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An Uptick in Stats Means Greater Demand for Special Needs Education

[Cari Shane](#)

Washington D.C. based writer

There are more than 6 million children in the United States with disabilities, from physical to developmental, and the numbers keep growing. The pervasive epidemic is leaving parents confused and overwhelmed while the area's educational systems (as well as families and businesses) work overtime to meet demand. According to the Census, special education programs increased by 5.5 percent (from 8.3 percent to 13.8 percent) between the 1970s and 2004/5.

With an endorsement from the National Institutes of Health and Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. is home to one of the most exceptional educational resources -- a warehouse, if you will, where parents whose children think and learn differently (regardless of their disability) can come and find the school that is right for their child.

In its eighth year, The Exceptional Schools Fair, held Sunday, November 16th at American University, was designed with the community in mind bringing more than 30 mid-Atlantic Schools (as well as schools from New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan and Illinois) and dozens of allied health professionals, from psychologists to speech and language pathologists, all to one location.

"The fair is an education," says head of The Diener School in Potomac, Maryland, which has been participating in the fair since its inception. "You can have children with similar diagnoses on paper, but one school is right for one of these children and another school is right for another. It really depends upon the actual child."

The brainchild of Bekah Atkinson, Director of Admissions at The Sienna School, The Exceptional School's Fair (ESF) was created solely to provide a resource to parents whose lives literally changed overnight -- the moment they received a diagnosis that their child was disabled. ESF is a forum for parents to explore educational options for their children, not a forum for diagnosis or advice.

"It can be a very isolating emotional situation," says Atkinson, "and this one environment, one location to research what's out there makes it less scary. You can see there is a world of other families out there in the same situation. You can talk to professionals who are passionate about what they do in their schools."

"We didn't realize how many schools are out there that are specifically dedicated to so many different kinds of learning disabilities," said John Alexander, a parent in Gaithersburg, Maryland. "Getting the diagnosis that our child didn't learn like everyone else has been difficult. But knowing there are options and ways to help her... it's a relief."

The Exceptional Schools Fair grew out of the new world in which we live," says Lois McCabe, head of The Diener School which has been participating in the fair since its inception.

Twenty years ago, not only did we not have acknowledgement of learning differences and learning challenges, we did not have support. A decade and a half later, it's the new world. And we as schools in the community are involved in this fair because we are invested in supporting parent who are faced with a difficult situation.

During the fair itself, organizers refer families to different schools arming parents with as many options as they can. At a sign-in table, parents are asked to provide general information and are provided with a directory listing all the schools with short snippets on each school including age groups. In addition, the Take-One-Table provided information about outside resources such as camps, after-school activities, OTs, PTs, dentists, tutors, financial advisors, counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, NIH studies, Georgetown studies, learning disability associations and associations for those with special needs.

Some stats to pull this all into perspective:

According to the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#), about 1 in 6 children in the United States have been diagnosed with a developmental disability from mild disabilities such as speech and language impairments to serious developmental disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, and autism seen in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. US Census (2005): "Between 2002 and 2005, both the percentage and number of Americans affected by disability rose, as has been the trend for some time."

In the Washington, D.C. area, the numbers are explosive and higher than the general population, though the statistics are difficult to find as statisticians and researchers race to catch up with the epidemic. The Community Report on Autism, prepared by the CDC in 2014, tracked the numbers specific to autism in the state of Maryland producing the following statistic: "1 in 60 children were identified with [Autism Spectrum Disorder] ASD. This estimate is higher than the average number of children identified with ASD (1 in 68) in all areas of the United States where CDC tracks ASD.

The Exceptional Schools Fair is listed with one of the nation's largest database of special needs providers, "Love My Provider." The network supports more than 30,000 provider profiles with contact information, suggestions and reviews.

Additional Statistics:

From the [National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities](#):

- As many as 5 out of every 100 children in school may have Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD).
- Between 2 to 6 per 1,000 children (from 1 in 500 to 1 in 150) have some form of

Autism/Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD).

- Severe visual impairments (legally or totally blind) occur at a rate of .06 per 1,000.
- During the 2000-2001 school year, 70,767 students aged 6 to 21 received special education services under the category of "hearing impairment."
- Approximately 1 in every 800 to 1,000 live births in the U.S. are diagnosed with Down's Syndrome.
- As many as 3 out of every 100 people in the country have an intellectual disability (The Arc, 2001).
- As many as 1 out of every 5 people in the U.S. has a learning disability.
- More than 1 million children receive brain injuries each year. More than 30,000 of these children have lifelong disabilities as a result of the brain injury.

From the [Centers for Disease Control](#):

- The number of children identified with ASD varies by community, from 1 in 175 children in areas of Alabama to 1 in 45 children in areas of New Jersey.
- About 1 in 63 white children, 1 in 81 black children, and 1 in 93 Hispanic children were identified with ASD.
- Almost half (46 percent) of children identified with ASD had average or above average intellectual ability (IQ > 85).
- On average, children identified with ASD were not diagnosed until after age 4, even though children can be diagnosed as early as age 2.