



Benchmark Family Services
Watertown City School District
Full Day Pre-K
Family Handbook

Program History

Benchmark Family Services has been part of the Watertown community since 2000.

Initially, the Benchmark program was a stand-alone facility with classrooms for preschoolers with and without disabilities, as well as daycare for infants and toddlers. About 6 years ago, Benchmark Family Services started contracting with the Watertown City School District as a community-based organization to provide play-based preschool classrooms. After the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Benchmark Family Services had to stop providing specialized services to preschoolers with disabilities and daycare.

As of the 2021-2022 school year, Benchmark Family Services provides 3 play-based preschool classrooms in the Watertown City School District, which are located at Ohio Street School.

Program Philosophy

“Play is our brain’s favorite way of learning.” (Diane Ackerman)

A growing body of research establishes relationships between children’s play and their development in several areas, including language, executive function, mathematics and spatial skills, scientific thinking, and social-emotional development.

In the field called the science of learning, there are four key ingredients of successful learning: learning occurs best when children are mentally active (not passive), engaged (not distracted), socially interactive (with peers or adults), and building meaningful connections in their lives.

The field of brain development tells us that play helps to shape the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways.

Children’s play allows them to explore, identify, negotiate, take risks, and create meaning. Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, increased language development, and are better able to regulate their behaviors, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning.

The Pre-K program embraces a play-based curriculum. When you enter the classrooms, you see children actively engaged in play activities. Does this mean it is a free-for-all? No. It means the teacher has purposely planned centers in the classroom to promote certain aspects or goals of learning. This is called guided play (or light adult scaffolding). The teachers and other classroom staff are there to guide the children in their exploration and discoveries in the various centers.

The classroom schedule is posted where children can view it. It is the same every day. When looking at it you see indoor and outdoor activity time daily, large, and small group activities, music and movement, snack, and mealtimes. Given our geographical location, outdoor time is not possible every day, but big body play (large muscle) is possible through activities in the gym when the weather does not allow for outdoor play. Staff set up gross motor activities in the gym, such as an obstacle course, kick ball, or parachute games. The daily schedule also reflects individual and small group activities, as well as quiet activities. Children spend at least one third of their preschool day engaged in guided play activities.

The curriculum used is The Creative Curriculum. Children will explore various topics throughout the year to include units of study on sand, insects, tubes and tunnels, signs, and simple machines. This curriculum aligns with the New York State Pre-K Learning Standards.

During the school year classroom staff will be observing the children and taking notes, pictures, and videos on what they do and say. This information is then entered to a program called Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG). This program will assign the information to various categories. During the year, the teacher can share this information with you to show you the progress your child has made. At the end of the school year, this program can produce reports on all children to show where they started developmentally and where they ended developmentally.

The program also helps guide the teacher in planning as it can reveal which children need more in terms of guided play activities and which children need more challenges.

Because the program places emphasis on children's social-emotional development, we use the *Second Step* curriculum to facilitate social-emotional growth, coping skills, conflict resolution and problem solving.

Sometimes we hear from parents that they have concerns we are not teaching the children their letters and numbers. Children must be able to get along with others, follow directions and communicate their wants and needs before learning letters and numbers. Academics are woven throughout the curriculum but are not the focus. Children learn through play.

Staff Qualifications

We are fortunate to have highly qualified staff working in our classrooms along with great staff retention. All staff are fingerprinted and cleared through the New York State Registry for Child Abuse and Maltreatment. Teachers in the program have teacher certification appropriate for this age level. Teacher assistants have NY State Teacher Assistant certification. Benchmark pays for all classroom staff to obtain and maintain CPR and first aid certification. Classroom teachers participate in trainings provided through the Watertown City School District on an annual basis.

The program administrator holds a master's degree in Early Childhood Education and NYS certification as a school administrator, with 30+ years of experience in this field.

Admission Policy

The Pre-K program in the Watertown City School District is open to all students who meet the following requirements:

1. Family must reside in the Watertown City School District
2. Child must be 3 years old or 4 years old by December 1 of the enrolling school year

In addition, all children must be current on immunizations as set forth by the New York State Department of Health. If a child is not current, the parents must present a written catch-up schedule prepared by the primary health care provider to come into compliance with immunizations.

Parents must present a current physical for their child within 30 days of enrollment.

Parents must complete an enrollment packet, including the Home Language Questionnaire, intake packet, and ACES questionnaire, and submit it along with supporting documentation consisting of the child's birth certificate, family's proof of residence, and child's physical and vaccine records. If an IEP exists for the child, or there are any orders of custody or protection, these must be submitted as well.

Parents whose students require medications during the school day, including those prescribed an Epi-Pen, must provide doctor's orders and the actual medication/pen to the school nurse.

Parents are responsible for providing extra clothing, suitable outdoor clothing and footwear, diapers and wipes, special food to meet dietary restrictions, and any special equipment their child needs during the school day.

Meet & Greet (Open House)

During the Meet & Greet prior to the start of the school year, individual classroom teachers provide information to families.

Families are invited to attend the Meet & Greet via phone message, use of the Remind app, through the Parent Square app, or by email.

Copies of the Handbook are made available to the parents/families. The Handbook is also posted online for parents who were unable to attend the or who enrolled their children after the start of the school year.

During the Meet & Greet, parents and families tour the classroom and meet staff. Families are asked to bring a picture of their child to put with their printed name at their cubby. Staff also take pictures of the child with their family and take the child's picture individually.

Families can pick up information regarding the breakfast and lunch procedures and the menu for September, information about what happens if the child gets sick at school, pick-up and drop-off procedures, how to reach the teacher or staff, and other information pertaining to the particular classroom.

Attendance

Benchmark Family Services' Pre-K program in the Watertown City School District follows the Watertown City School District calendar. You can obtain a copy of the calendar from the Watertown City School District website, on Benchmark's website, or by asking your child's teacher for a copy.

Teachers will send out a message using the Remind app if there is a change to the calendar. Additionally, Benchmark will also post changes to its Facebook page.

Consistent attendance is particularly important.

Children who attend school and participate in school activities on a regular basis always have better outcomes than children who miss school or whose attendance is spotty. The expectation is that your child will be in attendance regularly unless they are sick.

We realize families are busy and sometimes things happen that may result in a late arrival to school. We get it. However, when children miss part of the routine in the classroom it can throw off their entire day. When children are late, they are missing portions of the day's activities which are regularly part of the routine.

One of the goals of the full day Pre-K program is to provide children with as many learning and socialization opportunities as possible before Kindergarten. If your child is missing school on a regular basis, then they are missing learning opportunities, socialization opportunities and play opportunities.

If you and your family must be gone for an extended period, please let the classroom teacher know. We certainly understand extenuating circumstances like hospitalizations, serious illness, or other issues that impact the child's family in such a way as to cause extended absenteeism.

Some children make the adjustment to a setting outside their home quicker and easier than others. If your child is having difficulty adjusting to school, please discuss this with the teacher.

If a child is sick, please contact the classroom teacher to let them know. If your child is absent 2 or 3 days in a row and we have not heard from you, we will contact you.

It is important that you stay connected with the teacher regarding any health or family issues that may affect your child's attendance.

School Closings/Delays

When the school district announces a closing or delay due to weather, the Pre-K program is also delayed or closed.

If the school is closing early, the Pre-K program will dismiss early as well.

We will contact you to provide you with more information regarding pick-up time. Please make sure that we have current phone numbers to reach you. If you move or if you change your phone number, you need to let us know right away.

Also, when you designate someone to act on your behalf picking up your child from school, please be sure that their phone is working and that they have transportation and valid identification. No one under 18 years of age can pick up children from school.

If you decide to make a change to the persons allowed to pick up your child, you must tell us. We cannot release your child to anyone not listed. We will ask you to send in written information to update your pickup list. This is for your child's safety.

What Should My Child Bring?

Your child should have a small backpack with the following items:

- A complete change of clothing including socks and underwear.
- Lunch or snack (if there are special dietary requirements or you prefer to send food from home over school-provided meals)

All other supplies are provided.

We discourage children from bringing toys from home because these can get lost or broken.

Breakfast & Lunch

The Watertown City School District participates in the Federal Breakfast and Lunch program, and all children are eligible to receive free breakfast and lunch.

Teachers send home monthly breakfast and lunch menus to let parents know what is being served. Parents have the option of sending lunch with their child or having their child get lunch at school.

Classroom staff sit with the children at lunch time. Staff are there to help and talk with the children.

Please note: If your child is on a specific diet prescribed by a doctor, we need to know this. If your child has food allergies, you need to inform us on the enrollment paperwork.

Children's Behavior

The first few weeks of school are dedicated to helping children adjust to their new classroom environment, personnel, and routine; learning how to play with others and to play with the items in various centers in the classroom; responding appropriately to adult directives, working to get along with their new friends, assisting them with problem solving and conflict resolution, reassuring them, and supporting them in their efforts.

Teachers recognize that some children need more time than others to make an adjustment to an unfamiliar environment and new people. Some children have anxiety over being separated from the parent which can cause a variety of reactions.

Teachers will collaborate closely with you and your child to make the transition to preschool as smooth as possible.

Sometimes the child may need extra supports to help them in their adjustment period. Examples of extra supports may be: a picture of mom to carry in their pocket and to look at when they feel the need, to sit in the 'cozy cube' in the classroom to regain their calm, a visual schedule to provide them with something that they can see and manipulate so they have a better sense of when mom, dad, or caregiver will be coming back to get them. Usually, the need for these supports fades away after a few weeks.

Sometimes, even with the extra supports in place, the child continues to have difficulty getting along in the classroom or demonstrates aggressive behaviors (hitting, punching, slapping, biting, throwing items, etc.). The teacher will contact you to discuss the issue and ask for your assistance and insight.

Physical or corporal punishment is never used in any classroom.

We will ask you to meet with us and help develop a behavior plan that emphasizes positive behavior support for your child. The steps to achieving the desired behavior are small and take time.

Most importantly, we regard the parent as a partner in their child's learning journey. We want you to collaborate closely with us to resolve any adjustment issues.

Child Guidance

Preschool children participating in the full day Pre-K program come from homes with various views on child rearing. Some parents are more permissive than others. Some homes have more rules than others. In the classroom, the rules are the same for everyone. It is the teacher's job to assist and guide the children in developing their sense of self, figuring out where the boundaries are, how to make friends, how to be a friend, and how to develop a sense of fairness with the other children.

To teach the children to be respectful and provide each child with the guidance that they need, the program has wide-ranging parameters to help guide children's behaviors.

We look at each child's developmental age when looking to change a negative behavior. What is most appropriate for this individual child? It is not a "one size fits all" situation.

Children are approached in a calm, positive manner.

Children are redirected to another activity, or to another place in the classroom. Most often the teacher will speak to the child about their behavior.

Children may be separated from the group briefly, only long enough to gain self-control, but must be in view of the teacher or the teaching assistant at all times.

Corporal punishment is prohibited. No child may be isolated in an adjacent room, hallway, closet, darkened area, or anywhere the child cannot be seen and supervised.

As part of this program, we hope to have children gain control over their own emotions. We use the Pyramid Model to promote positive behaviors. This model encourages the children to:
Be Better, Be Friendly, Be Safe

Gathering Information, Parent Conferences & Portfolios

To provide the most developmentally appropriate program and activities for your child, we will ask you to fill out a questionnaire in the beginning of the school year. This is called the *Ages and Stages Questionnaire* (ASQ). Additionally, the teacher will also complete the ASQ based on their observations of your child.

In the fall, the teacher will schedule a parent conference with you to review the results of the two questionnaires and talk about your child's strengths and areas of need. This is a suitable time to set some goals for your child for the school year. This is also a suitable time to share any information that you feel is important.

In the spring, the teacher will administer the ASQ again and record the scores as previously. This practice allows us to track children's progress over the course of the school year.

The teacher also keeps a portfolio on each child. The portfolio contains written observations, pictures, samples of your child's coloring, writing, cutting, painting, video clips, and other pieces of information. Like the ASQs, these portfolios are kept in a locked drawer in the classroom to protect the confidentiality of the child. The information in the portfolio may be shared with you at conference time.

Special Considerations

If your child has special medical needs, for example: diabetes care, nebulizer use, inhaler use, or catheterization, you must contact the school nurse in the school your child will be attending.

If your child has an IEP and receives specialized services, please contact your child's service provider to let them know that your child is attending the Pre-K program. Your student can receive services with their therapist while they are in the classroom.

Toilet Training

We are often asked if a child who is not yet toilet trained can attend the program. Yes.

If the child is not toilet trained, we will make every effort to help with this process. In the meantime, the teacher and the parent will work on a plan for toilet training so that the same language and method is used both at home and at school.

Parents must supply diapers, pull ups and wipes for the child.

Administering Medicine in a School Program

If your child needs to have medicine administered during his/her stay in the program, the following guidelines apply:

1. Only the nurse can administer medication, whether it is prescribed or over the counter.
2. A written order from a licensed prescriber is required.
3. Parents must sign a written statement requesting the administration of the medication as ordered by the licensed prescriber.
4. The parent or guardian must assume responsibility to have the medication delivered directly to the school nurses' office in a properly labeled original container.
5. The labeled original container must display the following:
 - a. Child's name
 - b. Name and phone number of the pharmacy
 - c. Licensed prescriber's name
 - d. Date and number of refills
 - e. Name of medication and dosage
 - f. Frequency of administration
 - g. Route (or how) the medication is to be given and /or other directions
6. Over the counter medications must be in their original manufacturer's container with the child's name affixed to the container.
7. If the medication is a controlled substance, a nurse will count the medication upon receipt from the parent. Medication may not be transported daily to and from the program. Parents need to ask the pharmacist for two containers: one to remain at home and one to remain at school.
8. If there is a need for administration of emergency medication (injectable or oral) to a child for extreme hypersensitivity, any school staff responding to an emergency may administer.
9. If medication is to be given while a child is on a field trip or off program grounds during the program day, a med certified staff member will place the medication in a single dose medication envelope and label as follows:
 - a. Child's name
 - b. Name of medication and dosage
 - c. Date and time to be given
 - d. Any special instructions
 - e. Possible side effects
 - f. Route of how medication is to be given.
10. When the medication is changed or discontinued or at the end of the school year that the child's enrolled, the medication will be returned to the parent for disposal. The parent must sign a release to stop medication.

Mandated Reporting

New York State recognizes certain professionals to be equipped to hold the key role of mandated reporters of child abuse and maltreatment. These professionals include teachers, teacher assistants, teacher aides, and other school personnel.

Mandated reporters are required to report suspected child abuse or maltreatment when, in their official or professional role, they are presented with a reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or maltreatment.

What is Child Abuse and Maltreatment?

Abuse: Abuse encompasses the most serious harms committed. An abused child is one whose parent or other person legally responsible for his or her care inflicts serious physical injury upon the child, creates a substantial risk of injury, or commits a sex offense against the child. Abuse also includes situations where a parent or other person legally responsible knowingly allows someone else to inflict such harm on a child.

Maltreatment (including Neglect): Maltreatment means that a child's physical, mental, emotional conditions have been impaired, or placed in imminent danger of impairment, by failure of the child's parent or other person legally responsible to exercise a minimum of care by:

- Failing to provide sufficient food, clothing, shelter, education, OR
- Failing to provide proper supervision, guardianship, or medical care (refers to all medical issues, including dental, optometric, or surgical care, OR
- Inflicting excessive corporal punishment, abandoning the child, or misusing alcohol or other drugs to the extent that the child was placed in imminent danger.

Poverty or other financial inability to provide the above is not maltreatment.

Classroom staff are mandated reporters and are obliged by NYS law to report child abuse and maltreatment. The call to the NYS Child Abuse Hotline for Mandated Reporters is confidential. School staff take this step only when necessary for the care and well-being of the child.

Parent Engagement

Due to Covid -19, all or some Parent Engagement activities may be suspended.

Throughout the course of the school year there are activities planned especially for parents and families. We want you to engage with your child at school and during school-related activities. Research tells us that children whose parents are engaged in their child's school program and school-related activities, have better outcomes than children whose parents are not engaged.

Parent engagement activities may include but are not limited to the following: going on a field trip, coming to school to celebrate parents/legal guardians with special activities for a specific holiday, attending a "lunch bunch" discussion on a topic chosen by parents, sharing your talent or special interest with your child's class, or helping out in the classroom.

We want open communication with parents/caregivers.

One of the goals of this program is to build a trustworthy relationship with the parent/caregiver and their child. Having a good relationship with the school is noteworthy for student success starting at the Pre-K level.

Resources and Supports for Families

Jefferson County New York offers a wide variety of resources for families: from assistance through the Department of Social Services and the North Country Prenatal/Perinatal Council, to the Rowell P. Flower Memorial Library offering toddler and preschool story hours and activities, to the Farmer's Market (May through October) supporting families by offering nutritious foods which can be purchased using EBT or SNAP benefits.

The Jefferson County Office of Community Services can assist families looking for Early Intervention Services or Preschool Special Education Services at no cost to families. This office can also assist with locating mental health services.

There are various counseling agencies available in the county, some of which have a sliding fee scale for services.

Teachers can provide information on request. Additionally, we try to provide information, such as dates for the farmers' markets, on our Facebook page.

Diversity, Inclusion, Multilanguage Learners

All children are welcome to attend the Pre-K program. Children from this community come from a wide variety of families, cultures, and living situations, religions, skin colors, and financial backgrounds. Family units may include single parent families, blended families, or families with two moms or two dads. Children may be living with foster or adoptive parents. Families may be living with grandparents or other relatives.

Because of the varied nature of families and living conditions of children in our community, we talk about, teach, and support diversity in the Pre-K classroom. The concept is to present diversified families and living situations to help children understand and respect the different situations of their classmates.

The Creative Curriculum used in our Pre-K classrooms, celebrates diversity through its literature choices. Cultural differences and acceptance are noted throughout the school year through various holidays and literature allowing children to be noticed and encouraging discussion.

Transitions

First Entering the Program

If your child is a 3-year-old entering a structured program for the first time, it is expected that they may have some apprehension or be a bit nervous. There are some things you can do to prepare your child for this transition so both of you will feel comfortable.

- Create quick good-bye rituals: keeping your good-byes quick and sweet will serve you well.
- Be consistent: Practice the same drop off ritual every day. Make it a routine. A routine can diminish anxiety and build independence with your child.
- Attention: When separating, give them your full attention, be loving and affectionate.
- Be specific: When you discuss your return to pick up your child, provide specifics that your child will understand. Tell them when you will be back in terms that they will understand such as: "I will pick you up after lunch/snack/nap." Help the child adjust to being apart from you but define when you will be back.
- Practice being apart: Having your child visit with a relative, such as grandma, for periods of time is an effective way to do this. Scheduling playdates with friends is another effective way. Before sending your child off to a structured program, practice going to school by playing on the school playground, driving past the school, or calling the school and scheduling a short tour. These can make the transition smoother for you and your child.
- Read about going to school. Suggested books: *Llama Llama Misses Mama* by Anna Dewdney and *The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn.

Transitioning to Kindergarten

Leaving Pre-K and going to kindergarten is a big step for young children and their families. We send home information about the dates for introduction to kindergarten programs, such as *Ready, Set, Fun!* Families and their Pre-K students are invited to participate at the school they will be attending in fall. Information goes home via the Parent Square app, paper copies, Facebook, and the Watertown City School District website.

Because the Pre-K program is located in the school building, the children see the kindergarten classrooms and teachers daily. They are also familiar with other school staff, such as the principal, secretary, nurse, and janitors. As the principal makes her rounds every day, she stops to say hello to the Pre-K children.

Your child's Pre-K teacher prepares a kindergarten transition form on each child, which is passed on to the kindergarten teacher assigned for the fall. This form has information such as: sample drawing that your child completed, sample of your child's cutting skills, the child's independent skill level, and play skills.

Parents can make the transition go more smoothly for their children by being supportive and encouraging, spending time reading to their children daily, engaging in age-appropriate play activities to support skill development, such as playing memory games, doing puzzles, drawing, playing outdoors, and going on short trips such as to the zoo or the library.

Celebrations at School

We celebrate special days at school such as children's birthdays and other noted holidays. If you want to send in treats for your child's birthday you need to make sure that the items are store bought (no homemade anything, please). Cupcakes are always an excellent choice, especially the mini cupcakes. They are just the right size.

If the teacher asks for donations for a party at school the food items need to be individually wrapped.

Additionally, please check with the teacher prior to sending in anything in case there are children (or a child) with serious food allergies.