

School Selection Guide

The experience of Autism is not one thing. When it comes to schools, there is also no “one-size-fits-all” for students with Autism. A common call the Autism Society of Greater Akron (ASGA) receives on our Helpline is from parents and guardians seeking assistance selecting the best school for their student with Autism. Each student with Autism has varying needs, and therefore not all schools are a good fit. We’ve designed this guide to help you navigate the school selection process with some helpful tips. It’s important to tour the schools you’re considering and to ask questions applicable to your student’s needs. Our suggested questions are a good place to start and we know you’ll have your own as well that will help in your decision-making process.

Whether your student is entering school for the first time, transitioning to a new grade, or facing unique challenges, this guide aims to provide you with the knowledge and tools you need to effectively advocate for their educational needs. ASGA’s commitment is to empower you with the information you need to become informed advocates, strong allies, and knowledgeable partners in your student’s education.

This list of questions is intended to be a guide as you search for a school. This list is not all-inclusive, and there may be questions on this list that do not apply to your situation. Please use these questions as a starting point during your search. If your student has co-occurring conditions or dual diagnoses, consider what specific support questions you may want to ask the school related to their situation as well.

If you have additional questions, please contact ASGA’s Helpline at 330-940-1441 x1 or email us at info@autismakron.org.

CULTURE

A school's culture contributes greatly to students' overall academic experience. Evaluating the look and feel of a school - and ensuring your family will feel welcomed and included - is an important part of the school selection process.

- What is the environment and culture of the school? How does it feel to walk through the hallways?
- How do students transition throughout the day? What is a typical daily student schedule?
- What is the typical class size? What is the student to teacher ratio?
- What does the school do to excite students about learning?
- How are activities planned and organized (i.e., assemblies)? Are there accommodations so students with sensory needs can participate?
- What is the school's stance on bullying and how are bullying concerns addressed?
- Are parents/guardians permitted to observe during the school day?
- Are parents/guardians encouraged to volunteer? In what ways can parents/guardians get involved?
- Does anyone on the school board have a connection to disabilities or special education?
- Is peer training available? For example, teaching typical students about Autism spectrum disorder and how to interact with students with Autism.

CURRICULUM

A school curriculum is a structured and organized plan or framework that outlines the educational content, learning objectives, instructional methods, and assessments for a specific educational program or institution. It serves as a guide for what students will learn and how they will learn it during their time in school. The curriculum is a fundamental component of the education system and plays a crucial role in shaping the knowledge, skills, and experiences that students acquire.

- What do the LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) placements look like? Are students with disabilities fully included with non-disabled peers? Are there hybrid models, such as co-teaching? Is a classroom available for students with higher needs, who are pulled out for classes where they can participate? Least Restrictive Environment should mean options for various needs, too.

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is a legal and educational concept that stems from the federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It emphasizes that students with disabilities should, to the greatest extent possible, be educated in an educational setting that is the least restrictive and most inclusive while still meeting their individual needs. The LRE principle is designed to ensure that students with disabilities can participate in general education alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.

- How long is the school year? If the school has an extended school year (ESY), how is the program structured? For your planning purposes: When does it start and end? How many hours?
- How long will my student be at this school building? What's is the plan for transition to next building?
- Are there predictable daily schedules and routines?
- What academic enrichment opportunities are available?
- Are there any extra opportunities for my student to practice social skills in a group setting facilitated by school staff (i.e., lunch bunch, gaming club)?
- Will my student have a 1:1 aide (if needed)? If not, how many students does the classroom aide work with? How will my student interact with the aide?
- Is Social Emotional Learning (SEL) part of the curriculum? How is the impact and success of the SEL curriculum measured?

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to a framework and set of skills that individuals, especially children and adolescents, can develop to understand and manage their emotions, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and effectively navigate various social situations. SEL recognizes the importance of emotional and social well-being alongside academic achievement.

- What is the homework policy? What is the typical time homework should take per grade level?
- Does this school offer a program that focuses on developing functional skills?

STAFF

School staff members are the backbone of the educational system. Their diverse roles collectively contribute to the growth, well-being, and success of students. The collaboration and teamwork among various staff members creates an educational ecosystem that nurtures students' intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development, preparing them for future success in life.

- Have all staff members (Gym, Art, Music Teachers, Secretaries, etc.) been given training in how to interact with Autistic students?
- What kind of support, supervision and encouragement does the classroom staff receive from the administration?
- What is the turnover rate in the building?
- Is staff required to do professional development related to disabilities throughout the year?
- Are my student's related services available at this school – occupational therapy, speech therapy, sensory therapy, physical therapy, psychology, etc.?

FAMILY

Families provide a consistent and stable learning environment. The home is where students spend a significant portion of their time outside of school. When families are actively involved in their children's education, they can reinforce and extend the lessons learned in the classroom.

- How does the school communicate with the family? What is the expectation for me as a parent/guardian from the school to be involved? Are there meetings, calls? How often?
- How often will I receive IEP reports? And would it be possible to receive daily notes from the aide/teacher on my student's day?
- What supports or resources does the school provide for parents or guardians? For the family?
- Will parents/guardians be given guidance on how to carry over school interventions and programming in the home?

BEHAVIOR

Understanding how behavior is managed in school is essential because it contributes to a safe, inclusive, and productive learning environment. It equips students with important life skills and supports the well-being of both students and teachers.

- What are the behavior support systems the school uses? Do they use PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support) or another approach?

Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) is a proactive and evidence-based framework used in educational and other settings to promote positive behavior, improve social interactions, and prevent and address challenging or disruptive behaviors. PBIS is often implemented in schools, but it can also be applied in various other contexts, including workplaces, healthcare facilities, and community settings.

- How does the school manage difficult behavior?
- If my student needs a behavioral plan, how will it be put together? Who evaluates his behaviors and makes recommendations?
- Is there a policy on notifying parents of challenging behavior?
- Is there a BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst) on staff and if so, what interactions will my student have with them?

A BCBA is a highly trained and certified professional who specializes in the assessment and treatment of individuals with Autism and other developmental disorders using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). They are typically involved in designing, implementing, and supervising ABA-based interventions to improve the behavior, communication, social, and adaptive skills of individuals with autism.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

The primary reason for ensuring a safe school environment is to protect the physical and emotional well-being of students. When students feel safe at school, they are more likely to thrive academically and socially.

- Is the facility locked or open?
- What is the school's policy on medication and administering medication?
- How does the school handle dietary needs and allergies?

SPECIAL EDUCATION

A well-designed special education program can help students with disabilities reach their full potential, acquire essential skills, and achieve their educational goals.

- What is the school's underlying philosophy about therapy?
- Are there social workers at the school? Or other mental health professionals? Will they provide therapy and treatment? How often?
- What types of training and certification does the staff have? In education? In behavior support?
- Do you have a peer group for my student? Can my student have successful peer interactions?
- How successful has the program been for other students with Autism?
- Do staff members have access to training in working with students with Autism?
- How is progress measured? Will behavior be closely observed and recorded?
- Will the student be given tasks and rewards that are individualized (personalized to their interests and motivation)?
- Is the environment designed to minimize distractions?
- How will my student's classroom placement be determined? What percent of the day will be spent in the typical classroom, resource room, therapies, etc.

Classroom placement in the context of autism refers to the educational setting or environment in which a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) receives their education and related services. It involves decisions about where and how the student will be educated based on their individual needs, abilities, and the least restrictive environment (LRE) principle. Classroom placement options for students with autism can vary widely, and the choice of placement is typically determined through a collaborative process involving parents, educators, and professionals.

- Can you put me in touch with the parent/guardian of another student who is in the special education program to discuss their student's firsthand experience?

EXTRACURRICULAR/OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

Extracurricular opportunities are essential for students with disabilities because they offer a wide range of social, emotional, physical, and developmental benefits. They contribute to a more inclusive and supportive school environment and help students with disabilities build valuable life skills and experiences that can positively impact their overall well-being and future opportunities.

- Does this school provide a before and after care program that accommodates students with disabilities?
- Does this school pick up from or bus to daycare programs? Which programs?
- What extracurricular activities, clubs, or sports are available at this school? Do these activities offer accommodations for students with disabilities?
- How/where are extracurricular activities advertised?
- Does the PTA plan any activities, and do these have accommodations?

PTA stands for "Parent-Teacher Association," and it is a widely recognized and active parent organization that plays a crucial role in supporting schools and promoting the well-being of students. It's important to note that while the name "PTA" is commonly used, parent organizations in schools may go by various names, such as "Parent-Teacher Organization" (PTO), "Parent-Teacher-Student Association" (PTSA), or other similar titles, depending on the specific organization's structure and affiliations.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation options should be tailored to the unique needs of each student with a disability to ensure they have equitable access to their educational programs and related services in a safe and supportive manner.

- What does school-provided transportation look like?
- What type of transportation does my student qualify for and what will that look like?
- What is the length of my student's bus ride?

TRANSITION

Transition planning in public schools refers to the process of preparing students with disabilities for life after their formal education. It is a critical component of special education services and is mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States. Transition planning is designed to help students with disabilities successfully transition from school to post-school activities, which may include further education, employment, independent living, and community participation. The goal is to ensure that students with disabilities are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources they need to lead fulfilling and productive lives as adults.

- When does transition planning begin and what does it look like?
- What vocational opportunities are available?
- Can you provide data on successful outcomes from your special education program (i.e., graduation rates, successful job placements)?

AFTER THE TOUR

A school is a place where your child will spend a significant portion of their time. Their comfort and happiness in the school environment are crucial for their overall well-being and academic success. By soliciting their feedback, you can gauge their initial feelings about the school and whether they feel comfortable there.

- What is my student's opinion about this school?
- How does the staff interact with my student?
- Do I feel comfortable with this school?
- Are the staff responsive to me? To my student?
- Can this school meet my student's needs?
- Can I see my student being successful at this school?

ALTERNATE SCHOOLING OPTIONS

If I believe the school is not a good fit for my student, what are my options?

- Some school districts in Ohio offer **open enrollment**. If you are interested in a certain district, contact the district's enrollment office for more information. Open enrollment application periods generally begin each spring for the next fall's enrollment. Each district selects its own specific application process, schedule and students in accordance with state law.
- Parents are responsible for transportation from a residence outside a district to the open enrollment district. Talk with the enrollment office about any school transportation that the district may be able to offer in some cases.
- <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-Education-Options/Open-Enrollment>
- The **Educational Choice Scholarship (EdChoice) Program** provides students from designated public schools the opportunity to attend participating private schools. The program also provides students who are entering kindergarten through 12th grade scholarship opportunities based on their household income level.

- <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/EdChoice-Scholarship>
- The **Autism Scholarship Program (ASP)** gives parents of children with Autism who qualify for a scholarship the choice to send the child to a special education program other than the one operated by the school district of residence to receive their education and the services outlined in the child's individualized education program (IEP).

A student may qualify for the Autism Scholarship Program if they meet at least one of the following criteria:

1. A student who has been identified by their district as a child with Autism and for whom the district has created an individualized education plan (IEP). The student must have a current IEP from the district of residence that is finalized and all parties, including the parent, must be in agreement with the IEP.

OR

2. A student who receives a private diagnosis of Autism and reflects this in their individualized education plan (IEP) or in an Autism education plan (AEP) developed by the district of residence.

A child is eligible to apply to participate in the program when the child turns three.

<https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Autism-Scholarship>

- The **Jon Peterson Special Needs (JPSN) Scholarship Program** provides scholarships to students who are eligible to attend kindergarten through 12th grade and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) from their district.
<https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Jon-Peterson-Special-Needs-Scholarship>
- Ohio Scholarship Providers Interactive Directory: <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Ohio-Scholarship-Providers-Interactive-Directory>
- During your search for alternate schooling options, please note that private schools do not have to follow an IEP or provide one for a student with disabilities. This is because private schools are not bound by IDEA, the federal law that defines and regulates special education. However, private schools that receive federal funding, either directly or indirectly, may have to comply with Section 504, another federal law that protects the educational rights of children with disabilities. Parents should check with the private school to see what services and accommodations they offer.

This guide was designed to assist parents and guardians in selecting a school that meets the unique needs of their student with Autism. The experience of Autism varies significantly among individuals, and there's no singular approach that suits all students when it comes to education. The Autism Society of Greater Akron recognizes this diversity and emphasizes the need for families to choose what works best for their student.

ASGA aims to empower caregivers to advocate for their student's education by giving them the tools to create needed connections and get the support they need when they need it.

Should you have further questions that were not covered in this guide, please contact ASGA's Helpline at 330-940-1441 x1 or email us at info@autismakron.org.



DISCLAIMER

The information contained within this guide is accurate as of its publication date. Users are advised to verify any critical details or consult with relevant experts or authorities to ensure the currency and applicability of the information to their specific circumstances. We disclaim any liability for actions taken based on the information contained herein.

The contents of this publication are proprietary and were written by and created for the Autism Society of Greater Akron. Please do not copy or distribute without written permission from the Autism Society of Greater Akron. For permission requests, write to the Autism Society of Greater Akron at info@autismakron.org.

Published: April 2024