

## EDUCATION

# Learning center for students with autism, intellectual disabilities set to open in Menasha

**Kathryn Muchnick** USA TODAY NETWORK - Wisconsin  
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A new learning center aimed at students with autism and intellectual or developmental disabilities is opening at 1180 Province Terrace, Menasha.

Chileda Learning Center was originally established in Stevens Point in 1973, before moving to La Crosse in 1977. The new Menasha campus will welcome students for the first day of school on Aug. 26.

This is the Chileda Learning Center's first expansion, though Principal Robert Becker said demand has been high in La Crosse for many years.

"They've gotten contacted from people from across the state of Wisconsin and from other states, also looking for placements, and they realize that there's still a great need to provide service to students in lots of other areas," he said.

Chileda specializes in students with profound autism, Becker said, a population that other schools sometimes struggle to accommodate. About 60% of the school's students are nonverbal and communicate through touch devices or sign language. The school serves students from ages 5 to 21.

"The new day school will provide a nurturing and stimulating environment that fosters academic success, social-emotional development, and independence for students," a press release said.

The Menasha campus is licensed to provide for 37 students, but the school's goal for this year is to reach about 30 students.

There will be three classrooms, with as many as seven or eight staff each. Each room is set to have a teacher, a behaviorist and multiple classroom assistants. The school also maintains an on-site occupational therapist and a speech and language therapist.

"Sometimes we'll bring in extra people just for fun, like a music therapy person. Our students don't have that written into their educational plans, but we do that just as a supplement sometimes," Becker said.

Each student at Chileda will have an individual education plan or IEP. The school is a nonprofit and partners with several school districts, which coordinate with parents to send students to Chileda. The corresponding public school district pays for each student that is placed at Chileda, Becker said.

Transportation is also provided by the corresponding public school, and Chileda builds the cost of hot lunch into the daily rate public schools pay.

Chileda also offers "sensory-sensitive" classrooms that are designed to protect students who might try to run away or elope.

"Every one of our rooms has an exterior door, a door to the outside, but it's into a fenced-in area. So even if our students decide that they want to take a run, they're just going to run out onto the playground," Becker said.

There is no deadline to apply. Becker said that many students start at a traditional public school and move to an alternative setting partway through the year.

"In some cases, parents learn about Chileda first and take their information back to their school district, in other cases, the school districts find out about us and present the possibility of Chileda to their families," Becker added.

Enrollment for the new day school program is open; the Menasha campus is hosting a campus tour on Aug. 16.

*Contact Kathryn Muchnick at [KMuchnick@gannett.com](mailto:KMuchnick@gannett.com) or 812-568-4468.*