



Merrillville Community School Corporation
Preschool
Family Handbook
2026 - 2027

Contact Information:

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Merrillville, IN 46410

Preschool Main Office Phone Number: (219) 756-5940

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Family Handbook
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The purpose of this handbook is to provide families with information regarding the services, policies, procedures, and regulations of the MCSC Preschool program. The information contained in this handbook may be modified by changes in federal, state or local regulations. This handbook will be available on the parent board at your center's location and on the MCSC Preschool website.

Program Director: Mrs. Kate O'Sullivan, if Mrs. Kate O'Sullivan is not available, the building principal is the next point of contact in the event of an emergency and legally responsible for Merrillville Community School Corporation Preschool.

Early Childhood Director:	Mrs. Christine Waugh
Fieler Elementary School:	Mrs. LaFonda Morris
Iddings Elementary School:	Mr. James Stamper
Miller Elementary School:	Mrs. Jennifer Griffin

MERRILLVILLE COMMUNITY SCHOOL CORPORATION

Mission Statement

WE challenge our students with an inclusive, world-class education that affords exciting opportunities for growth and development. WE engage our families and community through timely and accurate communications that cultivate dynamic relationships. OUR commitment establishes Merrillville schools as the dominant leader of relentless success.

MERRILLVILLE COMMUNITY SCHOOL CORPORATION

Vision Statement

Merrillville Community School Corporation provides high-quality learning experiences that prepare students to be productive citizens in a global society.

Welcome to Merrillville Preschool!

We're excited to partner with you and your child on this early learning journey. This handbook outlines our mission, policies, and the many services we offer to support your child's growth.

Please take time to read it thoroughly, and don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or ideas. We're here for you—and we thank you for choosing Merrillville Preschool.

Merrillville Community School Corporation Preschool is committed to serving eligible families in Ross Township. Our programs key features include:

- Highly qualified staff—a bachelor's level lead teacher and one or two classroom aides
- Small group size— 20 students in full day sessions
- Intentional instruction—based on best practices for teaching and learning
- Parent-Family and Community Engagement Services—both expected and strongly supported with well trained and experienced staff
- Reflective supervision and practice model is implemented
- Emphasis on social-emotional development and self-regulation skills
- Enhanced focus on language, literacy, and math learning to promote school readiness
- Interdisciplinary approach for better outcomes for children and families
- Family life skills training
- Collect data on service delivery to drive decisions for improved program and child outcomes

Our preschool program is committed to understanding, respecting, reflecting, and being responsive to the cultures of all people, but particularly to those of our enrolled children, families and staff. Merrillville Community School Corporation Preschool promises to succeed in creating a diverse learning environment that respects, accepts, and includes all children, families, visitors, and staff members regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs in order to embrace the diversity of our preschool community.

Preparing for your child's first day in a center-based classroom

Starting preschool can be an exciting yet emotional milestone—especially if it's your child's first time away from home. For children who are new to the program, it's completely normal to feel unsure or even cry during those early days of separation. Our preschool staff understand how important this transition is and will work closely with you to help your child feel safe, comfortable, and confident in their new classroom environment. Please know that adjustment takes time, and we are here to support both you and your child every step of the way.

Parent Rights and Responsibilities

My rights as a Preschool Parent

1. To take part in the major decisions affecting the planning and operations of the program
2. To be welcomed in the classroom through participation with a qualified background check on file
3. To participate without fear of endangering my child's right to be in the program
4. To be informed regularly about my child's progress
5. To always be treated with respect and dignity
6. To expect guidance for my child from the preschool staff
7. To be able to learn about the operation of the program including the budget, and the level of education and experience required to fill various staff positions by attending monthly policy committee meetings
8. To take part in planning and carrying out programs designed to increase both personal and professional skills in areas that will improve my well-being
9. To be informed about all community resources concerned with health, education, and the improvement of any condition in my family life

My responsibilities as a Preschool Parent

1. To learn as much as possible about the program and to take part in major policy decisions by attending monthly policy committee meetings
2. To accept preschool as an opportunity through which I can improve my life and the lives of my children
3. To be active in my child's classroom as an observer or a volunteer, and to contribute my services in whatever way I can toward the enrichment of the program. Qualified background checks are required. If you volunteer more than 8 hours in a month state licensing requires a TB test to be on file
4. To ensure that my child is at school on time daily
5. To provide parent leadership by taking part in elections and to explain the program to other parents encouraging their full participation
6. To welcome teachers and staff into my home to discuss ways in which I can help with my child's development connecting both school and home experiences
7. To work with teachers, staff, and other parents in a cooperative way
8. To guide my child with firmness that is both loving and protective
9. To offer constructive criticism of the program and defend it against unfair practices
10. To take advantage of program design supporting an increase in knowledge about child development and skills in areas of possible employment
11. To become involved in community programs which help to improve health, education, and recreation for all
12. To behave and dress appropriately while on school property

Attendance

The program requires a minimum of 93% average daily attendance, which is equivalent to one absence a month per child. Attendance is analyzed on a monthly basis to ensure each child is regular attendance.

- Parents need to ensure that their child attends every day and arrives at the center on time. Children who attend our program daily and on time experience better outcomes than those children who attend only occasionally. Staff will monitor attendance everyday via the sign in sheet. Please contact the center as early as possible if your child will be absent or late that day.
- If your child is absent and we have not heard from you within one hour of the start of class, we will call to verify the reason for the absence. If we are unsuccessful in contacting you, then your family advocate may do a home visit checking to see if support can be offered to ensure your child attends school regularly.
- If a child is absent three consecutive times without contact, the family advocate will initiate contact with a home visit. Family advocates will also collaborate with the parent/guardian on an attendance plan.

In circumstances where the parent/guardian cannot establish a regular attendance pattern and it does not seem feasible to include the child in the program, the child will be withdrawn from the program.

- If a child is withdrawn from the program and the parent wishes to re-enroll, the parent must reapply to the program. The child will then go on the Head Start waitlist and will be considered for enrollment if and when a vacancy occurs.
- If there is a planned absence (scheduled vacation or family visit) or even an extended emergency absence (hospitalization, etc.), it is the responsibility of the parent to contact their family advocate to discuss the situation in order to establish an expected return date and maintain the child's enrollment. If the child does not attend on the expected return date, the child may be at risk of being excluded from the program.

- The following shall be considered valid reasons for student absences with appropriate documentation:
 - A. Personal illness (followed by a doctor's note after 3 consecutive absences)
 - B. Death in the immediate family
 - C. Court attendance required by legal authorities
 - D. Dental and medical appointments (must be arranged in advance)
 - E. Religious holiday
 - F. Other emergency or unusual circumstances as approved by the Program Director.
- After the 3rd absence in a school year, appropriate documentation (parent note not included) must be provided for an excused absence. The Merrillville Community School Corporation, however, does recognize that vacations and out-of-town trips do not always coincide with school vacations. However, we strongly recommend that you make every effort to coincide your vacations around the school calendar.
- **Arrival Time (7:35-7:50am):** Children need to arrive and be signed in on time to class in order to fully benefit from the program. If you arrive tardy you will have to call the family advocate to meet you at the door to sign in.
- If your child is tardy more than three times, the family advocate will require the parent to set up a meeting to discuss the importance of prompt arrival to school and be put on an attendance plan.
- **Departure Time (2:20pm):** Children must be signed out and picked up at dismissal time. Parents or other caregivers (18 years of age or older) must have a valid government issued ID to pick up the child. All approved individuals must be on the pick up list. Changes to the pick up list must be made in person with the family advocate. We will NOT accept a driver's license on a cell phone. Parents should plan to be at the site ten minutes prior to dismissal time. If a parent is unable to pick up their child on time, it is their responsibility to notify site staff in advance as well as to arrange for someone on the child's *Emergency Contact List* to pick up the child. If there are circumstances that make picking up the child on time difficult, please contact your child's Head Start site – together

you may be able to find a solution. A child WILL NOT be released to an individual who appears impaired or intoxicated.

- For both drop off and pick up, parents must park their vehicle and walk the child to the center doors. When in the school parking lot we strongly discourage idling vehicles, except if vehicles need to idle in extreme heat or cold to maintain interior or engine temperatures.
- If a child is not picked up past class dismissal time and no arrangements have been made with site staff to have the child picked up by another authorized person, site staff may contact the Department of Child Protective Services. At no time will faculty hold the child responsible for the situation or discuss the issue with the child.

Tardies and late pick up that occur more than three times will result in creating an attendance plan with the family advocate. Failure to comply with the attendance plan will result in the child's removal from the program.

Health Services

Requirements for Preventive Care, Screenings and Immunizations

School readiness begins with health. The State of Indiana has requirements for children before and after their enrollment in the Head Start program.

- All Merrillville preschool children must have a current oral exam prior to starting and that is updated every 6 months
- All Merrillville preschool children must have a current physical prior to starting and that is updated yearly. The physical must be signed and dated by a MD, DO, PA or ARNP.
- All Merrillville preschool children must have up to date immunizations prior to starting and must be kept up to date. Immunizations are to be signed by a physician (DO or MD), Physical Assistant (PA), Nurse Practitioner (ARNP), or Certified Medical Assistant (CMA). Provisional certificates of immunization and religious/medical exemptions for immunizations will be accepted according to Indiana's immunization law.
- Lead Awareness: Lead exposure and poisoning remains a serious environmental health hazard for Head Start children nationwide. Our program will provide various opportunities throughout the year to educate families on the importance of lead testing and offer free lead screenings to children in need.

- Growth Assessments: Each Head Start child's height and weight will be measured twice a year by staff. The first measurement will be completed within the first month of school and the second measurement will be in March.
- Daily Health Check Upon arrival each day at center-based classrooms, your child will be observed by staff for signs of head lice, illness, or injury. If any signs are present, you will be notified immediately.

Medications

- If medication is necessary during school hours, you will need to fill out a *Medication Authorization Form* which is required for each individual medication. Prescribed and over the counter medications (i.e. cough syrup) will only be accepted on school grounds with a written order by a healthcare provider. School nurses will be responsible for administering medication. If there is an emergency event during school hours, program staff will take standard emergency precaution by providing CPR/First Aid and contacting 911, as needed. Parents/guardians are urged to always keep staff informed on the status of children requiring medication and provide official documentation.
- Rescue medications must be on-site with your child with doctors' orders. If Merrillville Community School Corporation Head Start does not have rescue medication for your child they will be temporarily excluded from the program until medication and doctor documentation is brought in.
- *Topical Treatment Parent* permission is required to apply topical creams (i.e. diaper ointment, sunscreen, etc.). Nurses will apply as needed.
- Short term exclusion of ill or affected children we ask that when a child becomes sick at home that the parent/guardian contact the site immediately. Our program reserves the right to admit or temporarily exclude children with contagious conditions from the program, based on each individual case. See chart below

Short-Term Exclusion Policy

Merrillville Community Schools have a full or part-time registered nurse during the school day. The program director, nurses and office personnel are the only people who have the authority to send students home for apparent sickness and/or injury. All ill students must see the nurse first for determination if they need to be picked-up.

Students may be excluded from school for the following conditions and diseases:

1. Temperature of 100° or above (Students must be fever free for 24 hours before returning to school. A temperature of 100° Fahrenheit or above is considered a fever. Temperature should be taken without the use of a fever reducing medication).
2. Conjunctivitis-bacterial and viral*-Students with conjunctivitis or "pinkeye" may not return to school until the eyes are clear and without drainage or

on antibiotics for 24 hours and a doctor's release to return to school is presented in the nurse's office.

3. Diarrhea (excluded until diarrhea is gone for 24 hours)
4. Vomiting (excluded until vomiting is gone for 24 hours)
5. Fifth Disease (may exclude if fever present)
6. Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease*
7. Herpes Zoster (Shingles)*
8. Hepatitis A *
9. Impetigo
10. Infectious Mononucleosis
11. Measles (Rubeola)*
12. Meningitis-bacterial and viral*
13. Mumps (Infectious Parotitis)*
14. Pediculosis Capitis (Lice) students with Pediculosis (head lice) may return to school when the hair is free from active lice.
15. Pertussis (whooping cough)
16. Pinworms (Enterobiasis) return after 24 hours of treatment
17. Roseola (Exanthem Subitum)*
18. Rubella (German Measles)*
19. Scabies*
20. Scarlet Fever (may return after 24-48 hours of antibiotic treatment and fever free for 24 hours)
21. Staphylococcal Infections *-Streptococcal Infections (may return after 24-48 hours of antibiotic treatment and fever free for 24 hours)
22. Tinea Capitis (Ringworm of the scalp)*
23. Undiagnosed skin condition*
24. Varicella-Zoster Virus (Chicken Pox) exclude until all vesicles have scabbed
25. Bed Bugs (school nurse assessment required to return to school; severe cases require physician's release)
26. Any other condition in which the school feels a physician's note for readmission is necessary to protect the student population

In addition, a release from the physician will be required for absences due to any extended reason. A physician's release is needed regarding hospitalization for any reason, and any newly diagnosed condition including, but not limited to: cardiac or heart conditions, orthopedic problems, (including conditions involving a splint, cast, crutches, or use of wheelchair or elevator), diabetes and the use of glucometers, asthma, and seizures. If you are in doubt about the length of time to keep children home after the occurrence of other common childhood diseases, please contact the school nurse.

General Procedures

- **Equal Opportunity Policy:** In accordance with federal law and the United States Department of Health and Human Services policy, this program is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, political beliefs, or disability.
- **Change in Information:** Whenever there is a change in address, phone, emergency contact, health provider, health conditions, work/school schedule, family situation, or other please notify us. You may be asked to update the emergency contact information form at your site. Changes to *Emergency Contacts* must be done in PERSON!
- **Confidentiality:** All family information and children's files are kept strictly confidential. Only authorized Merrillville preschool staff have access to these files. On occasion, state and federal licensing representatives may also have access. Parents and legal guardians have the right (at any time) to review and or obtain copies of their child's files upon written request.
- **Smoking:** All preschool locations are smoke-free environments. Smoking or vaping is not allowed in any preschool buildings or on any building grounds, including cars in the parking lot.
- **Alcohol/firearms/ILLEGAL Substances:** Use of alcohol, firearms, and illegal substances is prohibited in all Merrillville Community School Corporation preschool buildings.
- **Child Abuse and Neglect:** All preschool staff are mandatory reporters and must immediately notify the Department of Child Protective Services with any concern of child sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental injury, child prostitution, denial of critical care, bestiality in the presence of a child, illegal drug in the child's system, or manufacture of drugs in the child's presence.
- **Evacuation:** As required by the federal performance standards and state child care licensing. Emergency drills will be practiced on a monthly basis. Fire drills, severe weather drills and lockdown drills are conducted once each month. The Merrillville Community School Corporation also has a written district-wide *Crisis Guide*. This guide assists administration and staff in the event that one of our schools should experience an incident requiring emergency guidelines to be

followed. If you are in the building during an evacuation please follow the direction of the staff.

- **Child Safety:** Indiana child care licensing standards require daily outdoor play unless severe weather poses a safety or health hazard (High UV Day or Ozone Action Day). Outdoor play must be suspended, and moved indoors, if the wind chill is at or below 25F or if the heat index exceeds 90F. Please dress your child in the appropriate clothing for the day.
- We ask that you do not send your child to school wearing jewelry—including rings, necklaces, or earrings— as these items can get caught in equipment when children play, increasing the risk of injury. We also ask that all shoes worn by children should be closed toed and with a back (crocs and sandals with these features do not count). If you need assistance with clothing resources, please contact your family advocate.
- **Bathroom & Toileting:** As a component of our comprehensive early childhood program for children, we work with children who are still in the process of becoming toilet-trained. It is the responsibility of the parent to provide the necessary items (diapers, pull-ups, wipes, and a change of clothing) for your child to have a successful day at school. Classroom teachers will be available to assist your child in the preschool program and will support your child in learning to use the toilet. Classroom staff will respond promptly when a child requests assistance using the toilet. Classroom staff will not show disapproval or punish children for any accidents. A conference between the teacher(s) and the parent(s) will serve to establish common goals and methods for toilet-training. A child's clothing will be changed immediately following a toileting accident. Soiled clothing is placed in a sealed moisture-proof bag and sent home with the child, so that a fresh change of clothes can be sent back to the center. Faculty members are required to wash their hands with soap and water after each toileting, and to assist children with hand-washing, using soap and water. The following procedures are implemented in the program to ensure sanitary conditions.
 1. Gloves are used whenever staff need to assist children in the bathroom following universal precautions procedures.
 2. Staff members always respect a child's privacy.
 3. If a child lacks the necessary self-help skills in the bathroom, the staff will inform parents.
 4. Staff encourages the child to be independent and allow the child to become self-sufficient.

5. Bathrooms are cleaned and disinfected properly after any accident, and regularly on a daily basis.

- **Weather related closings:** Merrillville Community School Corporation will send an automated message to you with any school closings. It is critical that you notify us if your telephone number changes. All local news channels and the Merrillville Facebook page will post school closings as well.
- **Tooth Brushing:** Healthy oral habits are established in the classroom with daily tooth brushing after one meal. The program will provide toothbrushes to all enrolled children and will replace them every 3 months.

Inclusion Education

Children with special needs are always welcome to the Merrillville preschool program. The preschool program is committed to providing classroom settings that include all children. All children who attend the program are treated with respect and dignity, regardless of disability. Merrillville preschool strives to meet the individual education needs of every child including those children who enter the program with an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

School Readiness (birth to five approaches)

The Merrillville Community School Corporation preschool activities are designed to build social skills, language development, reinforcement of thinking processes, small and large muscle development and self-help skills. Research shows children learn best through hands-on activities and engaging in structured play. Within these activities children will learn by exploring, experimenting, problem solving, and asking questions. Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are and enabling them to reach goals that are challenging and achievable. Children in Preschool will be learning skills and behaviors they need to succeed in school. Children will be supported in each of the learning areas listed below:

- Cognitive: to help children develop learning and thinking skills through curiosity and creativity.
- Social-Emotional: to help children build relationships; develop self-control and independence; gain a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction; and have a positive attitude toward life, others, and themselves.

- Language and Literacy: to help children build early reading, writing, and communication skills.
- Physical: to help children increase their large muscle skills through running, jumping, and climbing; to help children develop their small muscle skills through building, cutting, stringing, and painting.
- Mathematics: to help children understand and explore mathematical concepts such as numbers and shapes.

The following curriculums are used in supporting your child's academic growth while they are attending the Merrillville preschool program:

- Creative Curriculum- A research-based, whole-child preschool curriculum.
- Heggerty- A literacy curriculum that focuses on phonemic awareness.
- Zaner-Bloser- A traditional, widely used penmanship teaching method and font style.

Home Visits

- Families are required to participate in two home visits a year.
 - o Before a child enters the program an initial home visit will be completed by instructional staff. This visit helps staff to get to know our new students and allows families the opportunity to update staff on any information regarding a returning student. This is a mandatory visit.
 - o At the end of the school year instructional staff will complete an end of the year home visit. This allows the staff to provide families with an overall picture of how the student did throughout the school year, and provide ideas and activities for the families to continue their child's growth throughout the summer months. This is a mandatory visit.

Field Trips

The Merrillville preschool classrooms do not attend off school grounds field trips. However, classrooms may go and visit other areas of the school building for special events and learning activities. To do so, your child must have a Preschool Field Trip permission slip form completed and on file.

Preschool Graduation

Events with caps and gowns and related activities have strong significance in many communities. However, this kind of graduation event is not allowable. Developmentally appropriate end of year celebrations will be organized each year to celebrate children's growth and development.

Developmental Screenings

- Your child will be screened using the Speed Dial 4. This informs teachers where your child is developmentally and also shows potential delays. This will be done within the first 45 days of enrollment.
- Your child will be screened using the DECA for social-emotional development. This will be done within the first 45 days of enrollment.
- Ongoing classroom assessments will include: letter recognition, number recognition, counting, shapes, and colors using the Teaching Strategies Gold online platform and a standards based assessment.

Parent Input

Throughout the school year, parents will be given information about what children are learning. We encourage parents to give feedback on what you would like your child to learn. Topics of studies are geared towards a child's interest. Each classroom will not be studying the same thing at the same time.

Annual Comprehensive Program Evaluation Findings

Upon completion of the annual comprehensive program evaluation, a detailed report of the findings is compiled and disseminated. This could include program staff, families, and members of the policy committee. The report outlines the strengths of the program, areas identified for improvement, and recommended strategies for continuous growth. By sharing these results, the program ensures transparency, encourages collaborative reflection, and fosters meaningful engagement in ongoing quality improvement efforts.

Parent/Teacher Conferences

- Formal Parent/Teacher conferences will be held in November at the school and in May at the end of the year home visit.
 - Conferences entail discussions of screenings and assessments used throughout the year. Discussions around ways the teaching staff and family can work together to grow your child both academically and socially will occur at this time as well.
- A conference may be called by the teacher or parent at any time throughout the school year to discuss any concerns that may arise.

Celebrations

The Merrillville Community School Corporation preschool understands that families take pride in celebrating their child's milestones, such as birthdays and cultural holidays. However, to maintain a learning environment that is inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and respectful of all backgrounds, we do not celebrate birthdays, holidays, or personal milestones within the classroom setting.

Parent Surveys

Merrillville Community School Corporation preschool recognizes the importance of feedback from enrolled families. During the program year parents and guardians will receive a survey to assess the quality of the Merrillville Community School Corporation preschool program. The collaboration between families and preschool staff is important and ensures that identified services are relevant to meeting their needs.

Behavior Guidance

Staff is prohibited from using any type of physical discipline (spanking...etc.) or harsh verbal reprimand. The program uses Conscious Discipline which teaches children what they can do rather than what they cannot do. When positive guidance techniques are used in the classroom, children learn what they can do within the limits of the classroom. As children grow, positive guidance techniques help children learn to manage their behavior. Consistency is the key to positive and successful self-regulation. The goal for each child is to obtain important problem solving skills that will lead to independent problem solving.

- The consistent use of the following positive guidance techniques will help children learn what to expect and what they can do:
 1. Clear and positive classroom rules explained to children
 2. Choices are offered
 3. Contingencies (when, then statements) used. For example, "When you pick up the blocks, then you can go to the play dough table." When you zip up your coat, then you can go outside."

Behavior Support

- Preschool will use consistent behavior guidance and will not exclude a child from program participation. If atypical behaviors adversely affect a student's participation, we will work with the child, family, and community mental health professionals if necessary to provide appropriate services.
If behavior concerns are identified during daily behavior guidance practices:
 1. A child's disruptive behavior will be documented and maintained in confidence

2. Parent/guardian will be given literature or other resources regarding methods of improving behavior
3. Staff and parents will use a variety of strategies to support their child in improving their behavior, with the goal of preventing exclusion:
 - a. Provide support and modeling of more appropriate behavior
 - b. Staff will reassess classroom environment, supervision, and appropriateness of activities
 - c. Always use positive methods and language while disciplining children.
 - d. Praise appropriate behaviors
 - e. Give verbal reminders

Limitations on Suspensions and Prohibition on Expulsion

Preschool cannot expel or unenroll a child from the program because of a child's behavior. Seclusion shall never be used as a punishment, for convenience, or to discipline a child. Children will never be isolated in a locked room or left unsupervised. Modified schedules are severely limited and may only be temporary in nature. Before a program determines whether a temporary modified schedule is necessary, a program must conduct a team meeting to collaborate with the parents, and utilize appropriate community resources.

If a temporary modified schedule is deemed necessary, Merrillville preschool must help the child return to full participation in all program activities as quickly as possible while providing support and ensuring child safety. This is done through:

1. Continuing to engage with the parents and mental health consultant to continue the utilization of appropriate community resources
2. Developing a written plan to document the action and supports needed
3. Providing services that include home visits
4. Determining whether a referral to a behavior specialist or local agency that is responsible for implementing IDEA is an appropriate next step

When a child exhibits persistent and seriously challenging behaviors, Merrillville preschool must explore all possible steps and document these steps to address such problems. This supports the facilitation of the child's safe participation in the program. Such steps must include, at a minimum, engaging a mental health consultant and considering the appropriateness of providing appropriate services and support outlined by IDEA and local education agencies.

After the program has explored all possible steps with supporting documentation a program, in consultation and agreement with the parents, the child's teacher, the agency responsible for implementing IDEA (if applicable), and the mental health consultant determines that the child's continued enrollment presents a continued serious safety threat to the child or other enrolled children and determines the program is not the most appropriate placement for the child, the program must work with such entities to directly facilitate the transition of the child to a more appropriate placement.

Mental Health Services

To support a program-wide culture that promotes children's mental health, social and emotional well-being, and overall health, a program must collaborate with parents by:

- Obtaining parental information, observations, and concerns about their child's mental health
- Sharing staff observations of their child and discussing the child's behavior and development, including separation and attachment issues
- Discussing appropriate responses to their child's behavior
- Discussing how to strengthen and nurture a supportive environment in the home and in the program
- Help parents to better understand mental health issues
- Support parents' participation in any needed mental health interventions

Contract services with licensed mental health consultants to assist with:

- Coordination of mental health services for children
- Providing staff with suggestions to support children's behavior and emotional needs
- Individual child observations arranged with written parental consent
- Helping parents locate mental health resources for concerns about the child
- Parent training on mental health or behavior support for young children. For more information on mental health services, please ask your child's teacher, family advocate, or director.

Nutrition Services

Meals: Students will receive two meals a day (breakfast and lunch), provided by the Merrillville Community School Corporation.

Food Allergies: Any student with a food allergy must have a doctor's note on file with the nurse to support the food allergy. Any changes in food allergies will require a subsequent note from the child's physician to initiate the change.

- Children are not allowed to bring outside food into the classrooms
- Menus are posted on the parent boards at each site and copies are available to parents upon request

Parent, Family and Community Engagements

Families and the community have the opportunity to be integrated into every aspect of the Merrillville Community School Corporation preschool program. Through active engagement, parents gain a better understanding of child development and early education as it relates to

their child(ren). The preschool's vision is to create and maintain family partnerships that include goals to:

- Support parents as primary educators, nurturers, and advocates for their child
- Provide every family with opportunities for a significant experience in preschool
- Ensure that parents are involved in making policy and program decisions for their preschool program
- Our preschool program reflects this vision through efforts to carry out the following standards:
 1. Culture – all aspects of the program support the cultures of the families and the community in which the program operates
 2. Governance – parents have opportunities for participation and shared decision making in every area of the program. Parents, staff and policy council members work together and provide leadership to communicate with others about the interests and needs of Head Start and assist in strengthening and existing and partnering with new services that may be needed. These meetings occur monthly and if you choose to be a policy committee member, it is a 12 month commitment.
 3. Individualized Family Partnerships – the staff and program meet the expressed interests and needs of each parent through on-going personal and family goal setting. The program partners with the families to meet these goals. Goal setting to identify interests, needs occurs within the first 30 days of enrollment
 4. Disabilities – all aspects of the program respond to and support children with disabilities and their families.
 5. Community Resources – families build the confidence, skills and knowledge they need to access community resources on their own behalf.
 6. Family Engagement Activities- our program provides monthly opportunities for families to engage with staff, peers and children in means to support school readiness and prevent the achievement gap.
 7. Male Involvement – our program will include fathers, supportive male family members and male caregivers in parent involvement activities, especially those activities involving the development of their children.

In-Kind and Background Checks

Merrillville Community School Corporation funds come directly from the federal government. However, the government only provides 80% of the funds necessary to operate our program. A remaining 20% must be generated from In-Kind. In-Kind is the donation of time, space or materials used in the program that would otherwise be purchased. A dollar amount is assigned to all volunteer hours whether in the classroom, at the site or at home. Head Start Performance Standard 1303.4 "Federal assistance under the Act for a Head Start program shall not exceed 80 percent of the total costs of a program and the non-Federal share will not be required to exceed 20 percent of the total costs of the program."

- In-Kind is provided through the categories listed below:
 1. Classroom activities
 2. Non-classroom activities
 3. Home activities
- We count on our parents, family members, and community members to record the various ways in which they have “volunteered” through In-Kind (donated time, space, or materials) for the program. *In-Kind Forms* will always be available to document volunteer hours. Ask your assigned staff for more information.
- Any individual above the age of 18 wishing to participate in school activities must have a valid background check on file with the preschool office and must sign in upon arrival through use of a valid government issued ID. Individuals who do not have a background check on file will not be permitted to participate in school activities.
- Volunteers who are in the classroom setting an average of (8) eight or more hours per month will be asked to complete at minimum a TB screening (at no cost to the enrolled parent or guardian).

Note: The preschool program does not allow siblings of the Head Start students in any Head Start classroom while parents volunteer.

Toys/Electronics

Please do not send your child with toys or electronics from home as they can become lost, broken or present a safety concern.. Outside toys will be taken by the teacher and given to the parent at the end of the day.

Preschool Staff

Preschool Health Policy

All Merrillville preschool staff undergo a physical and TB test.

Preschool Personnel Policy

All Merrillville preschool staff undergo a background check and a drug screening.

Class Ratios

Each class will maintain class size ratios in accordance with Indiana state licensing and Head Start standards. If a staff member is absent for any reason, a staff member from another site may be placed in the classroom to ensure the proper ratios are consistently maintained.

Preschool Staff Child Assessment Training

Lead Teachers undergo formal education in child development, early childhood education, or related fields. Many complete specialized coursework focused on assessment techniques, understanding developmental milestones, and using age-appropriate tools to evaluate children's abilities.

Child assessment techniques evolve over time, and professionals are required to participate in ongoing training or workshops to stay current with best practices, new research, and updated tools for assessment prior to implementation.