

TIPS ON FINDING A SCHOOL

Choosing an appropriate private special education facility for an individual can be a complicated and involved process. National Association of Private Special Education Centers (NAPSEC) has compiled these suggestions for parents who are considering a private special education placement.

Academics

Visit the school to assess its atmosphere, both inside and outside the classroom. Would it appeal to your child? Take note of what the students are doing. Does everyone appear to be participating in activities that are age-appropriate? Ask yourself if your child's functioning level is similar to the other students you see.

Find out how much of your child's day will be spent in the classroom. What courses are available? What is the student to teacher ratio?

For students of high school age, are degrees available upon completion of the program, and if so, what type? Will your child have opportunities for vocational training? Does the school contract with local business for work placement of its students?

The school should hold periodic parent/staff conferences to keep you abreast of your child's progress. Be sure to ask how often these conferences will be held. If your child's IEP requires counseling, speech therapy, physical therapy, etc., when and where will these be provided and by whom (are they qualified service providers?).

If the school is a residential facility, is it open 365 days per year? If not, what provisions are made for families who need assistance during summer and vacations? If you are looking into a day program, check to see if summer sessions are available. Many parents find this extra instructional time to be beneficial to their child.

Staff

Qualified and caring staff members should be a top priority when choosing a school for your child. While visiting the facility, do you feel the staff promotes a positive and open atmosphere? Are they working appropriately with the students? Are both the staff and students enthused and actively involved in the learning process? If the school is a residential facility, are there staff members awake throughout the night to monitor activity and handle problems?

Talk to as many of the employees as possible to get a feel for the type of people they are. Find out the central philosophy behind the methods the school uses, and if all staff members can explain and support it.

Before you enroll your child, try to arrange a meeting with the executive director of the school. Ask for his/her degree qualifications, the qualifications and purpose of the school's Board of Directors, and the degree qualifications of the staff, both educational and residential, if applicable. Make sure they are appropriately trained and experienced

professionals. Obtain the name of the person whom you should contact with questions and concerns you may have if your child does attend the school.

Ask the executive director if the school is licensed, accredited, or approved by the State. Is the school affiliated with a professional organization, and what is the criteria for membership? Does the organization have an accreditation or certification process?

Building Safety & Living Arrangements

Pay close attention to the physical appearance of the facility. Is it neat, clean, safe, and in good condition? If it is a residential facility, what are the living arrangements? Are the rooms large enough to accommodate its residents? Does it adhere to the local fire codes? Does it have fire escapes? Is it equipped with appropriate alarms for children who are visually and/or hearing impaired?

You will also want to find out what your child can bring for his/her room, i.e., TV, VCR, radio, etc. Ask if there are provisions for storing personal belongings in the students' rooms.

Find out what responsibilities your child will have in terms of cooking, cleaning, etc. Will he/she participate in any of these activities, and if so, who will be supervising?

Healthcare

Make sure the school provides proper health care for its students. Is a health care professional on staff 24 hours per day? What are his/her qualifications? How close is the nearest hospital? If your child takes medication, will a physician affiliated with the school monitor the dosages?

Make sure the school has a policy on contagious diseases and that it covers AIDS and Hepatitis B.

Does the school provide individual and family counseling for those who desire it? How often does counseling occur? What are the therapist's qualifications?

Check out the school's policy on personal hygiene. If your child requires assistance with feeding, washing, or dressing will someone be available to help him/her? Who will this person be?

Visitation, Vacations, & Community Involvement

Starting at a new school, especially a residential facility, can be an intimidating experience for a child. You'll need to find how long the school suggests he/she wait before making or receiving phone calls or going home. Ask if the child is afforded privacy when making calls and how many phones are available for students' use.

Obtain a copy of the school calendar. Note the number of holidays and breaks the school has. Is transportation provided to the child's home for these breaks and weekends? If your child will be attending a facility far from home, you will need to check the availability of public transportation for home visits. Also, will your child have the

chance to become involved with the community through team sports, holiday celebrations, or organizations?

It is important to check out the school's policy on visitors. Can anyone come to see your child or only immediate family members? How does the school feel about your child's leaving the school grounds, both with and without supervision? What sort of field trips does the school make, how often do they occur, and what form of transportation is used?

Meals

The school should provide nutritious and balanced meals for its students. Ask to see a menu, and if possible, eat a meal at the school. What are the policies on junk food and care packages?

Will the school provide specialized menus for children who need to avoid certain foods? Does the school contract out its plan or prepare meals at its facility? If it does cook its own meals, ask if students have a chance to help with the food preparation. Are meals served to the students cafeteria style or family style?

Discipline and Supervision

Find out about the school's discipline policy. Is it in writing? Ask to have a copy. If the school uses behavior modification, what type of punishments and rewards are used and are they flexible?

What type of supervision will your child have while on the school premises? Will he/she receive round-the-clock supervision?

Conclusion

It is a good idea to include your child in as much of the placement decision making process as you can. This will help him/her feel more comfortable with the choice that is made.

Talk to an educational advocate about the facility, your child's rights, and ask to be made familiar with documents, IEPs, etc. Confer with your State Departments of Education and Children and Family Services and other agencies that may be able to provide input on appropriate placement.

One of the most important factors in finding the right school is the trust and comfort level between the parents and the school staff. The more the parents and school believe in each other and are working toward the same goals, the better the child's chance of success.