

Special Needs

10 Programs

Questions to Ask



PHOTOS COURTESY THE HELP GROUP

Considering a few key factors when choosing a school for your special needs child can make your search more successful.

By Tim Haddock

Choosing a school or a class for a child with special needs can be an overwhelming task. Class sizes, student populations, therapy services and transportation are all factors. Parents will have to weigh teacher strategies and approaches, district priorities and policies regarding motivation and behaviors.

Here are 10 questions to ask during your search for the right school or program:

1 What is the class size, and what are the student-teacher and student-aide ratios?

"I think it's a legitimate place to start, because the question you're really asking is: Will my child get that level of support in this particular school?" says Brian Roper, Ph.D., Director of Autism Services at Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services.

2 What are the priorities of teachers in special day classes?

Some classes focus more on behaviors than academics. Some put more emphasis on social needs and integration.

"What you're really asking is, will my child's behavioral, academic and social needs be met?" Roper says. "What is the class working on most? Does the cognitive profile fit the needs of my child?"

You also want to know that special-education teachers who will be working with your child love their job, says Sandra Belanger, a special day class teacher in the Saugus Union School District. Just keep in mind that these teachers have to focus on classroom management as well as the individual needs of each student.

It is also important to find out how well the school supports its teachers. “Teachers need emotional support and intellectual stimulation,” says Tom Komp, Admissions Director and Senior Vice President at The Help Group. “Where do they get that on campus?”

3 How much do special-needs students at the school interact with their typical peers?

Some schools and teachers expect special-needs students to socialize with typical students on campus. Some schools and teachers prefer to have special-needs students interact more with their peers, other students with special needs.

Parents need to decide what they consider best for their child, and how dedicated a school is to respecting their decisions. “It shows a commitment,” says Roper. “It could be as simple as whether they eat lunch together. Is there opportunity for my child to be mainstreamed for certain classes?”

4 How successful is the school at actually educating special-needs students?

Parents can ask to see a school’s test scores and alternative assessment records to evaluate the success rate of a teacher or a program. This might be easier in public schools, where special-needs programs have often been in place for quite a while and information is more readily available. But scores and assessments only tell a part of the story. To understand how successful a program is, it is important to talk to other parents.

One place to connect with fellow special-needs parents is at support groups run by the Los Angeles County Regional Center.

5 Is the size of the campus and the student population a good fit?

Some special-needs students have physical limitations that make it difficult to move around campus. Some students on the autism spectrum find large crowds intimidating. A smaller campus or a smaller school might be more appropriate for these types of students.

But schools of all sizes can make accommodations to help students feel more comfortable. Special-needs students could be allowed to leave class a few minutes early to avoid the crowd on the bus, or line up a few minutes earlier for lunch to give them more time to make the transition. “I think it goes back to, is this school willing to make some adjustments?” Roper says.

6 How much value does the school place on developing independence in special-needs students?

For some students, independence might include putting away their lunch before school, taking out supplies for an assignment or remembering to wear a jacket outside on a cold day. It is important to ask how teachers at the school work with students to help them develop as much independence as possible. “Schools are places where citizens are created,” says Roper. “Part of that is independence. My job is to get them to a point where they can do without me.”

7 What services does a school offer, and what is the size of the service staff?

Some special-needs students require a variety of therapists. If your child needs a particular service, find out whether the school or district can provide it on campus.

8 What is the classroom atmosphere like?

Most districts will allow parents to observe classes for 20 minutes, allowing you to see how the teacher manages the class, how the aides interact with the students, and how much focus the teacher gives to behavior management, academics and socialization.

“It’s not just the services that they provide, but more importantly, what is the primary focus and mission of the school,” says Komp. “What is the population that they intend to serve?”

9 What motivation strategies do the teachers use?

Finding ways to motivate special-needs students can be challenging, and parents can help by sharing ideas about rewards that will motivate their child. “Ask, what are the special interests that my child has and does the school have something that can further those special interests as a motivational tool?” says Komp.

10 What transportation options are available?

If your child will take the bus, how long will the ride take? How many other students need to be picked up and dropped off? “How reliable is it in terms of consistent pick-up and consistent drop-off time?” asks Komp. ■

Tim Haddock is an L.A. writer and father of a child with special needs.

