
Effective Questions for Parents to Ask...

When looking for a school for your child with special needs

In DC's unique landscape of "choice" in public schools, the difficult challenge for parents of children in special education is to find out how a school functions in special education. Since all charters are their own LEA (local education agency) and DCPS has various programs, there are dozens of variables in the public schools surrounding special education for a parent to consider, including:

- What is the school staffing structure for special education – are there special education coordinators, inclusion specialists, or student services managers? Are they assigned by grade? Who is the administrator in charge of special education?
- Does the school leadership embrace inclusion and the special education population in areas outside of the classroom, such as specials, afterschool activities, etc.?
- How are related service providers organized/staffed – are they contractors, and at the school for 1-2 days a week or full-time?
- Are there reading specialists in the school and are they incorporating evidence-based reading interventions? And if so, which interventions are school staff trained?

It is up to parents to do their own research on a school; and still the best way to learn about the school is a face-to-face visit at the school and meeting with the staff/administration.

When you visit a school—see how the leadership embraces (*or not*) principles of inclusion, different learning needs, accommodations and staffing.

First, **ask as many specific questions as possible**. School staff, especially those who work in the special education will have the answers you need, and should be able to guide you in learning more:

1. If your child has a specific disability, for example Autism, ask if the school has had a student with autism before, how many do they have enrolled currently and in what grades.
2. How does the school structure their classrooms or learning models to deal with these student's needs – did they provide differentiated instruction; how did they deal with transition (from classroom to gym or art) do they practice responsive classroom or other positive behavior systems?
3. What is your school's model for special education? Do you offer any small, specialized classes for students who may need this modification?
4. Does the school have positive behavior support and are staff trained in these techniques? (and how often!)? And how do these plans interact with Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs)?
5. How do they deal with behavior issues? Do teachers have training in ABA or teaching children with disabilities?
6. Do they have assistive technology? And if yes, what?
7. How are related services (counseling/speech/OT) provided and how often are these related service providers (OT, SLP, PT) physically in the school? (It is not uncommon for a therapist to have 2-4 assigned schools, meaning that they may not be physically be at your child's school more than one day a week. This can limit the amount of integration, and collaboration between a classroom teacher and a therapist in creating a functional environment for a child who needs speech therapy.)
8. How many students in the school have IEPs – how many in specific grades?
9. What range of disability codes are in the school population?
10. How often does the MDT (Multiple Disability Team) or SSP (School Support Team) meet? (And who takes part in these meetings)
11. How many special education teachers does the school have and how they divide their duties (by grade or by class or by high need)? What is their caseload?
12. Who serves as the special education coordinator? Who serves as the student's case manager?



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

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To find out more about the style of a prospective school, consider asking:

1. What type of learner do you think is the best fit for your program model? Any type of learner who may struggle in your program model?
2. How do you support students who are below grade level in reading/math/writing?
3. How are parents informed if their child is having academic/social/behavior difficulties?
4. What type of extra supports, such as after-school tutoring, do you offer?
5. How do you support students who have organizational difficulties? Or challenges making friends/fitting in socially?
6. Would my child have an opportunity to come in before school starts to individually meet teachers and learn about expectations? Is there a summer program and what is the focus, i.e., is it academic or focused on adapting to a new school?
7. Who will be the main point of contact if my child or I have questions about school?



Absolutely ask if you can talk to other parents with children with IEPs at the school. From a fellow parent, ask:

How that parent “feels” at the school, i.e., Do they feel a part of the special ed team/IEP team? Do they feel welcome? How do they describe the special education and administrative staff? professional? knowledgeable? trustworthy?

By no means is this an exhaustive list – it is a good place to start, and provides parents with an opportunity to insert traits about your child. For example, when asking about transitioning within the building, you can share that your child gets overstimulated in noisy areas and going to the Gym for large events can cause a meltdown. At the very least – as a prospective parent, if you ask pertinent and reasonable questions – the school staff will become aware that you are a parent who understands that your child will need supports and services, and that you are within your rights at a DC public school (to insure that your child receives all the accommodations, modifications and support he/she needs to access the learning curriculum.

Remember, it is up to you as the parent to ask questions and share about your student’s learning needs with a prospective school! Once you have enrolled your student, you will need to continue to advocate for your child to make sure his/her needs are met!

Once you have selected a school and enrolled your child, you can ensure your child’s success by continuing to advocate:

- ⇒ Ask to meet with the special education coordinator at your child’s new school. Share a copy of your child’s IEP or 504 plan, before school begins
- ⇒ Share your hopes and expectations for your child and also share insight into your child; his/her strengths, challenges, anxieties, learning issues, and more. As a parent—you know your child best!
- ⇒ Once school begins, monitor your child’s homework, and communicate directly with teachers and administrators early in the school year. Ask to have a one-month check-in meeting in the fall.

AJE provides FREE parent training and resources on special education.

Keep updated with AJE on our website: www.aje-dc.org

Sign up for our regular emails and newsletters by emailing: information@aje-dc.org.

WHEN should you reach out to AJE?

When you want to learn more about rights regarding your child’s education.

When you have doubts or questions about the special education process, 504 process, ESL services, SST process, transition, or healthcare.

When you want to learn skills to advocate for your child.

When you think your child’s school is not providing appropriate services to your child with special needs.

When your child is having academic or behavioral problems in school.

When your child is suspended or expelled from school.

When you want emotional support from other parent.

AJE is here to help!