ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE SCHOOL

PRESCHOOL PARENT HANDBOOK

2026–2027

Faith • Learning • Friendship • Growth

75 Pine Street
West Springfield, Massachusetts 01089

(413) 739-4131
www.stthomasapostleschool.org

WELCOME TO PRESCHOOL

Dear Preschool Families,

Welcome to the St. Thomas the Apostle School Preschool Program. We are grateful that you have entrusted your child to our care during these important early years. Preschool is often a child's first experience as a member of a school community, and our goal is to make that beginning safe, joyful, faith-filled, and developmentally appropriate.

Our preschool program provides children with opportunities to grow spiritually, socially, emotionally, physically, and academically. Children learn early literacy and mathematics skills, explore through play, create, pray, move, communicate, and build friendships.

Just as importantly, children learn how to be part of a classroom community. They learn to follow routines, listen to adults, share space and materials, wait for turns, communicate their needs, manage frustration, interact appropriately with other children, and develop increasing independence.

We believe that a strong partnership between home and school gives children the best opportunity for success. Open and honest communication between parents and teachers is essential.

We look forward to a wonderful year of learning, faith, friendship, and growth.

Blessings,

Miss Hawley
Principal

OUR CATHOLIC IDENTITY

St. Thomas the Apostle School is a Catholic school community. Our preschool program introduces children to the love of God through simple prayer, Bible stories, songs, kindness, gratitude, service, and participation in the faith life of our school.

Children are taught that each person is created and loved by God and deserves to be treated with dignity, kindness, and respect.

Age-appropriate prayer and faith formation are incorporated into the preschool day. Families of all backgrounds who choose St. Thomas the Apostle School are expected to respect and support the Catholic identity and mission of the school.

OUR PRESCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

Young children learn best through a combination of purposeful play, direct instruction, exploration, conversation, movement, repetition, and consistent routines.

Our teachers create an environment in which children can develop curiosity, confidence, language, self-control, problem-solving skills, creativity, independence, and a love of learning.

The St. Thomas the Apostle School Preschool program is a structured early-learning environment and not simply childcare.

Children are not expected to arrive already knowing everything that is expected of them in a classroom. Learning how to be a student is an important part of preschool.

Teachers patiently teach, model, practice, and reinforce classroom expectations throughout the year. At the same time, children must gradually develop the ability to participate safely and appropriately within a classroom community.

PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

The St. Thomas the Apostle School Preschool Program serves children beginning at 2 years, 9 months of age through 4 years of age, according to the school's enrollment and placement guidelines.

Children develop at different rates. Chronological age alone does not necessarily determine a child's readiness for a structured preschool environment.

Children entering preschool should demonstrate, or be developing, the social, emotional, behavioral, communication, and physical skills necessary to participate safely within a group setting.

Admission and continued enrollment are contingent upon the school's ability to appropriately and safely meet a child's needs within the structure, staffing, and resources of the preschool program.

PRESCHOOL READINESS

Beginning preschool is an important developmental transition.

Children are not expected to arrive knowing everything that is expected in a classroom. Learning how to be a student is part of our preschool learning experience.

Teachers will patiently teach and reinforce classroom expectations throughout the year.

Children will learn to:

- Separate from parents or caregivers and transition into the classroom.
- Follow a predictable classroom schedule and routine.
- Follow simple directions from teachers.
- Participate in circle time and group activities for developmentally appropriate periods.
- Transition from one activity to another.
- Share classroom materials.
- Take turns.
- Use words and appropriate communication to express wants, needs, and feelings.

- Respect the personal space of other children.
- Keep hands, feet, and objects to themselves.
- Walk appropriately within the classroom and school.
- Remain with the group and supervising adults.
- Clean up classroom materials.
- Develop increasing independence.
- Treat classmates and adults with kindness and respect.
- Learn appropriate ways to manage frustration, disappointment, and conflict.

These skills develop over time. Teachers understand that young children need routines, repetition, encouragement, redirection, and many opportunities to practice.

TOILET TRAINING REQUIREMENT

All children entering the preschool program must be fully toilet trained before beginning school.

Being fully toilet trained means that a child is generally able to:

- Recognize and communicate the need to use the bathroom.
- Use the toilet independently or with minimal age-appropriate assistance.
- Manage his or her clothing.
- Remain dry for reasonable periods during the school day.
- Participate in appropriate handwashing and bathroom hygiene with age-appropriate guidance.

Children may not attend our preschool program wearing diapers or pull-ups.

We recognize that occasional bathroom accidents can occur, particularly during the transition to school. An occasional accident will be handled discreetly, patiently, and compassionately.

Parents must provide a complete change of labeled clothing to be kept at school.

Frequent accidents, however, may indicate that a child has not yet achieved the level of toilet independence necessary for participation in the program. In these circumstances,

the teacher and principal will communicate with the child's parents to determine an appropriate plan.

Enrollment may need to be temporarily paused until the child is fully toilet trained.

INFORMATION TO SHARE PRIOR TO ENROLLMENT

Parents and guardians know their children best. The more information our teachers have before a child begins preschool, the better prepared we can be to support the child's successful transition.

Prior to enrollment, parents must bring to the attention of the preschool teacher and/or principal any information that may be important in understanding and supporting their child.

This includes previous or current:

- Developmental assessments or screenings.
- Early Intervention services.
- Speech and language assessments or services.
- Occupational or physical therapy assessments or services.
- Behavioral evaluations or concerns.
- Psychological or developmental evaluations.
- Educational assessments.
- Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), service plans, or other educational plans, if applicable.
- Recommendations from previous preschool or childcare programs.
- Previous difficulties in a preschool, daycare, playgroup, or other group setting.
- Significant concerns regarding communication, sensory needs, social interaction, emotional regulation, behavior, learning, attention, transitions, toileting, or safety.

Parents should also communicate concerns they themselves have observed, even if the child has not received a formal assessment or diagnosis.

Sharing this information does not automatically prevent a child from enrolling. Rather, open communication allows the school and family to discuss the child's needs and determine whether our preschool program can appropriately support the child.

The school relies upon parents to provide complete and accurate information regarding their child's development and needs.

SEPARATION AND ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL

For some children, preschool may be their first significant experience away from a parent or caregiver.

Some tears or hesitation during the first days or weeks of school can be developmentally appropriate.

Parents can help by establishing a consistent morning routine, speaking positively about school, arriving on time, and keeping goodbyes loving but brief.

Teachers will comfort and reassure children while helping them become involved in classroom activities.

As children develop trust in their teachers and become familiar with the daily routine, separation generally becomes easier.

If separation difficulties continue for an extended period or significantly interfere with a child's ability to participate in the program, the teacher and parents will discuss strategies to assist the child.

DAILY SCHEDULE AND ROUTINE

Preschool children thrive when their environment is predictable and consistent. For this reason, each preschool classroom follows a developmentally appropriate daily schedule.

Although schedules may vary according to classroom, age, special events, weather, and the needs of the children, the preschool day may include:

- Arrival and morning routines
- Prayer and faith formation
- Free choice and learning centers

- Circle time or morning meeting
- Early literacy and language activities
- Early mathematics activities
- Art and creative experiences
- Music and movement
- Fine-motor activities
- Sensory experiences
- Gross-motor activities
- Snack and/or lunch
- Bathroom and handwashing routines
- Outdoor play
- Stories and read-alouds
- Small-group instruction
- Rest or quiet time
- Social play
- Classroom jobs and responsibilities
- Clean-up
- Preparation for dismissal

Children are expected to gradually adjust to the classroom schedule and participate in the activities of the preschool day.

A child may initially have difficulty transitioning between preferred and non-preferred activities. Teachers will help children develop this important school-readiness skill.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Play is an essential component of early childhood education.

During purposeful play, children develop language, imagination, creativity, problem-solving skills, fine- and gross-motor skills, cooperation, self-regulation, and early academic concepts.

Classroom learning centers may include dramatic play, blocks and construction, art, books and literacy, manipulatives, sensory experiences, mathematics, science, music, and other developmentally appropriate activities.

Teachers thoughtfully plan these experiences so that children are learning while they explore and play.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

An important purpose of preschool is helping children learn how to live, learn, and play successfully with others.

Children will have daily opportunities to develop friendships, participate in cooperative play, practice sharing and turn-taking, communicate feelings, solve age-appropriate problems, and develop empathy for others.

Young children occasionally disagree, become frustrated, cry, or have difficulty sharing. These are normal opportunities for learning.

Teachers will guide children in using appropriate words, making positive choices, understanding classroom expectations, and developing strategies for managing emotions.

Through consistent routines and expectations, children gradually learn that they are important members of a larger classroom community.

CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS

One of the important things children learn in preschool is how to behave appropriately in a classroom with other children.

Teachers understand that these skills must be taught and practiced.

Children will be expected to make developmental progress toward:

- Following reasonable directions from teachers and staff.
- Remaining with the supervised group.
- Walking safely in the classroom and school.
- Keeping hands, feet, and objects to themselves.
- Respecting other children's bodies and personal space.

- Respecting the work and belongings of others.
- Using classroom materials safely and appropriately.
- Using words or other appropriate communication to express needs.
- Waiting and taking turns with adult support.
- Accepting redirection from an adult.
- Participating in clean-up and classroom routines.
- Treating children and adults with kindness and respect.

POSITIVE GUIDANCE AND DISCIPLINE

In our preschool programs, our goal is to teach appropriate behavior.

Teachers use developmentally appropriate positive guidance strategies including:

- Clear and consistent expectations.
- Modeling appropriate behavior.
- Praise and reinforcement of positive behavior.
- Redirection.
- Offering appropriate choices.
- Helping children identify and communicate feelings.
- Teaching problem-solving skills.
- Adjusting activities or the classroom environment when appropriate.
- Helping children learn appropriate strategies for managing frustration.

Staff will intervene promptly when behavior becomes unsafe.

UNSAFE OR SIGNIFICANTLY DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

The safety of every child and staff member is a priority. Preschool children are still developing self-control. An isolated incident will generally be addressed through teaching, redirection, communication, and developmentally appropriate intervention.

Certain behaviors, however, require immediate adult intervention because they create a safety concern.

These may include, but are not limited to:

- Hitting, kicking, biting, scratching, pushing, or intentionally hurting others.
- Throwing objects in a manner that could injure another person.
- Climbing on tables, shelving, furniture, railings, or other unsafe areas.
- Running away from teachers or the supervised group.
- Leaving or attempting to leave a classroom or designated area without permission.
- Repeatedly destroying classroom materials or property.
- Aggressive behavior toward children or adults.
- Persistent screaming or significantly disruptive behavior that prevents the classroom from functioning safely.
- Any behavior that places the child, another child, or a staff member at immediate risk of injury.

If a child's behavior presents an immediate safety concern, a parent or authorized caregiver may be required to pick up the child from school.

When significant or repeated concerns arise, the teacher will communicate with the parent. The teacher, parent, and principal may meet to discuss strategies to help the child become successful.

Parents are expected to work cooperatively with the school when behavioral or developmental concerns are identified.

When a pattern of unsafe or significantly disruptive behavior continues despite reasonable interventions, the school may determine that its preschool program cannot safely or appropriately meet the child's needs.

In such circumstances, enrollment may be suspended, temporarily paused, or discontinued in accordance with applicable school and regulatory requirements.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNS IDENTIFIED DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

Preschool teachers observe children throughout the school day and become familiar with their strengths, interests, learning styles, and developmental needs.

If teachers observe a consistent concern regarding a child, the teacher will communicate the observations to the child's parents. These observations may include concerns regarding:

- Communication
- Learning
- Behavior
- Social interaction
- Emotional regulation
- Attention
- Motor development
- Sensory needs
- Classroom participation
- Overall development

A parent conference may be scheduled to discuss the concerns and determine appropriate next steps.

The school may recommend that parents consult the child's pediatrician, local public school district, Early Intervention provider when age appropriate, or another qualified professional for additional screening or evaluation.

Such recommendations are made to support the child's development and should be viewed as part of the partnership between home and school.

INDEPENDENCE

Preschool provides children with many opportunities to develop independence.

Children will be encouraged to do developmentally appropriate tasks for themselves, including:

- Hanging up belongings.
- Putting classroom materials away.
- Managing coats and other clothing.
- Opening lunch or snack items when able.
- Washing and drying hands.

- Using the bathroom.
- Following classroom routines.
- Making simple choices.
- Asking for help appropriately.
- Taking responsibility for classroom materials.

Parents can reinforce these skills at home by allowing children appropriate opportunities to complete everyday tasks independently.

PARENT-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

Successful preschool experiences are built upon communication, trust, consistency, and cooperation between families and teachers.

Parents are encouraged to communicate with teachers regarding changes at home or other circumstances that may affect their child's school experience.

Likewise, teachers will communicate important observations and concerns to parents.

When concerns arise, parents are asked to speak directly with the classroom teacher. If additional assistance is necessary, the principal may become involved.

It is important that home and school work together and provide children with consistent expectations.

PROGRESS AND PARENT CONFERENCES

Teachers monitor children's development through observation, classroom participation, work samples, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Families will receive information about their child's progress during meetings that are scheduled in October.

Parents or teachers may request a conference whenever concerns arise.

ATTENDANCE AND PUNCTUALITY

Regular attendance and punctual arrival help children develop routines and feel secure within the classroom community.

Arriving late can make transitions more difficult for young children and may interrupt classroom activities already underway. If your child will be late for school, please park in the back of the school and walk them to the door of their classroom.

Parents are encouraged to make regular and timely attendance a priority and should notify the school when their child will be absent.

DISMISSAL AND AUTHORIZED PICK-UP

Children will be released only to parents, guardians, or other individuals authorized by the family according to school procedures.

The school may request photo identification from an individual whose identity is not known to staff.

Parents must notify the school of changes to authorized pick-up arrangements.

Children must be picked up promptly at the conclusion of their school day unless attending the after-school program.

CLOTHING AND PERSONAL BELONGINGS

Children should wear comfortable, school-appropriate clothing that allows them to participate fully in classroom activities and manage bathroom needs as independently as possible. Children should wear sneakers to school.

Because preschool involves painting, outdoor play, sensory activities, and other hands-on experiences, clothing may occasionally become dirty.

Parents must send a complete change of seasonally appropriate clothing to school, including underwear and socks.

All clothing and personal items should be clearly labeled with the child's name.

Children should not bring toys or valuable personal items to school unless requested by the teacher.

OUTDOOR PLAY

Outdoor and gross-motor play are important parts of the preschool program.

Children should arrive dressed appropriately for the weather and prepared to participate outdoors when conditions permit.

Coats, hats, gloves, footwear, and other seasonal belongings should be clearly labeled.

When outdoor play is not appropriate because of weather or other conditions, teachers will provide opportunities for indoor movement and gross-motor activities when possible.

FOOD, SNACKS, AND ALLERGIES

Families must inform the school of all food allergies, dietary restrictions, and medically necessary accommodations before their child attends school. St. Thomas the Apostle School is a nut-free school.

Required medical documentation and emergency medication must be provided according to school health procedures.

Because classroom allergy needs can change, parents must follow teacher and school nurse guidance regarding foods that may or may not be sent into a particular classroom.

Children will be encouraged, but never forced, to eat. Food will not be withheld as a disciplinary consequence.

REST AND QUIET TIME

When a classroom schedule includes rest or quiet time, children will be provided with an age-appropriate opportunity to rest.

Children who do not sleep will be expected to participate quietly so that classmates who need sleep can rest.

Children must have a nap mat at school for rest time.

BIRTHDAYS AND CLASSROOM CELEBRATIONS

Preschool classrooms enjoy recognizing birthdays and special occasions. Families should consult the classroom teacher before sending food, treats, favors, or other items. Peanut free items only are allowed in the school.

Allergy and health considerations may limit what may be distributed within the classroom.

HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

Families must provide all health records, physical examination information, immunization documentation, and other forms required by the school and applicable regulations.

Parents are responsible for keeping emergency contact and health information current.

A child who is ill should remain home when attendance would prevent the child from comfortably participating in school activities, require care beyond what staff can reasonably provide while supervising the group, or create a significant risk of spreading illness to others. Children who have a fever, diarrhea, or are vomiting should remain at home for at least 24 hours. Students should be completely free of these symptoms before returning to school.

Parents must be reachable during the school day. If a child becomes ill or is injured and needs to leave school, the parent, guardian, or authorized emergency contact must arrange for prompt pick-up.

MEDICATION

Medication may be administered only in accordance with school health procedures and applicable requirements.

Required parent and health care provider authorizations must be completed before medication can be administered.

Medication must be provided in its original labeled container and delivered directly to the appropriate school personnel.

Medication should never be placed in a child's backpack or lunchbox unless specifically authorized under an approved health plan.

INJURIES AND INCIDENTS

Minor injuries will be treated using appropriate first-aid procedures and communicated to families as required.

Parents will be contacted promptly for significant injuries, head injuries, unusual symptoms, or circumstances requiring additional medical attention.

Emergency medical services will be contacted when warranted.

EMERGENCY AND SAFETY PROCEDURES

St. Thomas the Apostle School maintains procedures for emergencies and conducts age-appropriate safety drills.

Preschool staff will supervise and reassure children during drills and emergencies.

Families are responsible for maintaining current telephone numbers, emergency contacts, and authorized pick-up information.

During an emergency, the school will use its established communication systems to provide families with information and instructions when appropriate.

CHILD PROTECTION AND MANDATED REPORTING

The safety and well-being of children are of the utmost importance.

School personnel are mandated reporters and are required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate authorities.

St. Thomas the Apostle School follows applicable diocesan, school, and legal requirements concerning child protection and safe-environment practices.

STUDENT RECORDS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Student information is maintained according to applicable school policies and legal requirements.

Information regarding a child's development, health, assessments, services, or behavior may be shared with school personnel who have a legitimate educational, health, safety, or administrative need for the information.

Parents are responsible for providing relevant assessments, educational plans, health plans, and professional recommendations necessary for the school to make informed decisions regarding the child's educational experience and safety.

SCHOOL CALENDAR AND CLOSINGS

The preschool program follows the St. Thomas the Apostle School calendar, including scheduled holidays, vacations, professional development days, and other school closings.

Weather-related delays, closings, or emergency schedule changes will be communicated through the school's established notification system.

Families should review the school calendar and preschool communications regularly.

WITHDRAWAL OR DISCONTINUATION OF ENROLLMENT

St. Thomas the Apostle School seeks to resolve concerns through communication and partnership whenever possible.

There may be circumstances, however, in which continued enrollment is no longer appropriate.

The school may suspend, pause, or discontinue preschool enrollment when:

- The school cannot safely or appropriately meet the child's needs within the structure and resources of the program.
- A child's repeated behavior creates a significant safety concern for the child, other children, or staff.
- Required enrollment, health, developmental, or educational information has not been provided.
- Parents or guardians are unwilling to cooperate with reasonable school efforts to address significant concerns.
- School policies are repeatedly or substantially violated.
- Other circumstances make continued placement inappropriate.

Decisions regarding continued enrollment will be made by school administration after consideration of the individual circumstances and applicable school, diocesan, and regulatory requirements.

OUR SHARED GOAL

Preschool is a wonderful period of growth.

Children enter our program with different personalities, experiences, strengths, and developmental needs.

Over the course of the year, we hope to see each child become increasingly confident, independent, kind, curious, responsible, and comfortable within a school environment.

Our teachers are committed to providing patience, encouragement, structure, faith, and love while maintaining clear expectations that allow every child to learn and grow safely.

By working together, families and teachers can provide children with a strong foundation for their future years at St. Thomas the Apostle School.

Welcome to our preschool family. We look forward to sharing this important beginning with you and your child.

PARENT/GUARDIAN HANDBOOK ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Please sign and return this page to St. Thomas the Apostle School.

I/We acknowledge that I/we have received and reviewed the **2026–2027 St. Thomas the Apostle School Preschool Parent Handbook**.

I/We understand that preschool is a structured educational environment and that children are expected to develop the social, behavioral, communication, toileting, and independence skills necessary to participate safely in a group setting.

I/We understand that children must be fully toilet trained before attending preschool.

I/We agree to provide the school with complete and accurate information regarding prior assessments, evaluations, educational or therapeutic services, behavioral concerns, developmental concerns, and other information that may be important in supporting our child.

I/We understand that the school will communicate with us when concerns arise, and that continued enrollment depends upon the school's ability to safely and appropriately serve our child within the preschool program.

Child's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____