

## Ascend Academy

“Your eyesight can place focus on disabilities, but your vision can help you uncover possibilities.” — Chad E. Foster

For many families of students with disabilities, graduation is not the finish line it is often portrayed to be. It is the moment when the structure of school ends and the uncertainty of adulthood begins. National data reveals a troubling reality: nearly 7.5 million students in the United States receive special education services, yet within one year of graduation, 54% of students with intellectual disabilities and 41% of students with autism are not engaged in employment or further education. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, only one in five disabled graduates secures employment. These statistics highlight a systemic gap. Students are supported through school, but too often left without a structured pathway into adulthood.

Designed to address this critical need, we created ASCEND, the Academy for Specialized Cognitive Education, Neurodevelopment, and Discovery. ASCEND was created to redefine what success looks like for students with cognitive and developmental disabilities. Our mission is to empower each learner to discover their strengths, develop practical life and career skills, and build a meaningful future beyond graduation. Our mascot, the ASCEND Goat, symbolizes perseverance and growth, inspired by a goat’s natural ability to keep climbing and find a path upward, representing our students’ journey toward independence, confidence, and a brighter future.

Through personalized learning, small supportive classrooms, and hands-on experiences, students will explore areas such as culinary arts, technology, media production, horticulture, retail, and customer service. Learning is designed to mirror real-world experiences, allowing students to practice skills that benefit both themselves and the communities around them. As students grow, they will transition into more authentic work opportunities where they contribute to local businesses and community services while continuing to build independence and confidence. By focusing on abilities rather than limitations, Ascend Academy creates a pathway where students are not only prepared for adulthood but are valued contributors to their community.

Our selected site is a vacant two-building campus in the Kansas City area, ironically located on a street called Abilities Way, near a busy shopping district. The name of the street perfectly matches our mission, because we focus on each student’s abilities and strengths. By repurposing an existing, vacant campus, we reduce material waste, conserve resources, and minimize environmental impact while transforming the buildings into sustainable, future-focused schools. Kansas City was intentionally selected due to limited long-term transition programming in the region. While neighboring school districts offer specialized services, many focus primarily on behavioral needs and do not provide comprehensive career-connected pathways beyond high school. ASCEND will offer both a secondary school for grades 6–12 and a dedicated

Professional Career Discovery Center, referred to as the Bridge Center for ASCEND graduates, ensuring continuity of support well after traditional graduation.

Within the 6–12 academy, students learn in small, personalized settings designed to meet individual academic, emotional, and sensory needs. Classrooms serve 6-7 students, allowing for individualized instruction and relationship-based support. Flexible layouts, calming sensory rooms, accessible design features, and reduced-noise mechanical systems create an environment intentionally structured to minimize overstimulation and maximize engagement. Learning is experiential and simulation-based, emphasizing real-world application and skills rather than traditional lecture and classroom models. Instruction is tailored to ability level, and success is measured by growth, independence, and confidence rather than standardized benchmarks alone. Therapy animals will also be part of the ASCEND environment, helping students regulate emotions, reduce anxiety, and build positive connections that support both learning and personal growth.

The Bridge Center extends this philosophy into adulthood. Students may remain on campus to develop vocational skills within structured, supported environments before transitioning into community employment. For students not yet ready for external community placements, on-site enterprises include a café supplied by produce grown in a rooftop garden, a copy and print shop serving local businesses, and a hospitality service partnership in which students wash, fold, and deliver linens for nearby hotels. Additional opportunities include assembling business materials, maintaining landscaping for area properties, packaging goods for local entrepreneurs, managing greenhouse sales, supporting digital media production, and providing clerical services to community organizations. Many Bridge Center students will also fulfill employment opportunities in the 6-12 school building. For those prepared to engage off-campus, partnerships throughout the surrounding commercial district offer meaningful employment opportunities. A newly developing amusement park designed specifically for individuals with disabilities expands potential career opportunities. Each student will be supported by trained job coaches who gradually foster independence while ensuring dignity and success.

Transportation services connect families across the metropolitan area, including multiple neighboring communities, reinforcing Ascend Academy's role as a regional resource rather than a district-bound program. Sustainability remains integral to the design, with solar panels, rooftop gardens, and energy-efficient systems integrated into the remodeled campus to reduce environmental impact while modeling responsible innovation.

ASCEND builds on Kansas City's legacy of specialized education, advancing it into a comprehensive model that unites academic growth, emotional development, career exploration, and postsecondary transition on a single campus. By redefining success and extending support beyond graduation, ASCEND transforms uncertainty into opportunity. It offers families clarity, provides student purpose, and the broader Kansas City community a powerful reminder that when vision replaces limitation, possibility becomes reality.