



The Estevez-Diaz family enjoyed a Special Olympics event at the Child and Career Development Center.

New CCIU Schools Fill Gaps in Services for Students with Disabilities

West Grove, PA - When the Estevez-Diaz family moved to southeastern Pennsylvania, they had one paramount priority. They needed to find a school that could assist their two children with multiple disabilities. Carlos Estevez Benitez says they went house shopping after learning about the school options provided by the Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU). He and his wife Elizabeth Diaz found a home in southern Chester County following a tour of the Child and Career Development Center (CCDC) in Coatesville.

“When we first visited, honestly I was in tears, crying from happiness because I could see all the equipment, therapies, and personal assistants they have for their students,” Diaz said. “I feel very blessed to have my two children in a CCIU school.”

Not all families are as fortunate. Over the years, CCIU has seen the need for services increase, resulting in a waiting list that has grown to 100 families. This has led to initiatives to open two new schools. The CCDC Engle campus in West Grove opened in the fall of 2025, and now a new CCDC Great Valley campus will open in the fall of 2026.

The new campuses are greatly reducing travel times for many current students with special needs, who took long bus rides to reach the Coatesville campus.

“It was a hike to get her to Coatesville,” said Jessica Wood, whose daughter Megan moved from CCDC Coatesville to the Engle campus. “A five-minute bus ride is great compared to 45 minutes or even longer.”

The new locations also are creating options for students with disabilities who live in areas without enough services. The Great Valley campus will enroll students from five Chester County districts, but it also will welcome students from 16 districts in Delaware Valley regions outside the county.

Autistic support is one area of need with the highest shortage of services. Whitney is a parent who has two sons benefitting from the elementary autistic support classrooms at CCDC Engle. She says both of her children have learned to communicate better since enrolling in the school. Her oldest now asks for breaks when he needs them, and she has seen a big change in her younger son at home.

“He used to just be in his own world – his own zone,” Whitney said. “Now he has started to relate more with me, grabbing my hand, giggling, laughing and wanting more one-on-one time. That is huge.”

The Estevez-Diaz family says the communication techniques learned by their children at CCDC Coatesville and now at the Engle campus have been life changing. They used to rely on nonverbal communications with their son Carlitos and daughter Valentina. Now, the children can use eye gaze technology to communicate their needs and their thoughts.

“They invited us to see how it’s working, and I remember I cried because Valentina was there at her desk in front of the eye gaze communication device, and when I entered the room, Valentina said, ‘I love you, Daddy.’ That was amazing,” Estevez Benitez said.

CCIU schools are designed to offer these types of personalized services that help students with different abilities. Wood’s daughter Megan is in the Life Skills Support program that provides many job training opportunities.



Megan Wood prepares coffee as part of her job skill training at CCDC Engle.

Megan joined a CCIU program as a preschooler and will soon be graduating from CCDC Engle as a young adult. During this time, she has learned about safety measures to help her in public, like how to cross a street. She also has worked in food service and dog grooming and hopes to get a job after graduating. Wood credits the staff with making a deep impact on her daughter.

“I just can’t say enough good things about every single person that works at the school, from the front office to the aides and the teachers. I’m going to miss everybody when she graduates,” Wood said.

CCDC Engle Principal Dr. Shannon Brown says creating a sense of community is an important part of the school. The staff focuses on dignity, belonging, and connection for the students. Reaching these goals has been easier with the shorter travel times to the campus.

“We are seeing stronger family involvement and growing community partnerships, which create a network of support for our students,” Brown said.

The new campus in Great Valley will provide the same opportunities. Like the other campuses, the new school will offer life skills support, autistic support, multiple disabilities support, and emotional support. The school also will include biophilic design features, which bring elements of nature like natural light into a built environment.



The CCDC Great Valley school is scheduled to open in the fall of 2026.

Principal Hillary Soring says these custom-built elements will create a warm atmosphere for the school community.

“The Great Valley campus will be a supportive, student-centered environment designed specifically for students with disabilities. The additional space and programming will allow us to better meet students’ needs while also increasing opportunities for independence and community connections,” Soring said.

To help ease the shortage of special education teachers, CCIU’s Human Relations team also created a program for adults who wish to obtain certification. These added initiatives aim to help all the students CCIU serves to reach their potential.

Parents like Diaz recognize it can be challenging to assist students with disabilities, but she says she appreciates every “miracle” she sees as her children continue their journey at CCDC Engle.

“You have to battle for every single thing, but if they say mama or papa, that is a huge thing for me as a mom. I wasn’t expecting that in the past, but now I can listen to them communicate,” she said. “I think it is hard, but if you love them, they can feel that emotion. They can be happy.”

For more information about CCIU’s special education services, visit cciu.org/special-education/school-age-program.

This article was shared on social media and the [CCIU website](#). It was also published by [The Daily Local News](#).