

# Education

## *Finding The Right Special Needs School In The UK*

**Y**ou've just found out that you'll be moving to Britain. Fantastic! Great stuff! A country that does pageantry better than anywhere else, that boasts thatched roofs and ancient cottages, that offers superb theatre in the most exciting capital in the world, that features wonderfully articulate and literate people and meanwhile pays little attention to the weather! Now you've found a wonderful house to rent. Finally, you've located equally wonderful schools for your children.

Sounds great. But if you are the parent of a child who has special educational needs (SEN), euphoria may soon turn to anxiety. What, specifically, are your options? How will SEN education differ from what was on offer in Iowa or New York? And how do you get the information you need?

Let me assure you that everything is here. But it will take some research and some careful planning. And you should get going on a multiplicity of tasks as soon as possible.

### **CHOICES**

There are literally hundreds of schools that address SEN throughout the UK, and thousands more if we include the state schools sector. However, the state system is increasingly

hard pressed to accommodate children with learning challenges. Usually, what is on offer will be a regular class with about 30 students, and your child will be given some help by a 'learning support assistant' working under the direction of a specialist teacher. It is very much a 'one size fits all' approach.

A second option involves what are usually called Independent Mainstream Schools with Specialist Provision. As the term suggests, these are, in the American sense, private schools that offer SEN support for a limited number of students, usually via individual tutoring through a withdrawal system. There are 43 such schools in London alone, including those that are co-educational as well as single-sex. Most deal with limited age ranges (boys, from 8-13; girls, ages 3-13 etc.) and address only relatively few learning challenges.

American expats may instead be drawn to a more convenient option: placing the SEN child in the same school as his/her siblings. Your focus will therefore likely be on one of the three American-International schools in the Greater London area: the American School in London; the American Community Schools (three sites); TASIS, the American School in England. All are good, with superb facilities, many American-trained teachers and American curriculums, including the IB and the American High School Diploma. All offer limited SEN support within the regular curriculum and all have some specialist teacher/therapists.

Positive though these three options may be, there is a fourth and, depending on the individual child's needs, one that offers an especially valuable learning experience. I refer to Independent Special Schools. These are private and they differ quite substantially from the other three groups. They are, for instance, small, with total enrolments usually numbering from 40 to 180; class sizes of between 5-8; highly experienced teachers with specialist qualifications; and on-site speech and language and other therapists. There are 10 such schools in London, all of which address a wide variety of learning difficulties and one of which offers the American Diploma. Of particular significance is the specialist environment: in mainstream schools, the SEN child is often inadvertently made to feel 'different' from the other children, something that can cause significant psychological damage and is often a major factor in low self esteem and a lack of confidence. However, in a school that is exclusively special needs, all students have difficulties hence, no one is different.

### **SEN IN BRITAIN**

The UK and the US may enjoy a common language and a shared history, but their educational systems differ in some fundamental

ways. Scotland has its own system, but children in England follow the National Curriculum, which, as the name suggests, is prescriptive and embraces children through Year 13 (equivalent to Grade 12 in the US). In the lower years, there is significant emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and generally less choice than is the case in the US.

Course content is also different. A subject such as mathematics in the UK will generally see a commingling of various aspects of maths; thus, maths for a Year 10 student might involve algebra, trigonometry and geometry in addition to fundamental arithmetic. In the US, however, the Grade 9 student will generally have a full year of algebra, and a full year of geometry in Grade 10 etc. Similar specificity is also apparent in the sciences and related subjects. The specific focus of the American approach is likely to be more readily organised and thus more palatable for the SEN student.

Perhaps the major difference and the major difficulty is the British adherence to an examination-based system. Children here spend considerable time 'prepping' for this or that exam, and these efforts are intensified with GCSEs in Year 11 and A-levels in Year 13. A student who does poorly in these examinations will have few options for higher education. Study after study has meanwhile revealed that SEN students generally do not do well in examination situations; the culprit is not their lack of ability but rather the anxiety that they experience during an exam. Far too frequently, the examination mirrors that anxiety rather than measuring and assessing what the student knows.

What might be termed the "American approach", a system of continual assessment, is likely to offer a significantly fairer way of examining the knowledge and abilities of the SEN student. Enabling him to profit from regular and timely feedback that examines and credits a wide range of coursework including essays, research, presentations, quizzes and tests, this approach reduces significantly the anxiety that can give a very skewed portrait of the SEN student. As one educator recently noted, "examinations almost always discriminate against a student with special needs; by virtually removing anxiety, coursework gives that student a level playing field."

That said, virtually all SEN programmes in the UK will offer support in ways that will benefit most students who face learning challenges. There will be classes in social skills, and the specialist schools will also build in to every lesson certain aspects of these skills. There will be separate study, thinking and life skills, and many programmes will also feature art or other similar therapies; and in addition to speech and language, occupational therapy and physiotherapy, some schools will also distinguish themselves by offering yoga and other means of helping a child relax. Finally, a variety of sports will

be on offer; here, SEN educators will know that participation is more important than proficiency.

### GOING FORWARD

As you will know, students with special educational needs generally dislike change. Accordingly, parents really do need to 'get it right' with regard to finding a school that will serve the needs of the SEN student. Certainly, it may be one that will replicate as closely as possible the student's previous school in the US. However, the key element is for the parents to define as specifically as possible what is needed, what will work. Only then will it be time to begin the admissions process.

All SEN schools in the UK and many of the others that accept SEN students will want certain information, to include the following: (1) a reasonably current report by an educational psychologist or other similar practitioner; (2) an analysis by a speech and language professional or other therapists who have been working with the child in the US; (3) school reports for at least the last year or two; (4) any other information that the parent believes will provide additional insights about the child. It is essential to understand that no reputable school will accept a child whose needs it believes it cannot meet, so providing information that is timely and

accurate serves everyone's interests and especially those of the child.

As you are accumulating the information, the internet will provide access to lists of SEN programmes and schools in London and elsewhere. All of these schools will have websites that will be helpful. At a minimum, you will be able to gain answers to fundamental questions: co-educational or single sex, age range, special needs addressed, day, day and boarding, and location. The websites will also have information regarding the school's latest assessments by various accrediting bodies, and they will explain the admissions process.

You may also want to examine some printed material. The Gabbittas Guide to Schools for Special Needs" is published annually and is well worth your time. Similarly, the John Catt organisation puts out guides keyed to various parts of the UK. A particularly worthwhile publication is The Good Schools Guide, for each of the schools included in this publication has undergone a rigorous inspection by former headmasters and headmistresses; most of the schools in The Good Schools Guide are mainstream, but a few SEN schools have also been selected.

As this process evolves, you will have started compiling a list of possibles. At this point, it is time to get in touch with these schools either by

telephone or by the internet. Do your research first, however; find out who you need to speak with or write to. Have specific questions ready. And then be instructed how you should best proceed.

One especially important note: the admissions process for many of these schools will include a one, two or three-day trial period. For obvious reasons, you need to ascertain if this is so and if you will be able to arrange a visit to the UK during which the trial period can take place. Some schools, however, recognise that this is not always possible and in some instances, they may be willing to offer a place on the basis of the supporting material you would have forwarded to them.

Let me conclude by reiterating that with the appropriate effort, you will find the right school for your child. And let me also note that as one who is a dual US/UK national and one who has been educated in both countries, I know that you will find your time here in the UK something to be enjoyed and, indeed, to be cherished. ■

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