When it comes to belonging, one of the biggest challenges is finding the right fit between schools and students. When a child has learning differences, such as dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, processing deficits, anxiety, and others, this challenge is exacerbated. Regardless of the official diagnosis, or lack thereof, most parents end up seeking an alternative school for their child due to the emotional toll on not only the student but the entire family. Parents commonly share stories of kids as young as six years old who identify themselves as "stupid" or "not good at school."

The Joy School, an independent, nonprofit day school, prepares students with learning differences to return to traditional classroom settings by enabling them to reach their academic and social potential in a safe, supportive environment.

What makes The Joy School stand out to new families looking to enroll their children? Families seeking out The Joy School have kids who are struggling in at least one of three areas: academics, socially, or executive functioning. Most children naturally start school eager and excited to learn. It is only when they begin to struggle and are unable to overcome challenges that joy in learning begins to fade. At The Joy School, our goal is to help kids find that joy in learning again, to help them understand and accept themselves as whole people with both weaknesses AND strengths, and to return to the mainstream world with a renewed sense of self and confidence in their ability to be successful.

Being an enrollment management director at a school for children with learning differences must come with additional responsibilities and challenges. What are the biggest areas of additional focus? Our admissions process is very time and people intensive. Each file is extensive as all applicants are required to provide detailed parent descriptions, cognitive and achievement testing, and teacher recommendation forms. Our goal with each family is to help them find the right school for their child, regardless of whether it’s our school. Therefore, our priority is to deeply listen to each parent and establish a relationship in which they can feel safe to share and trust in our commitment to helping them make the best decisions for their child.

From a logistical perspective, enrollment management at our school has unique challenges related to our flexible entry and exit points. Kids come to The Joy School at all ages and leave at the right time for them. Most kids stay an average of 3 to 4 years, so by design, each year approximately 30% of our student body transitions to other schools. It is nearly impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy how many openings we will have at any given grade level until very late in the admissions season. Therefore, we must not only process significantly more applications than openings, we must also carefully and continually nurture relationships and manage expectations for parents awaiting admissions decisions.

There are many areas of concern that traditional schools don’t have to think about as much—different learning modalities, classroom setups, school day structure, logistics, family relationships, etc. How do you manage it all? Adaptability plays the biggest role in our ability to meet the needs of kids and families. Unlike many independent schools, we don’t rely on one type of curriculum or teaching methodology. Everything we do is intentional and student-centered. Our success is intentional, not ironic. Our curriculum is rigorous for our students where needed. For example, we have students who may need help with reading, but are several grade levels above in math, so we accommodate them by providing more rigorous math curriculum for them. There simply is no one size fits all aspect to anything we do and that is what sets us apart. Our adaptability is our superpower in meeting the needs of kids who learn differently!
How do you identify the right faculty and staff fit at The Joy School?
Like everything at The Joy School, there is not one ideal profile of a Joy School teacher. However, the two most important qualities for everyone on staff are compassion and analytical ability. Allowing teachers to capitalize on their personal strengths and work around their weaknesses parallels our work with students. Once the group of students is set, we work to match each teacher’s talents with the best group of students. Outside the classroom, duties such as recess duty or carpool duty are not assigned equally to all teachers so those who enjoy those duties are compensated for that work.

How does your team keep apprised of the latest enrollment trends?
We utilize the NAIS DASL system and resources provided by The Enrollment Management Association. We are also part of the Independent School Association of the Southwest, the Houston Area Independent Schools Admission Directors group, and the Houston Special School Coalition. We dedicate time to developing relationships with many different constituents in the Houston community. The most important part of our professional relationships lies in the communication we have with other independent schools, academic professionals, public schools, diagnosticians, doctors, etc. We serve as a resource to other independent schools and a referral resource. We can enroll kids who need our help from other schools, then send them to those schools after working with them at Joy. We consult with schools to explain how they can serve all students more effectively, and we foster relationships in the community to build awareness so each of us can help children succeed.

What skills are necessary to ensure success in your role?
Our compassion, adaptability, openness, analytic thinking, willingness to jump in, the ability to build relationships and foster community trust are crucial to our success as a school.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?
It is seeing kids and their parents feel at ease when they start at The Joy School and then seeing their success in school and life after leaving. With the tools that they learn at Joy, our former students bring self-awareness, self-advocacy, and perseverance to their next school. They are successful because they know what they need and how to ask for it. Our students understand that each person is unique and valuable. They are accepting, tolerant, and kind to others. They think differently and are creative problem solvers.

At The Joy School, we encourage each other, learn from mistakes, work hard, give second chances, embrace all differences, apologize and forgive, laugh, give hugs and high fives, have fun, and never ever give up, enabling kids to find “Joy” in learning. We believe that The Joy School is how school should be!

Rob Wise has worked in independent school admissions since 2015 and previously worked in a magnet performing and visual arts school, public high school pre-engineering, and school administration.

Christine Pratt has been working with children with learning differences since 2008. She taught third grade at The Joy School, tutored all grade levels, and directed summer and special programs prior to joining admissions in 2013.