Deciding what public and private schools can offer your special-needs child is a difficult path. Whether your child’s special needs are physical or learning-based, both public and private schools offer solutions for your special-needs child. Maryland public schools have laws to include special-needs children in mainstream classes as much as possible, while some Maryland private schools cater to children with special needs, including learning disabilities. Here one parent describes what she learned on her journey to find the best option for her special-needs child.

As my husband and I sat waiting for a conference with our son’s first grade teacher, I was prepared for a fight. While the students in Max’s class were beginning to read, he was still struggling to remember the alphabet and accurately form his letters. For two years we had sat by as teachers repeatedly told us not to worry — but this time, I wasn’t leaving without a better answer (and if one more person told me my son was just a late bloomer who would suddenly blossom, I was going to lose it).

Luckily, Max’s teacher not only took us seriously, she suggested testing for a learning disability. That was two years ago and Max, who is dyslexic, has blossomed after all at his public school, once testing and services were put in place.

Entering the world of special education has allowed us to bond with people from all walks of life who struggle with the same basic questions: What are the best educational options for my special needs child? And which is better — public or private?
“You have to look at the needs of the child and what’s appropriate,” says Paula McCormick, a special education advocate in Millersville who has worked as a school principal and as a due-process hearing officer for state and county level special education hearings. “There are pros and cons of both public and private placement. There is no one best solution, usually. It’s all about understanding your child’s needs, getting that information through good diagnostic testing, and matching up an appropriate program to meet the child’s needs, whether it be public or private. Both have services to offer.”

Public Schools

Public schools are governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, or IDEA. This federal law governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

Once a thorough assessment has found that a child has a disability (IDEA has 14 identified disabilities, only one of which is learning disabilities), and that the disability interferes with the child’s ability to learn, then a team of educators at the school (along with the parents) is required to develop an Individualized Education Program, or IEP.

The IEP is the cornerstone of a child’s education in the public school system. It should discuss your child’s present levels, goals, and objectives in measurable ways. It also should identify the services, accommodations, specialized materials, or supplementary supports your child needs to overcome the impact of his or her disability. In other words, it should “level the playing field,” says James M. Walsh, immediate past director of Special Education for Howard County Public Schools. (Walsh retired in June.)

Including good measurable goals and objectives in the IEP is very important, says McCormick. “It should be written in measurable terms, and that information shared with parents so they can have an understanding of if their child is making adequate progress,” she says. Once the IEP is solidified and in place, parents should closely examine if their local school system can actually provide those services, advises McCormick.
Parents should know that it doesn’t matter what type of disability their child has, public schools can help, says Walsh. “Parents sometimes are afraid that they have to have a child with a disability of a certain type to get services. But we are required to provide services to children with a full range of disabilities,” he says.

Parents shouldn’t worry about school size either. “Our staffing isn’t based on the size of the school but on the number of hours of service needed by the students in that school,” explains Walsh. “So a school might be the same size as the school next door, but have more special services staff because there are more IEP service hours to provide. It doesn’t mean that you are going to have fewer services by going to a larger school.”

One advantage, in Walsh’s eyes, is the law’s least-restrictive environment requirement. “Research shows that children learn best if in the least restrictive environment: close to home, most normal settings, least specialized with general education peers,” says Walsh. “So public schools as much as possible provide the opportunity for children to learn with nondisabled children. Research demonstrates that children learn best when with peers who are high achieving and not disabled.”

However, if it is demonstrated that a child is unsuccessful learning in the public school setting, no matter what services are made available, public schools are required to consider more specialized settings, such as a special education private school. “We do use and need to have specialized private schools to serve those kids who need more,” says Walsh.

Special Ed Private Schools

One such special education school is The Summit School in Edgewater. As a private school, it is not subject to IDEA and the creation of IEPs. Instead, it writes its own curriculum based on Maryland state standards and, because it primarily serves students with language-based differences, it employs a variety of specialized reading methods shown to help children who do not learn to read on their own.
“Research tells us that children who aren’t learning to read well need a structured, systematic, phonetic approach that is intensive and has fidelity,” says Jane Snider, executive director of the Summit School. “Our whole program is designed around offering intensive instruction, whether it is reading, science, math, or social studies.”

The children who come to Summit have often been unable to thrive at a public or private school. “A third of our students come from public schools, a third from private, and a third from parochial, and no matter where they are from, they all have had some help, but it wasn’t enough,” says Snider.

One reason is that special education might not be integrated in to the full school day. A child might receive instruction with a specialist, a reading tutor for example, and then come back to the classroom to learn with a general education teacher who is not using the same strategies, Snider explains. “So the child has to make a switch from what taught in the special group and transfer into the general classroom. Some children can do that, some can’t. Children who come here haven’t been able to do that well.”

However, can children miss their school friends, and if a commute to reach the private school is required, that can make for a long day. Parents need to make sure the benefits outweigh the costs, advises McCormick.

Snider says Summit advises parents to help their child keep up neighborhood friendships, especially if they think they might transition the child back to the local public school (children usually need three years at Summit to master the learning strategies; at that time some parents will move their child back to public).

In addition, specialized private schools often are expensive. Summit, like many such schools, offers scholarships and financial aid. It also has an outreach center that offers afterschool tutoring and assessment services, and summer school.
Special Education Resources

Two resources for parents is their local public school system’s special education advisory committee and parent or family resource center. “You can call the special education office at your school system, or the general number of your local school and ask for the contact information,” says Walsh.

Other good resources:

- U.S. Education Department, www.ed.gov (Search for Office of Special Education Programs)
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, idea.ed.gov
- Council for Exceptional Children, www.cec.sped.org
- Council for Parent Attorneys and Advocates, www.copaa.org
- Maryland State Department of Education, www.marylandpublicschools.org (Look for the Division of Special Education and Early Intervention)

- Anne Arundel Special Education Citizen's Advisory Committee, www.aasecac.org