

How Do I Choose A School For My Child Who Has Down Syndrome?



**Down Syndrome Connection
OF THE BAY AREA**

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COMMON QUESTIONS

“My family is moving to the Bay Area - what district should we move to?”

“What districts or schools support inclusion?”

“How do we find out what the different districts and school offer?”

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to those questions. Every district has its own personality, resources, philosophy and structure for special education programs and personnel. There are over 35 school districts just in Alameda and Contra Costa counties alone - dozens more across the Bay Area. Each of these districts has their own strengths and differences. Even within districts, the options and attitudes are often disparate - certain schools may be more open to and experienced in supporting inclusive practices while others might only have experience with special day classes. Further, just the offering of a specific setting - be it general education or special day - doesn't mean that it is supported appropriately and effectively. Often, that comes down to personnel - and that regularly changes.

Even though there isn't an easy answer, there are things that you can and should do to help yourself make an informed decision and one that hopefully works best for your family.

CONSIDER THE COMMUNITY

Ideally, you'll be moving to a place that can be your home and community for years to come. Think about whether it's a good match for your family as a whole.



Is it close enough to your places of employment? Do you have other family and/or friends nearby? What is the general culture and diversity of that community? Is there proximity to nature, public transportation and/or arts and is that important to you?

SPEAK TO A DSCBA MEMBER

We can connect you with families who are willing to share their experiences and knowledge. Tell us what districts you're interested in and we'll do our best to connect you with a family there. You can also post and ask a question on our Yahoo Group email list:

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/DSCBA/>

CONSIDER THE RATINGS

You can look at the accountability ratings for both the Academic Performance Index (API) as well as the “Adequate Yearly Progress Report” component of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB Act). These test numbers don't tell the whole picture, but can show you how a district/school is performing in relation to other nearby districts/schools and or what their latest trend (upwards or downwards) has been.

TEN IMPORTANT QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT WANT TO ASK:

1. Is it possible to visit a school in a district that we are considering moving to? Note, most districts will not allow you to visit schools until you have an in-district address.

2. What is your approach and structure to special education services? Ideally, services are provided in natural and meaningful contexts and with a team approach. An ideal school will have multiple professionals (speech pathologist, occupational therapist, etc.) working closely with one another and your child.

3. What is your philosophy regarding inclusion? The federal IDEA law calls for education in the “least restrictive environment.” Districts may vary in their opinion, experience, structure and supports regarding including children with special needs in general education classrooms.



4. *How do you facilitate communication between families and schools?* A school should encourage regular communication between the family and rest of the IEP team. Communication may be regular emails, brief exchanges upon pick-up, a communication log, quarterly or monthly team meetings, etc.

5. *How is your ESY (Extended School Year) structured?* ESY is designed to prevent children with special needs from regressing over the summer. Most districts offer a limited ESY program that is solely for students with special needs.

6. *How long is the average bus ride for special education students?* If your child will be riding the bus, you might want to know about the average time children spend on the bus in a given district. Some bus rides can be over an hour. You might also ask about standard safety features on the buses.

7. *What are your policies regarding behavior supports?* Many children with Down syndrome require a positive behavior support plan at some point. Districts/schools may have different policies regarding allowable behavior supports. You might be concerned if they still permit restraints and/or “quiet rooms”.

8. *Does your district have a special education parent or advisory group?* These groups may be organized by districts or directly by parents. They often serve the important job of providing unity and information between families of students with special needs as well as serving to provide input and communication between the families and district.

9. *Can you put me in contact with a parent of a child with special needs in your district/school?*

10. Have your teachers attended trainings regarding best practices and research based- methods for teaching students with Down syndrome? Research shows that children with Down syndrome are not simply globally delayed, but instead have a specific cognitive profile with (generalized) clear strengths and weaknesses. Down Syndrome Education International (DownsEd) is the leading expert in the field. They offer literature and access to research based curriculum. We at the Down Syndrome Connection of the Bay Area (DSCBA) also provide training, resources and curriculum to educators through our Down Syndrome Education Alliance Program. We welcome new districts and schools to contact us in order to participate and utilize these services.

HOW DO I EVEN KNOW WHAT KIND OF SETTING I WANT?

For many advocates and specialists, inclusion is a must. The DSCBA as well as the national Down syndrome groups believe strongly that all children (including those with disabilities) benefit from some degree of inclusion. What that looks like can vary greatly from child to child.

Most children with Down syndrome (like all children) are socially motivated - they learn from one another. Placement alongside typically developing peers enhances academic learning while building behavior and social skills all people need to be successful learners and ultimately, to succeed in society as adults. Decades of studies show this to be true. Furthermore evidence is growing that it is not only those with special needs that benefit.

Teachers and other students can benefit from the extra adult presence and specialists on the IEP team - especially when those resources are used effectively. Also, where students with Down syndrome learn from other children, the reverse is also true.



General education children learn that everyone has strengths and challenges, they may practice verbalizing how to break down a task, being patient, and gain a greater understanding and respect for diversity and empathy.

The research is very clear. Fred Balcom, the Director of the Special Education Division of the California Department of Education stated “We know that removing students from the general education classroom impedes their academic progress and that, conversely, keeping students in general education classes typically improves their school performance and often their behavior” [The Special EDGE 25 (Winter-Spring 2012): 2. Print].

We recommend that you question a district/school that routinely assigns students with Down syndrome to self-contained special education classes without consideration of inclusion in general education for at least a portion of the day.

We also recognize and understand that there is not one simple formula - which every student and family has their own needs and character and there might be situations where a special education classroom best meets a student's needs. Again, this information is meant to help you make the best decision for your family - every family is different.



INCLUSION RESOURCES

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

Inclusion in Education - What are the benefits and how do we make it successful? Down Syndrome Education Online
down-syndrome.org/practice/165/

Implementing Inclusion – National Down Syndrome Society
<http://www.ndss.org/Resources/Education/Implementing-Inclusion/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

DownsEd International: Downs Ed publishes free research and resources related to Down syndrome and education. There are materials on reading, speech, memory, mathematics and inclusion. DownsEd leads the field in educational information related to students with Down syndrome. **downsed.org**

Great Schools: Great Schools is an independent organization that provides parents with information and tools to choose their children's school.
greatschools.net/

The Association of Bay Area Governments: this site lists the school districts by county.
abag.ca.gov

The California Department of Education: Here you can search for the Academic Performance Index, Adequate Yearly Progress reports and other standardized test results.
cde.ca.gov



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