

CHOOSING A SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD WITH DOWN SYNDROME

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I AM MOVING TO COLORADO. 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 180 school districts in Colorado, 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 in 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 Colorado schools on the Colorado Department of Education website at:

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/stateaccountability>.

Consider the Ratings of the District(s) Under the No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 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) in 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.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/dper/ayp> .

Speak to an RMDSA Member

Several families have agreed to serve as a source of information about their experiences with Colorado schools.

To obtain a referral, please call our office at (303) 797-1699. Before making a decision about which school 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 this list:

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 professionals (such as speech pathologists and physical therapists) working closely with the children and with each other.

How much Communication is there between Parents and Teachers?

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" or "back and forth book" which you pass back and forth each day with notes and daily progress reports.

What is Your Philosophy Regarding Inclusion?

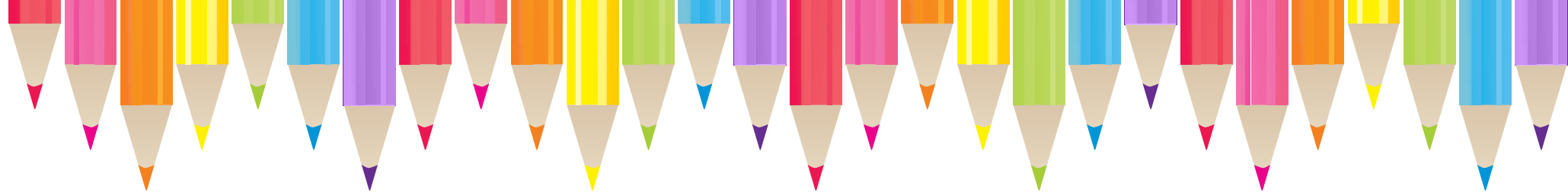
The IDEA and federal regulations call for education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). There are several types of placements that may be appropriate for your child:

Inclusion

In an inclusive 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 provide appropriate supports within the school day. Inclusion placements have the benefit of keeping children in classes with typically-developing peers.

Resource Room/Learning Center

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

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.

RMDSA believes firmly that all students are entitled to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). As described in IDEA, the regular education environment is the starting point for all education. Removing students from regular education environments should only be done when supports cannot be satisfactorily provided there. Studies show, and RMDSA as well as both national Down Syndrome groups believe, that all children benefit from some degree of inclusion for several reasons.

- **First**, students 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. Fundamentally 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. Children in inclusive regular education classes 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 class without consideration of inclusion with their typically-developing peers for at least part of the day (particularly in early grades).

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 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 (seatbelt, harness), 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 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 supports 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 is to provide information, training, and support to parents as they navigate the special education process and advise the district’s administration and senior staff on matters relating to special education. Perhaps most importantly, these groups provide parents input about policies and practices that affect children with special needs in their school 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 the 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 Learn 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 of Down Syndrome Educational International (DownsEd) are the leading experts in the field, with over 20 years of experience. You can access free research and practical resources 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, and/or independent living.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Choosing a School for Your Child Federal Citizen Information Center

<http://publications.usa.gov/epublications/choosing-school/choosingschool.htm>

Great Schools

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

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://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

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

Children with Disabilities Benefit from Classroom Inclusion (2014) <http://news.osu.edu/news/2014/07/28/%E2%80%8Bchildren-with-disabilities-benefit-from-classroom-inclusion/>

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>