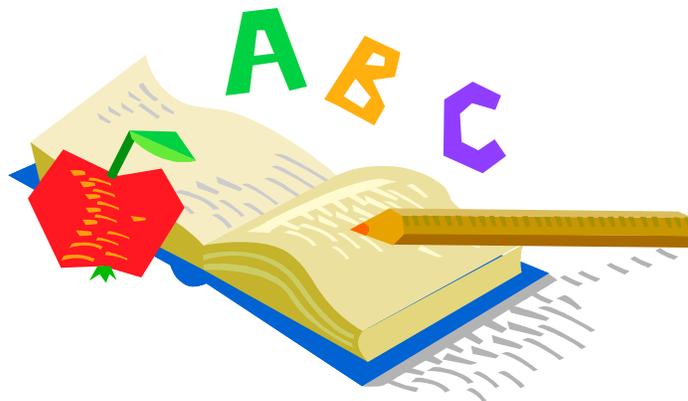




It Takes You...  
to end poverty in our community.



## **Community Action Southwest Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program Parent Handbook**



### **Mission Statement**

**Community Action Southwest serves as the catalyst to mobilize the resources of the entire community to enable families and individuals in Southwest Pennsylvania to attain the skills, knowledge, motivation and opportunities to become self-sufficient.**

### **The Promise of Community Action Southwest**

**Community Action changes people's lives, embodies the spirit of hope, improves communities and makes America a better place to live. We care about the community and we are dedicated to helping people help themselves and each other.**

# Community Action Southwest Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program

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## DEAR PRE-K PARENT/GUARDIAN(S):

We would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to the Community Action Southwest (CAS) Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program.

You as parents are the most vital resource to our Pre-K Program. You have an opportunity to be involved in your child's educational journey and to partner with us to make our program a success. Your participation gives you the opportunity to strengthen the bond between you and your child.

In the Pre-K program, we operate on the philosophy, "Parents are the primary educators of their children." This simply means that you are the number one teacher of your child. This philosophy guides our thinking as we work together as partners in a program that is preparing your child for Kindergarten.

Have a great year!

## GOALS OF THE PRE-K PROGRAM

- The CAS Pre-K program utilizes the Creative Curriculum and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale as a crosswalk with PA Early Learning Standards to provide quality learning experiences for children in the Pre-K program.
- The CAS Pre-K Program provides appropriate activities and learning experiences that help prepare young children for Kindergarten. School readiness means that children are socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively prepared for continued success in Kindergarten.
- The CAS Pre-K Program helps children become independent, self-confident, enthusiastic learners. Participation in the Pre-K program encourages children to develop good habits and daily routines.
- The CAS Pre-K Program encourages teachers to adopt child-centered instructional practices based on the interests and the developmental skill level of each child. Child-centered instruction allows teachers to facilitate learning in a rich environment that fosters children's initiative, exploration, and interaction with peers and adults.
- The CAS Pre-K Program helps to ensure a smooth transition for Pre-K children to Kindergarten. This will include communication with Kindergarten teachers from the appropriate school district.
- The CAS Pre-K Program will ensure that children with possible special needs will be referred to the proper source or agency for access to and coordination of health and other services. Families will be provided with information and assistance, if requested, in gathering required documentation necessary for their child's enrollment in Kindergarten.
- Parent(s), you are encouraged to become involved in what your child is learning and experiencing in Pre-K because your participation contributes to your child's success in school. A parent is a child's first and most important teacher.



## A SPECIAL WELCOME TO OUR PRE-K FAMILY MEMBERS

- Thank you for enrolling your child in The Community Action Southwest Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program. As a Pennsylvania resident, you can be proud that Pennsylvania is helping to lead the nation in providing preschool options for children.
- The purpose of this handbook is to help you understand this unique educational initiative, to explain goals and objectives of the program, and to offer suggestions that will help your child be successful in the Pre-K program and throughout his/her educational career.
- We also want you to know that we value your input. If you have questions or concerns, please contact your Pre-K teacher or contact a member of the Pre-K management team at Community Action Southwest: 724-225-9550. Also visit the Pre-K Web Site at <http://www.prektoday.org/>

## ELIGIBILITY AND ENROLLMENT REQUIREMENTS

- To be enrolled in the Community Action Southwest Pre-K program, a child must be a resident of Pennsylvania and be at least three years of age prior to the cutoff date for Kindergarten eligibility in the respective School District where the child resides.
- Families must meet the income guidelines of the program and provide income verification prior to enrollment in the program.
- Children are eligible to attend the Community Action Southwest Pre-K program for **only two years**.
- If a child is age-eligible for Kindergarten in the school district where the child resides, he/she may not be enrolled in the Pre-K program.
- A parent must be able to provide proof of a child's birth date, and a copy of the child's immunization record must be provided prior to the child's official enrollment in the Pre-K program. Immunizations must be up to date.
- If a child is to receive medications, documentation must be provided by a licensed physician or psychologist, and teaching staff must first be trained how to administer the medications prior to the child's enrollment in the Pre-K program.
- Written documentation must be provided for a child with a disability or special need so that appropriate referrals can be completed upon enrollment in the program.

## PRIORITIES FOR ENROLLMENT

- Because of limited funding, not all eligible children can be enrolled in the Community Action Southwest Pre-K program.
- Priorities for enrollment are based on a point system to enable Community Action to serve children who are most at risk of school failure, either because of income, language barrier or other factors outlined in the PA Pre-K Counts grant guidance.
- Top priority for enrollment is given to 4 year-old children, since 3 year-olds would be again eligible the following year.

## THE HOURS AND DAYS OF OPERATION

- The Community Action Southwest Pre-K Program operates for 180 student days per year.
- The days of operation are determined by the calendar of the School District in which the Pre-K facility is located. The hours of operation are generally six hours per day, based on the School District's schedule, so that children can be dropped off and picked up at appropriate times in coordination with the School District's breakfast and bus schedules.



## ATTENDANCE POLICY

- The Pre-K Program is open Monday through Friday except for closures due to holidays, in-service days, snow days, or other emergencies. Children enrolled in the Pre-K program are considered full-time and must attend 5 days per week for the full length of the day.
- Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts funding requires that the Pre-K Program provides 180 student days within a complete school year. Therefore, the Pre-K Program days of operation may vary slightly from the school district calendar in which the Pre-K Program operates in order to meet this requirement. Parents will be informed in writing of additional Pre-K days of operation not listed on the school district calendar.
- Parents are strongly encouraged to schedule appointments after the Pre-K Program so that children can reap all of the benefits offered through the services provided by the Pre-K Program.
- If your child is unable to attend on any given day(s), a written excuse including the reason for the absence must be provided to the teacher or teacher assistant within three days of the date of absence.
- **Excused absences** are defined as those absences when your child is prevented from attending for mental, physical or other urgent reasons. These can be further defined as illness, family emergency, death of a family member, health or dental appointments, fire, natural disaster, or other extenuating circumstances deemed as excused by CAS Pre-K program management staff.
- **Unexcused absences** are any absences that are not included in the above definition of excused absences or any absences that are not accompanied by a written excuse within three days of the date of absence.
- If your child is absent from class for an extended period of time (3 consecutive days), the teaching staff will contact you to learn the nature of the absence and offer support, as appropriate.
- If your child has more than five consecutive absences, the teaching staff and family, together, will discuss the reasons for the absence and discuss strategies to support your child's attendance in school. We may be able to refer you to our nurse consultant, school nurse, or other appropriate health services to provide appropriate support as necessary.
- Children who have 10 or more consecutive absences or more than 10% absences over the course of the school year (more than 18 days total) and whose family have not responded to program supports will be dismissed from the Pre-K Program.

## DROPPING OFF AND PICKING UP YOUR CHILD

- Parents are expected to bring their children to the Pre-K Program at the designated scheduled drop-off time.
- Parents are expected to pick up their children from the Pre-K Program at the designated scheduled pick-up time.
- Parents are also held accountable that all other caregivers or designated persons will drop off and pick up promptly at the designated scheduled times as well.
- As you drop off and pick up your child, please make verbal contact with one of your child's Pre-K teachers to ensure that your child's presence is acknowledged.
- It is required that you give the Pre-K teachers written notification of any person you have authorized to pick up your child from the Pre-K program.

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- Please comply with any school district regulations specific to parking when dropping off or picking up your child. Be sure to share this information with any other authorized individual who is dropping off or picking up your child.
- If there are days when you are uncertain whether the Pre-K program will be open due to snow, ice or other dangerous weather conditions, please check local radio and TV stations. If the school district where the Pre-K facility is located has a delay or is closed, the Pre-K facility will follow the same schedule.

## **PARENTAL/GUARDIANSHIP (CUSTODY ISSUES)**

- If custody is an issue with your child, you must provide your classroom teacher with a certified copy of the “Custody Order”. This copy will be kept on file at the Pre-K site.
- If the custody is “joint,” we will honor the parent/guardian rights for the particular days of the week as stated in the order.
- All custody issues must be resolved between parent/guardians and the court system. Pre-K staff cannot and will not intervene.

## **EXCLUSION POLICY**

- The Community Action Southwest Pre-K program reserves the right to discontinue classroom placement for children exhibiting behaviors that, “Present health and/or safety concerns to themselves, other children, staff parents, and/or volunteers.”
- Each situation will be handled on an individual basis.
- The duration of the exclusion is dependent upon the circumstances surrounding each individual case.

## **MEDICAL EXCLUSION (SICK CHILD) POLICY**

- This may be the first time your child is exposed to a large group of children. In view of this, your child’s health and the health of other children must be considered when your child is ill. Please keep your child home if he or she:
  - Is too ill to participate in classroom activities
  - Is irritable, continuously crying or requires more attention than our staff can provide without compromising the health and safety of other children in Pre-K
  - Has a fever greater than 100 degrees
  - Is vomiting or has diarrhea
  - Has severe coughing
  - Has body rash with fever
  - Has eye discharge – thick mucus or pus draining from the eye or pink eye
  - Has yellowish skin or eyes
  - Has any communicable skin condition (lice, scabies, etc.)
  - Has any communicable disease (chicken pox, pink eye, strep throat, etc.)
- If your child becomes ill while at Pre-K, you will be called to pick him/her up immediately. Please make sure that the contact information we have on file in the classroom is always up to date, so that we are able to reach you if there is an emergency.
- If a child is diagnosed with a communicable disease, a doctor’s excuse must be obtained before your child can return to the classroom (with the exception of conditions such as head lice or chicken pox).
- In the case of head lice, a parent or guardian must bring the child 15 minutes early the first day of return to check for nits. A “Nit Free Policy” is strictly enforced.
- To help prevent the spread of lice, children may not bring blankets or stuffed animals to the classroom.



## SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE

- All Pre-K Staff members are mandated reporters and are required, under the Child Protective Services Act, to report suspected child abuse to the appropriate authorities.
- Childline (1-800-932-0313) will be called when any Pre-K staff member has reasonable cause to suspect that a child coming before them in their professional capacity is a victim of child abuse.
- Staff are not to discuss their concerns with the family members until the Children & Youth Agency has been contacted and reports filed.
- The appropriate Pre-K staff person will continue to monitor the child's behavior for any further signs of suspected abuse. The teaching staff will complete ongoing anecdotal records on any child suspected of being abused.
- The Pre-K program is not the primary treatment program. Pre-K staff will work with the Children & Youth Agency, who will provide the necessary treatment for the family.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

- Community Action Southwest Pre-K Staff will do everything possible to ensure that all information obtained on the families enrolled in the program will be kept in the strictest confidence.
- No information regarding a client or family will be released to another agency or individual without the written consent of the client, parent or guardian.
- In accordance with the Federal Privacy Act of 1974 and the Child Protective Service Law, confidentiality can be broken only when there is:
  - An emergency when this release is necessary to protect the health or safety of an individual
  - When CAS Pre-K mandated reporters have reasonable cause or suspicion to suspect child abuse
  - When the Court subpoenas a child's record

## DISABILITY SERVICES AND MENTAL HEALTH

- All children enrolled in the Pre-K program are provided an experience where they achieve a positive self-image and feelings of trust, security and respect.
- Young children may exhibit behaviors as a result of normal growth and development. As part of Kindergarten readiness, Pre-K staff help children develop their social-emotional skills, guiding them to treat others with respect and to get along with their peers.
- If children exhibit behaviors that demonstrate that special services may be needed, appropriate referrals will be made after receiving the parent's input and consent.
- Parent permission must be obtained to schedule evaluations through any other agency or service provider.
- Three main areas for promotion of positive mental health through the Pre-K Program are:
  - Prevention – program goals are designed to help children and families remain healthy
  - Identification and Referral – early detection of potential problems is a primary focus
  - Treatment – a "Treatment Plan" will be developed collaboratively between the family, mental health professional and Pre-K staff
- The Community Action Southwest Pre-K Program is a partner with Intermediate Unit 1 who will provide appropriate services for children who are referred by Pre-K staff for evaluation and screenings.

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## NUTRITION AND FOOD SERVICES

- Your child will be provided with a nutritious breakfast and lunch each day at the Pre-K program at no charge to you.
- Monthly menus will be provided to the parents. Children will be given opportunities to make choices for themselves from the options provided for breakfast and lunch.
- Meal times are positive social experiences for children in the Pre-K program. Foods will not be used in any way as a reward or punishment.
- If your child has any food allergies, please provide written documentation from your child's doctor to share with appropriate Pre-K staff prior to starting your child in the program.
- If a severe food allergy should arise within the Pre-K classroom or the site location (such as allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, or any other transferable food allergy), then food item options may be limited or restricted.
- Pre-K staff will encourage Pre-K children to sample/try foods that come with the meals (fruits, vegetables, etc.). The more times children sample these foods or see the Pre-K staff eating (modeling) them, the more likely they will be to eat them, too.
- If a child does not eat, eats very little, or lacks variety in their food choices, Pre-K staff will discuss their observations and nutrition concerns with you.

## PARENT'S OPTION OF PROVIDING PACKED LUNCHES

- Your child will be provided with a nutritious breakfast and lunch each day at the Pre-K program at no charge to you; however, if you would like to send in a packed lunch for your child because he/she may not eat the planned menu items and/or alternatives, please follow these guidelines:
  - Please be sure to label your child's lunchbox and any items within that are not disposable items. Although we will do our best to help children keep track of their belongings, we are not responsible for lost items.
  - Please send in only food and drink items that can be stored at room temperature. We do not have the storage space to refrigerate food items or the facilities to heat up food. You can use cold packs within your child's lunch box if necessary.
  - Please let your child's teacher know during drop off time if your child's lunch box is in his or her backpack, so that it is not overlooked when getting ready for mealtime.
  - When packing a lunch, please be sure to include a drink. Children will only have the option of eating their packed lunch or eating the lunch provided through the cafeteria. Children will not be permitted to get ala carte items or drinks if they are packing a lunch for the day.
  - Fast food (such as McDonald's, etc.) is not permitted.
  - Soda pop (carbonated soft drinks, Pepsi, Coke, etc) is not permitted.
  - Candy is not permitted.
  - Occasionally, severe food allergies may arise within a classroom that may limit what can be sent in (such as a severe peanut allergy). If an allergy issues arises, the staff will inform parents in writing so that you can adjust what you are packing accordingly.

## OUTSIDE FOODS

- Outside foods (prepared, baked, or bought in pre-packaged containers) will not be permitted in the Pre-K classroom. Parents may not prepare or provide any outside foods whatsoever for any Pre-K child other than their own (packed lunches).

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- For the health and safety of all children, Pre-K children will not be permitted to share meals, trade food items, or eat/touch other children’s food items during meal periods.

## **BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS AND PARTIES**

- Pre-K staff will find special ways to honor children on their birthdays: wearing crowns, leader for the day, special songs, etc.
- Please do not send any special snacks, cakes, candy, etc. This is applicable to any holiday celebration events such as: Halloween, Valentine’s Day, etc.

## **CLASSROOM SETTINGS, LEARNING AREAS, TEACHING METHODS**

- Using the Creative Curriculum as a foundation, classrooms will have learning areas or “interest centers” with sufficient quantities of child accessible equipment, materials, supplies, books, etc.
- Learning centers will be designed to promote various developmental skills in the focus areas. For instance, typical learning centers will include math manipulatives, blocks, reading materials/books, art, science/exploratory materials, dramatic play accessories, writing utensils/paper, and musical instruments.
- The classrooms will have space to accommodate individual, small, and large group instruction activities.
- The learning environment will help children to develop socially, intellectually, physically and emotionally.
- Most Pre-K classrooms will have one lead teacher and one assistant teacher.
- Teachers will be interacting with children and moving about the classroom to facilitate learning experiences.
- Teachers will strongly encourage children to interact with each other and to verbally express their thoughts and feelings in positive ways.
- In most cases, there will be an outdoor play area nearby with equipment and supplies for exercising large muscles and developing balance and coordination.
- If applicable to the Pre-K classroom, a daily rest period will not exceed one-half hour and an individual rest mat will be provided for each child.
- Teachers will read to children daily.
- Daily schedules will be posted and adhered to, and will reflect a balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated activities with both active and quiet activities.
- Teachers utilize the Creative Curriculum Continuum to determine where each child is developmentally, to track each child’s progress, to plan learning experiences and to measure program outcomes.
- The Creative Curriculum Continuum enables the teacher to know that every child is developing and learning as expected and to be aware of each child’s differences and individual needs.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING**

- As part of our instructional practice, developmental screenings are completed on all Pre-K children within 45 days of their first day in the classroom setting. These screenings are completed in collaboration between parents and our Pre-K teaching staff.
- The use of developmental screening is a preventative strategy that quickly triggers additional supports for those children with suspected developmental delays or disabilities.
- These screenings enable our teaching staff to individualize activities to help maximize your child’s growth and development within the Pre-K setting.



- CAS Pre-K utilizes the Ages & Stages Questionnaire System, an evidence based, valid and reliable screening tool covering five developmental domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, personal, social and problem-solving. Ages and Stages Social-Emotional Screener focuses on social and emotional competence in the areas of self-regulation, compliance, communication, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect and interaction with people.
- Once a screening has been completed and scored, our Pre-K teaching staff will work collaboratively with you to help further support your child's development. As necessary, Pre-K staff will make recommendations for further assessment or intervention.
- With parental permission, Pre-K children also receive speech and/or vision screenings within the classroom setting by local agencies.

## **EARLY LEARNING NETWORK (ELN)**

- In Pennsylvania, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) provides funding to a variety of statewide early education programs including the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program.
- Electronic data systems are needed to maintain individual child records and to collect data for improving early childhood programs. OCDEL and Community Action Southwest use this data to make sure that early childhood programs are of high quality and will enhance the development of young children.
- The Early Learning Network (ELN) is Pennsylvania's electronic data system for gathering information on early childhood programs and for studying the development of children in those programs. ELN combines information about the program including the quality and experience of the staff, with information on your family and your child's development over time. This information is then used to build and maintain high quality early childhood programs.
- All information about your child is kept secure. All federal and state confidentiality, privacy and security requirements are honored. This means that only your local program will have access to your child's personally identifiable information. Your child's teacher will only be able to see information about the children with whom he or she works. Information reported to the state or federal government does not identify specific children and information about your child will not be shared outside of your child's program, except as permitted by law.
- Parents who would like more information about the Early Learning Network should speak with Community Action Southwest Pre-K management staff at 724-225-9550.

## **PARENT PARTICIPATION AND VOLUNTEERS**

- Whenever possible, families should actively participate in the Pre-K program and maintain open communication with the Pre-K teaching staff. Research shows that active family participation in children's learning experiences contributes to success in school.
- Volunteering in the classroom is highly recommended as it helps the children and is informative and rewarding for families.
- Contact your Pre-K teacher to find out about opportunities to volunteer your time, talents, and experiences in your child's classroom.
- If a parent is volunteering on a regular basis (once a week or more) in a Pre-K Classroom, a FBI clearance must be secured and kept on file. A physical examination and Mantoux (TB test) must also be completed.
- For student volunteers under the age of 18 in the Pre-K program, a physical examination and TB test must be completed.



## TIPS FOR PARENT VOLUNTEERS AND OTHER VOLUNTEERS

- Pre-K staff will help you learn procedures followed in the classroom.
- Be cheerful and friendly; talk and laugh with the children.
- Speak quietly and stoop to the child's eye level; call each child by name.
- Give the children choices when possible and redirect them to other activities if their behavior is inappropriate.
- Use appropriate language and be positive: "We walk inside" instead of "Don't run".
- Pre-K staff will handle any disciplinary action. Physical punishment **is not** permitted.
- All information concerning parents and children is strictly confidential.

## COMMUNITY EXCURSIONS & IN-HOUSE PRESENTATIONS

- Occasionally, Pre-K teachers will plan special activities both inside and outside the classroom environment to familiarize children with their community and broaden their educational experiences.
- The number of excursions and presentations will vary between programs. All CAS Pre-K activities are part of the Pre-K program and are free of charge for the children.
- Pre-K staff will inform parents well in advance when any excursions or other special events are scheduled.

## OPEN COMMUNICATION

- Please keep lines of communication open with your Pre-K teaching staff concerning the progress and development of your child.
- Parents will be given information regarding results of their child's assessment three times within the program year, including two parent-teacher conferences. Parents may also request a conference at any point within the program year to discuss their child's individual progress, assessments, needs or behaviors.
- Keep Pre-K teachers informed of your child's changes in habits, achievements, progress, etc. at home so that we can work as partners in the best interests of your child.
- If you have any special ideas or talents, please share them with the Pre-K teaching staff. You could be a special visitor to share your creativity with the children, such as:
  - Music - playing an instrument, singing or dancing
  - Art ideas - creative painting, sketches, special projects for holidays, etc.
  - Your profession: firefighter, police officer, nurse, teacher, truck driver, etc.
  - Sharing your culture with activities for children: cooking, books, music, art, etc.
  - Special presentations related to safety, health, animals, community projects, etc.



## PRE-K HANDBOOK ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I have read the Community Action Southwest Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts Program 2013-2014 Handbook and I agree to abide by the policies and procedures described within it. I also understand that the failure to follow the terms and conditions of the Pre-K Program will result in the teaching staff meeting with me to discuss penalties and consequences, including the possible termination of my child's enrollment from the program.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pre-K Staff Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pre-K Staff Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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