

Choosing a school when your kids learn and think differently

GreatSchools is the nation's leading nonprofit organization providing high-quality information for parents pursuing great educations for their children. More than 40 million parents of school-age children in the United States visit its [award-winning website](#) annually. Over 1.2 million users have registered accounts, and over 850,000 parents, educators, and community members have posted school reviews about their experiences. GreatSchools collects, analyzes, and presents data from all 51 state departments of education and the federal government. The organization's data analyses, insights, and school quality ratings not only support parents in navigating their children's educational journey but also inform academic research and state and district policy.

From 2023–2025, with generous support from Understood as part of the NeuroEquity Research Collaborative, GreatSchools conducted research to better understand how parents from low-income backgrounds with children who learn and think differently navigate the school choice process — and how these insights can inform the evolution of the GreatSchools platform. This report summarizes key findings and outlines how they are influencing GreatSchools' product roadmap as it evolves its services to families.

Background

In today's school choice environment, parents are expected to analyze complex data, understand admissions policies, and evaluate fit across a range of options. For parents from marginalized communities, this process is particularly challenging due to systemic inequities, limited access to information, and barriers within schools themselves. For parents of children with learning disabilities, the journey is doubly complicated: Not only must they choose a school, but they must also continually advocate for services and accommodations to ensure their child's success.

Research approach

- A literature review on how parents of children with disabilities, parents from low-income

- communities, and those at the intersection of both groups experience school choice
- A nationwide survey of 604 parents, comparing priorities and experiences across parents from low-income families with children with learning disabilities, non-low-income families with children with learning disabilities, and parents of neurotypical children
 - In-depth interviews with parents from marginalized communities whose children have learning disabilities, to capture qualitative insights into their lived experiences

Insights

Different priorities, stronger preferences

- Low-income parents of children with learning disabilities placed greater weight on positive school culture (39% vs. 25% of higher-income peers) and access to special services (21% vs. 14%).
- By contrast, parents of neurotypical children prioritized high test scores (32%).

Lower satisfaction with schools

- Only 65% of low-income parents of children with learning disabilities were satisfied with their school, compared to 83% of higher-income parents of children with learning disabilities and 87% of parents of neurotypical children.

Barriers to diagnosis and services

- Low-income parents were more likely to report challenges in obtaining assessments or in receiving services post-diagnosis.
- They expressed a stronger desire for information about teacher training and capacity to serve students with special needs.

Evolving school search strategies

- Families often began their first school search without awareness of their child's learning differences, which limited the information they sought.
- After diagnosis, parents became more intentional, evaluating schools based on class size, special services, and inclusivity.

Common pain points

- Parents described the special education system as a “maze” that required constant advocacy and adjustment.
- Word of mouth remained critical, but families also sought clearer, more relevant data about services and school culture, especially in school searches after a diagnosis.

From data repository to ecosystem guide

The research underscored that families — especially those with fewer resources — need more than just school performance data. They need clear, accessible guidance to find both schools and out-of-school learning opportunities that meet their children's needs.

Key shifts in GreatSchools' strategy

- **Broadening the scope of information:** In addition to school profiles, GreatSchools is building tools to surface community-based programs (libraries, tutoring, afterschool care, enrichment) that can support children who struggle academically.
- **Simplifying the experience:** Research shows that parents often feel overwhelmed by jargon and technical terms. GreatSchools' solution is to guide them through a process that translates their needs into actionable options.
- **Harnessing AI for personalization:** GreatSchools developed an AI-powered chat interface that allows parents to describe their child's needs in their own words. The system then interprets those needs, identifies key priorities, and matches families to schools and learning opportunities.

Anticipated impact

- A beta version of the AI-guided search tool launched in May 2026.
- Based on current reach, this new experience has the potential to serve approximately 1.3 million users annually.
- By connecting parents to tailored options, the tool can reduce barriers and empower families — particularly those from marginalized communities — to make informed choices for their children.

Final thoughts

The Understood-funded project enabled GreatSchools to deeply examine the experiences of one of the most underserved groups in the education landscape: parents from low-income communities whose children learn and think differently. The insights gained are directly informing the future of the GreatSchools platform, as it moves beyond static data to a dynamic, supportive ecosystem guide.

GreatSchools thanks Understood for its partnership in this work, which has allowed them to better understand and design for the families who need it most. Together, they are taking critical steps toward equity by ensuring that all families — regardless of background or circumstance — can find learning environments where their children can thrive.