

Day Therapeutic and Transition Options for Your Child

The "O School" is a Chicago therapeutic school known for its milieu treatment environment, a rich curriculum and, most of all, the healing difference it makes for the children and families it serves. Ninety percent of high school students at the O School go on to college.

Leaders of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School presented to FRED members, offering an overview of treatments and services provided, as well as advice on how to advocate for your child. Janet Hoffman, an attorney and chair of the O School board, described her daughter's experience as a residential student as "life-saving." Admission Director Kristin Friesen, LCSW, discussed her work with students and families, including guiding parents to needed resources.

Friesen advised parents to educate themselves in the educational process, including educational rights and potential funding through school districts. (Extensive information on educational rights is available on the FRED website).

If a student has an Individualized Educational Plan, (IEP), the home school district must meet the student's educational and social/emotional needs. Federal law requires school districts to provide "a free and appropriate public education". Some families hire therapists, educational consultants, or lawyers to seek needed services. It is not always a fight--some school districts are committed to doing the right thing for students.

Friesen recommended that parents consider delaying high school graduation in order to extend their child's eligibility for transition and other therapeutic services up to age 22. (Parents can refuse to permit their child to attend in-class driver's safety education. This Illinois graduation requirement requires parental permission.) When a student graduates high school, the school district's legal obligation ends.

Transition and assessment/testing services offered by the O School also may be funded by school districts. The transition program encourages self-advocacy and goal-setting, teaches employment and independent living skills and helps students explore future options including college, trade or technical school, gap years, military service, and employment. These are normalizing experiences for teens and young adults who have often felt different from peers.

The O School recently announced plans to close the residential component because of steep financial losses worsened by the pandemic. Instead, the school will double students in the day therapeutic program to 100, expand transition services, and launch a diagnostic and neuropsych assessment center. In addition, there are plans for summer, after-school and day care programs. The O School historically has worked closely with many schools, including Oak Park and River Forest High School.

A typical O School student suffers anxiety, depression, other emotional disorder, or high functioning autism. These students benefit from a strong relational approach with peers and staff, and

develop insight into their emotions. Often, they have attended school inconsistently; they do not have aggressive behaviors.

Psychologists and therapists at the O School offer CBT and DBT; occupational and speech therapy are also provided. Family therapy and partnership is an important part of the program. Students as young as 8 attend the O School, but most students are in their teens, including late teens.

Academically, O School students have high aptitude but may question their ability to succeed. The aim is to help students “rebuild their identity as a learner,” and recognize their strengths, Friesen said. Students enjoy an outstanding art program and can choose from activities including a student council, a literary magazine, and a paid student work program.

Friesen noted that some school districts are offering therapeutic services in-district, or forming cooperatives with other districts. Some of these programs offer separate classes for students with emotional disorders and those with behavioral challenges. Not all of these programs are able to create effective services for a variety of student needs.

Friesen advised parents to involve their home school district special education departments in discussions about the O School and whether it is the right fit for their student. She offered to speak with parents who are having trouble.