

**Supporting
Students with
ADHD in**

Independent and

by Susan H. Biggs, EdD

**RECENTLY, I MET A MOTHER WHO
ASKED ME ABOUT MY WORK.**

When I told her I oversee a program for students who learn differently at Flint Hill School, she was shocked to learn that private prep schools like Flint Hill accept students with ADHD and learning disabilities.



Private Schools

An independent school with a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, Flint Hill is located in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC. While the school is not designed for students with learning differences, we have an acknowledged percentage of students who are identified with them. We not only accept these students but consider it our mission to create a varied student body. We love having these students at our school, and we are not alone in the private school world.

Many private and independent schools have learned that students with learning differences require some support and accommodations, and that with these adaptations, they thrive and make our schools more inclusive and more diverse. Whether you're a parent considering this option for your child with ADHD, a teacher, or an administrator, this article will address some of your questions about educating students with learning differences at private and independent schools.

What makes private schools different?

Private schools are in a unique position to support students with ADHD and learning disabilities. Since the eligibility laws that govern special education in public schools do not bind these schools, they can be creative in how they support students. They can focus on the culture of the school and construct a climate that works well for students who learn differently. Classes are often smaller than in public schools, allowing for more personal attention and closer relationships with teachers and administrators. Private schools can offer challenging instruction and simultaneously address individual needs.

At Flint Hill School, we meet weekly at all grade levels to talk about students who are struggling. The staff works together to implement informal modifications in the classroom. We initiate meetings with parents to review our concerns and the steps we are taking to address them. As an independent school, we have the flexibility to create our own procedures to formally document the supports we put in place. We can offer help very quickly when a student is struggling—frequent-

ly in a matter of days. We have adapted and changed our processes over the years to reflect the requests of our teachers and the needs of our students. We have created a distinctive program that fits our school and our students with learning differences.

Private schools should consider the gifts that students with learning differences can bring to their culture. They are frequently capable students who think in unique ways. They are often bright and can demonstrate their skills successfully in more personalized environments. These students also create diversity in a school and offer perspectives others may not have considered.

All students can benefit from working with peers who have an unusual vision. The world is full of people who learn in different ways; learning to work with them and appreciate their strengths is a life skill. In addition, teachers who work with students with learning differences develop a more extensive toolbox of teaching techniques and learn to differentiate their instruction to meet a wider spectrum of students.

Creating a welcoming climate

All students need to believe they can be successful in school. A private school can create a nurturing culture where all students are connected to the adults and feel appreciated by them. Teachers with smaller classes have the time to get to know students as individuals and learn what they love and do well. For students with ADHD, it is essential that they are known for their abilities, not just as the kids who are always talking out of turn, turning in assignments late, or forgetting their PE uniforms. Private schools can also offer the academic challenge that many students with ADHD crave while still supporting their areas of difficulty.

Some private schools may have a willing staff but lack a mandate from administration. They may have a school culture that suggests, "We don't accept those kids at our school." Yet, "those kids" are already in almost every school, public and private—and many would flourish with some easily managed supports.

Training for the school staff is an ideal place to begin to create an accepting school climate. Often local professionals such as psychologists, pediatricians or psychiatrists are willing to speak to faculty to help them understand the difficulties students with ADHD can face in school as well as the delights they bring to the classroom. At Flint Hill School, we have invited local professionals to meet with our staff and share their expertise. Many are willing to spend an hour or two with us free of charge.

A school's parent advisory group can provide reading materials, website links, and CHADD memberships to encourage a deeper understanding for ways to help students with ADHD. Many private schools already have learning specialists on staff, indicating an appreciation for the needs of students who learn differently. These experts can facilitate communication, and they can act as advocates at the school for students with ADHD and their families.

Private schools and special education laws

Private schools are not required to follow the special education regulations of IDEA. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act apply to private schools if they receive federal funding (such as a reduced fee lunch program) or if they do not have a religious affiliation. However, these regulations only require the schools to make minor or reasonable adjustments to their program. Most private schools are willing to provide some classroom accommodations (such as extended time for tests), but they are not required to do more.

For these private schools, this permits tremendous latitude to decide which students could benefit from support and to determine how best to provide that help within their culture. There can be disadvantages for families who would like to require their child's school to provide accommodations in that the school may legally refuse to do so.

Students who attend private schools may be eligible for special education testing and some kinds of instruction in their local public school district free of charge. Parents may request that their local public school



Private schools are not bound by regulations as public schools are, so be sure to ask about how supports work at a school during the admissions process. Likewise, be open about your child's needs.

test their child for learning differences. The public schools are required to follow their IDEA-mandated procedures to determine eligibility for testing and services. When parents are requesting special education support in the public school, they should make that request in writing. It often helps to provide teacher narratives, work samples, standardized test scores, and report cards since the public school will not have the opportunity to see a child's work on a daily basis.

If a child is found eligible for special education support in the public school, the public school will provide that help through an Individual Service Plan (ISP). The names for these plans vary from state to state. Public schools are not required to provide as much assistance for students in private schools; nor are they required to provide transportation to the school for the services. In addition, parents of students in private schools have fewer due process rights within special education procedures.

Depending upon the level of support their child needs, parents may want to consider whether or not they should place their children with special needs in the public schools. The local public school district is required to provide a higher level of services as mandated by law.

Helping students with ADHD

At Flint Hill School, our teachers quickly become experts in building in supports that help a wide variety of students. They tell us that what works well for students with learning differences often works equally well for other students—best practices!

Teachers at all grade levels find that having a predictable classroom routine that is posted with the daily plan saves lots of time, answering questions for students who are disorganized. While our elementary teachers often do this, our high school teachers find it equally helpful. Teachers also find that when they post established organization routines with assignments online, students are encouraged to stay current with assignments and parents can supervise homework more effectively. Our older students find that technology

helps them stay organized by using electronic calendars to remind them of due dates. They also appreciate opportunities to submit assignments electronically so papers do not get lost and are backed up electronically.

Students with ADHD often like to have concrete models of finished work products and essays to guide their own work. Color-coding, organization checklists, and intermediate check-in dates for projects are also helpful for everyone and exponentially benefit students with organization struggles. Devoting time in class for students to write down assignments or organize binders allows teachers to oversee students who have a hard time with these requirements. Offering extra points for active class participation and considering the best seats for listening helps to engage easily distracted students.

Teachers find that thoughtful formatting of directions, tests, and handouts can make a substantial difference in a student's ability to comply with teacher expectations. Extra white space, limited decorations, and large fonts can be invaluable. Many teachers allow students to use laptops to write, take notes, and make audio recordings of lectures. They also incorporate study skills and active reading strategies into assignments for everyone. They encourage students to use technology to their advantage by making electronic flashcard sets, recording podcasts of lectures, and posting their own lecture notes online.

We have found that students with ADHD often require more frequent communication with colleagues and parents. We have established regularly scheduled grade-level meetings throughout our school where we share concerns and brainstorm helpful accommodations. In our middle school, teachers complete a quick weekly report template via email for students with learning differences. Shared with the students, parents, and learning specialists, these weekly reports keep students from falling more than a week behind. Teachers like having this predictable, expected forum to share concerns rather than having to remember to email with issues as they arise.

How parents can help


Parents can help the private or independent school in many ways. First, make sure the school is a good fit for your child. Meet with the admissions team and be honest. Share what you know about how your child learns best. Be sure to give the admissions office a thorough and accurate psychoeducational evaluation report that reflects both your child's strengths and needs. Ask if there is an additional fee for programs for students with learning differences. Choosing a private school can be a lot like dating—both partners have to find things they appreciate about each other to make the relationship work. Withholding important diagnostic information about your child from the school during the application process is not a great way to start a long-term, mutually supportive relationship with a school.

Parents of students in private schools often have a compelling voice in their children's education. They have selected the school they feel will work well for their child, and they pay the tuition. Parents might volunteer, or if the child's school has a parent advisory board, join it. These are opportunities to have a voice in the school and to get to know the staff. Ask if you can sponsor a speaker to come talk with teachers about ADHD. You can also purchase books and videos for the school's professional library.

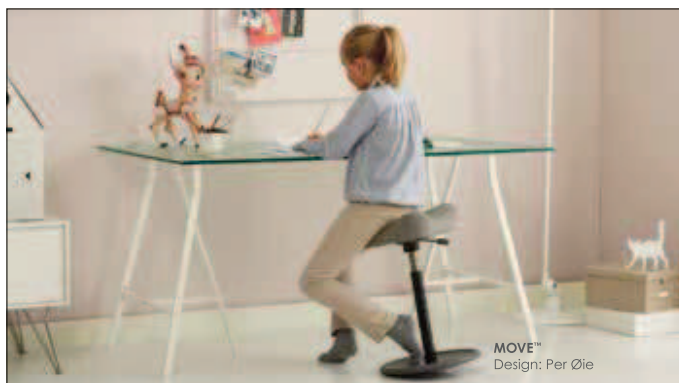
Once your child is enrolled, meet with teachers early in the year, before problems arise. Don't forget to include teachers of special

subjects like art and physical education. Be sure to involve the learning specialist if your school has one on staff. Ask teachers how they organize their classroom and what role you can play as a parent in supervising your child's work at home. Do this every year and follow up with a short summary of the meeting in writing.

A good option?

Private and independent schools can offer countless gifts to students with ADHD. Such schools can create a nurturing culture that celebrates unique learning styles. Private schools frequently have smaller classes, more personal attention, minimal red tape, and more parent involvement. These schools are not bound by regulations as public schools are, so be sure to ask about how supports work at a school during the admissions process. Likewise, be open about your child's needs. Seek a school that will welcome your child and work with you to create an environment where a child who learns differently can blossom into a successful young adult. 

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