to another parent allows you to get a feel for both the pros and cons of the school's special education program. Connecting with parents who share your perspective and who have experience with the school will enable you to get credible feedback about a school.

Do teachers attend trainings and research-based methods for teaching children with Down syndrome?

Research shows that children with Down syndrome are not simply globally delayed, but rather have a specific cognitive profile of strengths and weaknesses. The researchers and practitioners are Down Syndrome Education International (DownsEd) are the leading experts in the field, with over 20 years' experience. You can access free research and practical resources online at www.downsed.org.

These questions are only a few that you should ask potential schools. You should always feel free to ask questions, as the district you choose will be responsible for keeping your child safe and providing him or her with a quality education which will lead to further education, employment, or independent living.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Choosing a School for Your Child Federal Citizen Information Center

<http://publications.usa.gov/USAPubs.php?PubID=3376>

Great Schools

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

Great Schools is an independent, non-profit organization that provides parents with information and tools to choose schools and support their children's education.

School Matters

<http://www.schoolmatters.com/>

School Matters is a site where parents, educators and leaders can view performance, spending, and demographic information for schools and school districts in any state.

DownsEd International

<http://www.downsed.org>

DownsEd publishes free research and resources related to Down syndrome and education, with particular emphasis on reading, speech, memory, mathematics, and inclusion. They are internationally-recognized experts in the field.

INCLUSION RESEARCH

Wolpert, G. (1996). *The Educational Challenges Inclusion Study*. New York, NY: National Down Syndrome Society.

Video: *Inclusion in practice - Educating children with Down syndrome at primary schools*

<http://www.downsed.org/en/gb/in-practice/primary-inclusion/>

Inclusion in education - what are the benefits and how do we make it successful?

<http://www.down-syndrome.org/practice/165/practice-165.pdf>

Together at school: mainstream school in Italy, from kindergarten to high school: <http://www.down-syndrome.org/practice/208/?page=1>

Turner S, Alborz A, Gayle V. Predictors of academic attainments of young people with Down's syndrome. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*. 2008; 52(5):380-392.

Cunningham CC, Glenn S, Lorenz S, Cuckle P, Shepperdson B. Trends and outcomes in educational placements for children with Down's syndrome. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. 1998;13:225-237

Fox S, Farrell P, Davis P. Factors associated with the effective inclusion of primary-aged pupils with Down's syndrome. *British Journal of Special Education*. 2004;31(4):184-190.