



A student in the lower school of Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School plays in the guidance lounge, set aside for children who are overstimulated in their classroom.

Photos by Jacqueline Hyman

Day schools tackling ‘nonvisible’ disabilities

By Jacqueline Hyman
Staff Writer

In a room on the first floor of the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School’s lower school, a few kids are sliding down a small slide with cushions at the bottom, playing on large exercise balls or quietly playing with toys in a small sand box.

They’re releasing some pent-up energy in the Rockville school’s guidance lounge, but more often than not the room is used for one student at a time who needs some space.

Lenore Layman, the school’s director of education support services says the lounge is a constructive way to support an overstimulated student outside of the classroom.

“For kids that go from zero to 10, they might be at a 10. We want to bring them back to close to zero,” she says. “Then the guidance counselor will be able to sit with them and to really have a conversation and talk about

what happened.”

The guidance lounge is one of many accommodations Jewish day schools in the Greater Washington area have been making for students with disabilities. Because abilities are individualized, accommodations must be too.

With so many varying abilities, there’s not one right answer when it comes to the type or level of accommodation for any particular child.

“The ideal is that you meet the needs of the child,” says Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, president of RespectAbility, a nonprofit that works to advance opportunities for people with disabilities. “There’s no cookie cutter solution that works for every child. The question is, what is the child’s situation, what do they need that will enable them to learn and have a comfortable social environment?”

For this article, we spoke to Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville, Geshur Jewish Day School in Fairfax, Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation’s Capital

in Washington, and Sulam, an educational program for students with disabilities based in the Berman Hebrew Academy’s building.

The Yeshiva of Greater Washington and the Torah School of Greater Washington, both in Silver Spring, did not respond to requests in time for publication.

Most of the disabilities that students have are learning disabilities or mental and emotional conditions. Though schools should be accommodating regarding mobility, Mizrahi says physical disabilities are much less common in children.

“Most disabilities in children are nonvisible,” she says.

Individualized support

In the public school system, required plans called Individualized Education Plans, or IEPs, help students get the accommodations they need. Each school interviewed for this article has some form of an individualized plan for students who need extra support.

Teachers, guidance counselors and learning specialists meet with parents to outline their child's needs and check in for updates at least once a year with the whole team — more, if necessary.

Accommodations include modified schedules, voice to text dictation, smaller class sizes, audiobooks and extra time on tests.

And it's important to keep everybody in the loop.

"Parents are definitely a key part of that process because they know their kids better than anybody," says Layman.

Alexis Herschthal, director of student support services at Milton School, says their plans are "often created with recommendations from testing that's been done," though they create success plans for students who haven't had full psychoeducational testing.

Plus, each school has learning specialists and guidance counselors who often work one-on-one with students — or, in the case of learning specialists, join several students in a classroom to provide extra support.

For students who start in the day schools in elementary school years, their personalized plans will follow them throughout their time at school.

"The more shared understanding there is among all of the adults the more smoothly we can all work collaboratively to support each child to the best of their ability," says Fran Besalel, Gesher's coordinator of special services who also acts as an instructional coach for teachers.

Sometimes, even subtle changes can make a big difference.

"For instance, we have students that learn and practice nonverbal cues that they can use to indicate to a teacher that they need a break," Besalel says, "and they might leave the classroom and walk a lap around the hallway and come back."

Within Sulam, there are two programs — Sulam serves students who need significant support for language-based disabilities like dyslexia, students on the autism spectrum and children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. These students are generally on track to graduate high school.

The second, Shearim, is for students with intellectual disabilities, and teaches life skills and vocational skills to students who typically receive a certificate of completion.

Executive Director Lianne Heller says the staff works with each student to create a schedule based on that student's strengths and needs.

"If a student, for example, has a strength in math, we'll put them in a math classroom at Berman," says Heller, adding that a learning specialist would be put into the classroom to support them. However, the same student might need to be in a Sulam class for more extensive reading and writing support.

Jacob Licht, whose daughter Miriam has a rare neurological disorder called Moebius syndrome, says the experience has been "wonderful" for his daughter and family.

"It's been transformative for Miriam's educational and social development," says Licht. "[Sulam provides] support within the school and within the classroom to really enable her to be a full participant, member of the

classroom, which is an incredible thing for her."

That personalized approach to class schedules is one many schools are taking, treating each student as an individual. Sarah Sicherman, Berman's director of marketing and communications, says if the staff notices any potential areas of need, they make sure to have conversations with parents.

But it's not just students who are diagnosed with learning disabilities who benefit from accommodations. "Even if you are mainstream learning you are learning differently," adds Sicherman, echoing an education framework called Universal Design for Learning that uses flexibility in the classroom to help learners of all kinds.

School spaces

Physical spaces meant for accommodating students with disabilities, like the guidance lounge at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, is a critical component of accessibility. That's in addition to buildings themselves, which can vary in their flexibility for accommodating students' needs.

The Milton School's north campus, for grades two through eight, is newly renovated.

"The north campus was designed not only with all of the [Americans with Disabilities Act] codes in mind but with really an eye toward how to create a space where people can function physically with all different abilities," says Adam Brooms, the chief business officer for Milton School. He says the school design includes wider hallways and sensitive lighting fixtures.

Gesher, Berman Hebrew Academy and the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School lower school have been introducing flexible seating into their classrooms that allows students to move around during class.

Picture bean bag chairs, standing desks, exercise balls on wheels, sofas and movable desks that help create variety in the classroom.

"That gives them more ownership of where they will be able to attend best and where they can place their body in a way that won't distract others but will be more helpful to them," says Besalel.

School environment

Like any child, children with disabilities need support not only in academic areas, but also in social and emotional learning. The school environment plays a big role in that.

Sicherman has a daughter in first grade who was pulled out to work with a smaller group on reading skills.

"Within a couple of months she was able to graduate back into the classroom," Sicherman says. "What I thought as a parent was special was that my daughter didn't realize that she was getting pulled out for any reason other than she got to do this special thing."

Sicherman adds that having Sulam as a partner helps Berman students understand the importance of working together and that everyone is different.

"The school creates these environments where no one's poking fun and no one gets pushed aside," she says.

And for Sulam students, the program is a way to keep



Two children play in the guidance lounge at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, supervised by a staff member.

them included in Jewish life.

"Sulam presented the perfect opportunity to have [Miriam] in a Jewish environment included with her peers," says Licht.

Despite all the progress that's been made, there is still work to be done, all the schools acknowledge. Both Milton School and Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School have had situations where the staff has counseled students out of the school; helping them transition into a public school where there were more resources that the Jewish day schools couldn't provide. Mizrahi says that local public schools tend to be ahead of Jewish day schools "when it comes to serving children with disabilities," and says progress will take a firm commitment from day schools overall.

Public schools have more resources — more specialists and transportation — to be able to include students with disabilities. But the Jewish day schools in the Washington area are making strides, she adds.

Some are planning to take advantage of new professional development training Sulam is offering to help teachers and staff members understand how best to serve their students of differing abilities.

Mizrahi hopes Jewish day schools will continue to work on those changes.

She says, "People with all abilities can have a real passion for our community and we can be stronger and better by making sure that there's a place for people with all abilities inside education and our community." **WJW**

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