Dolphin Academy: FAQ

As part of our long-term planning to best serve the needs of all students, Toms River Regional Schools is preparing for an important transition. What is currently Toms River Intermediate North will, beginning for the 2027-2028 school year, be a school to better serve our students and those throughout the county who are most vulnerable, and will be known as the Dolphin Academy. We believe by doing this we can create, as a community, more opportunities for all of our students while preserving the integrity of the community school model in the Toms River Regional School District.

This change reflects our district's continued commitment to every learner. More than 22 percent of our students receive special education services, and we believe they deserve a facility designed to meet their needs with excellence and dignity. This new model will also ultimately allow us to welcome county students through tuition-in partnerships, strengthening both our programming and our fiscal stability.

We understand that change brings questions and emotions. We are equally committed to supporting our families, staff, and students through this process. This transition will be guided by thoughtful planning, community input, and our shared mission to provide the best educational experiences. The following FAQs–one geared toward our district community and the other targeted at families of special needs students–is the result of that thoughtful planning and the community input we've solicited since the idea of this transition was first conceived.

Part I: Frequently asked questions for and by the greater Toms River community

1. Why was Toms River Intermediate North (TRIN) selected for this transition?

The decreased population on the north side of the regional district, together with the growing demographic changes in areas such as special education, along with the central location in the district and county make this location ideal. TRIN is located immediately adjacent to the Garden State Parkway and Route 9, allowing quick access for surrounding areas, and its proximity to the RWJBarnabas Health Field of Dreams will provide numerous opportunities to better serve our students. The physical plan itself is laid out in a way that creates possibilities to serve students from preschool to grade 12 in a state-of-the-art facility, with the capacity to meet diverse needs, provide expanded programming, and keep more of our students learning close to home.

2. Has Toms River ever operated with only two intermediate schools before?

Yes. The district successfully operated with two intermediate schools in the past. While returning to this model requires careful planning, it is not new to Toms River and has proven to be effective in earlier years.

3. What will happen to students currently zoned for Intermediate North?

Decisions regarding student placement have been determined with stakeholder and community input. Students who would have attended Intermediate North will now attend either Intermediate East or Intermediate South, based on updated attendance zones, with Route 37 as the dividing line. These students will continue to attend the same high school they are currently zoned for. No changes are planned for high school placement.

4. What about sixth grade students?

As part of this transition, sixth-grade students will remain in the elementary schools. We understand that some parents value the middle school experience for sixth grade, and we want to assure you that this decision is being made to better support student development, continuity, and academic growth during these foundational years. Elementary schools will receive the staffing and resources needed to accommodate sixth-grade students, who will move from subject-area teacher to subject-area teacher, keeping their educational journey consistent, appropriate, and impactful. Additionally, students will have extracurricular and athletic experiences at the elementary level, which will provide a more equitable opportunity for our sixth graders to participate and compete with schools across the district.

5. How will staff be affected?

Staff currently assigned to Intermediate North will be reassigned to other district schools based on student needs, certification areas, and available positions. There will be no reductions in staff as a result of this transition; this model allows us to reallocate 120 positions to student needs and programs without adding to the budget. We are committed to transparency, collaboration, and providing support throughout the process.

6. What is the timeline for the transition?

The district has plans to officially open the Dolphin Academy in September 2027, in alignment with the beginning of the 2027-2028 school year.

7. How will this affect families and transportation?

New transportation routes will be designed to maximize access to student programs and opportunities and to minimize disruption for students and families. We have tasked our Transportation department with developing a model that brings back before and after school transportation and adequate support for our extracurricular programming needs. All changes will be communicated throughout this collaborative process. Our goal is to make this transition as smooth as possible for students and families.

8. How will the district support students and families during this change?

The district will offer family information sessions to collect feedback and support informing the transition process.

9. What are the benefits of creating a P–12 Special Education school?

This new model will feature:

- A full continuum of services without limits
- Individualized decision making and expanded opportunities in the least restrictive environment (LRE)
- Collaborative programs including preschool/autism, ERI, medically fragile, and 18-21 transition
- One connected campus, one seamless continuum which reduces out-of-district placements and allows more students to stay within our community
- Life Skills Labs to bridge the gap between classroom learning and the real world
- Classrooms designed for every learner and sensory spaces to build independence
- Opportunities for specialized staff development and collaboration

- Retain the process of decisions being made on an individualized basis within an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- Transportation for before- and after-school programming at all levels
- Extra and co-curricular opportunities for our most vulnerable students
- Tuition-in revenue from county partnerships, helping to strengthen our district financially and provide equitable financial support across the county

10. How can the community stay informed or share feedback?

Information about and updates regarding the Dolphin Academy will continue to be shared on the district website– a web page dedicated to the academy can be accessed at trschools/dolphinacademy– and via direct communication to families through ParentSquare. Town hall-style meetings are being planned at the building for late winter/early spring 2027 so residents, stakeholders, and families can see our vision firsthand; these meetings will include question-and-answer sessions. Finally, updates will be provided during our monthly Toms River Board of Education meetings, which are open to the public and available to live stream. We encourage our families and community members to stay tuned for more as the school year progresses.

Part 2: Frequently-asked questions for and by special needs familes

1. What is the Dolphin Academy?

The Dolphin Academy is Toms River Regional Schools' planned district-operated public separate specialized school. It will expand our current continuum of special education services by providing a highly supportive, intentionally designed environment for students with significant instructional, communication, behavioral, sensory, physical, adaptive, and functional needs. The goal is to provide another **in-district option**, allowing appropriate students to remain connected to their district and community.

2. Which students will attend the Dolphin Academy?

There will not be one disability classification or diagnosis that automatically qualifies a student for the Dolphin Academy. A student will not attend simply because they have an Autism, Multiple Disabilities, or another classification. Placement will be determined individually through the IEP process, based on the student's unique educational and functional needs and consideration of the least restrictive environment.

3. Will all of the district's self-contained programs move to the Dolphin Academy?

No. The Dolphin Academy is an addition to our continuum, not a replacement for all of our existing special education programs. Toms River will continue to maintain specialized programming throughout district schools. Specific program locations will be determined based on student needs, enrollment, staffing, facilities, and annual program planning.

4. Are all Autism programs moving to the Dolphin Academy?

No. Autism programming will continue to exist within district schools. The Dolphin Academy is intended to provide an additional option for students who require a more intensive, specialized environment. A student's Autism classification alone will never determine placement.

5. Will students who remain in self-contained programs in their neighborhood schools be required to mainstream?

Inclusion is individualized. The IEP team considers opportunities for participation with nondisabled peers for every student, but there is no predetermined amount of mainstreaming that applies to every student. Opportunities should be meaningful and appropriate to the student's individual strengths, needs, supports, and IEP.

6. What happens if a family does not agree with a proposed placement at the Dolphin Academy?

Families remain important members of the IEP team and will participate in the placement discussion. The team will review the student's needs, data, current programming, supports, and least restrictive environment considerations. If there is disagreement, the district will follow the procedural requirements and parent protections provided under IDEA and New Jersey special education regulations. A Dolphin Academy placement will not be predetermined before the IEP process.

7. What inclusion opportunities will Dolphin Academy students have?

Inclusion will remain an important part of programming. Depending on individual student needs, opportunities may include academics, electives, extracurricular activities, Field of Dreams, Unified Sports, Special Olympics, school performances and activities, community-based instruction, and connections with students' home schools. Reverse-inclusion opportunities may also be developed so peers can participate in activities at the Academy.

8. Will families be able to tour the Dolphin Academy before placement?

Yes. Family education and engagement are an important part of the planning process. Opportunities for families to learn about the Academy and visit the facility will be communicated as development progresses and the building becomes ready for tours.

9. Will students still attend out-of-district schools after Dolphin Academy opens?

Yes, when necessary. The Dolphin Academy expands the district's ability to serve students locally, but it does not eliminate the full continuum of placement options. There may continue to be students whose individualized needs require programming that cannot appropriately be provided within the district. Those decisions will continue to be made by the IEP team.

10. How will the Academy manage multiple students with significant behavioral needs?

Behavioral support is being designed as an embedded component of the schoo**l**, rather than something added only when a crisis occurs. Teachers, BCBAs, paraprofessionals, related-service providers, CST members, and administrators will work collaboratively to develop proactive supports, teach replacement skills, analyze student data, and create consistent environments. Staffing and professional development planning will reflect the intensive needs of the students served.

11. What will the Dolphin Academy school hours be?

The final school-day schedule has not yet been established. Hours will be communicated to families and staff once operational planning, transportation, programming, and contractual considerations are finalized.

The Most Important Message for Families:

Dolphin Academy creates another opportunity—it does not create an automatic placement.Every student will continue to have an individualized IEP, and every placement decision will be made by the IEP team based on that student's unique strengths, needs, supports, educational benefit, and least restrictive environment.

The goal is simple: expand what Toms River can provide so more students can receive highly specialized programming while remaining connected to their district, families, and community.