

What Makes a Good Special Ed Classroom?

Introduction

Sometimes parents will wonder what constitutes a good special education classroom. Instead of having parents fill in the blanks, we are presenting you with an outline of what factors are considered to be included in a good special education classroom. This interview, held with several experts including the two executive directors of **NASET** will provide parents with a good solution to this question.

Is your child with special needs getting the support she needs in school? Your child spends much of her day in school, and her classroom can either help or hinder her learning. An inclusive classroom is one that accommodates all of its students, special needs or not. We talked to four experts, Dr. George Giuliani and Dr. Roger Pierangelo, executive directors of the National Association of Special Education Teachers, Mary Z. McGrath, author and former special educator, and Ellen Arnold, educational consultant, to figure out just how conducive your child's classroom is to learning. Here are some things to keep in mind:

The Physical Space

The actual physical space of the classroom can have the greatest impact on a child's ability to learn. Ultimately, a classroom should be well-planned, structured, organized, and uncluttered. "I've been in rooms where the ceilings are full of things hanging and the walls are cluttered," says McGrath, "and it's too much for kids to process." The classroom should be organized into a series of different and separate spaces.

Large Group Space: This is a place for the entire class to learn together. It could be anything from a rug with a fancy "Author's Chair" for kids to share their work, or a space with couches and chairs for older students to engage in class meetings.

Small Group Space: This space should have a table with room for the teacher to work with a small group, as well as some space set aside for kids to transition into small group work (i.e. turning their desks towards one another).

Center Space: This space should have room set aside for reading, writing, listening, creative arts, and cross-curricular work. The center space is a space where kids can come together and work on various activities. It's a community space with lots of different uses. Every classroom should have a library space with books, comfortable seating and good lighting. A computer center is great for instruction and is a great space to help special needs children work on their writing.

Organization for Learning: Learning areas should be clearly partitioned with bookshelves or dividers. Students are often most comfortable in chairs that are at the appropriate height, and even a cushion or two can make all the difference! When students are comfortable they are more receptive and open to learning and can focus on what's being taught rather than on their discomfort. Areas that are energetic (art center, cross-curricular center) should be separate from quiet spaces (reading and writing centers).

Schedule, Routines, and Expectations

A daily schedule should be posted somewhere easy to read (with pictures for younger students and more detail for older ones). Classroom expectations should be clear and posted and students know the routines, including how to get what they need (bathroom breaks, supplies, water, etc).

The Learning Environment

A learning environment for a child with a special needs should focus on presenting the material in a variety of ways. It's not that students with special needs *can't* learn, says Giuliani. "In many cases, it's not the lack of understanding or knowledge that causes problems, but rather the manner of presentation, response requirements, and level of presentation."

An inclusive classroom should be what Ellen Arnold calls "brain friendly," where the teacher is sensitive to all the students in the room. Instead of everyone turning the page at the same time, an inclusive classroom is differentiated, everyone is working on their own level, at their own pace, in ways that work best for their brains.

Here are some non-tangible things to look for in a good learning environment:

Various Teaching Strategies: Teachers these days use many different strategies to help kids learn new information, including lessons that include visual, tactile, kinesthetic, and auditory teaching, large and small group work, and individual attention. Children with individual education plans should have seating that helps them learn (usually near the teacher) and receive permission slips or classroom information in advance. Another option is to provide special needs students with modified work to fit their needs as well as different options for how to get information (a student with an auditory processing disability may use an amplification system to help them hear).

Alternative Outputs: Teachers should provide opportunities for students to show what they know using their strengths. During a science experiment, students may build a model, tape record their observations, or write a log. Students who are struggling might dictate stories into a microphone onto a computer. They can even use a special pen and paper that helps them take notes while recording what the teacher says so they can go back and correct their work.

Individualized As Needed: Students with special needs should have behavior plans, and other modifications that help them focus and be successful, individualized to suit their needs (seat cushions or Velcro to help kids with sensory processing problems, for example).

Additional Supports: Special education teachers, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and other service providers should work with the classroom and the children and have an obvious purpose in the room.