SERVICE AND EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE (THERAPY) 
DOGS/ANIMALS IN SCHOOL

Background

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Schools is committed to the delivery of high quality education programs, supports and services that allow students with diverse needs to maximize their learning and achievement. The Division recognizes the diverse needs of some students may require unique accommodation(s). These accommodations, linked to the student's learning profile, may include the use of service dogs or therapy animals.

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Schools is also committed to ensuring it operates within the legal mandate of all legislation in meeting the needs of its students. This includes the School Act, Education Act and the Human Rights Act, specifically the Alberta Service Dogs Act (January 1, 2009), which legally recognized all service dogs. Albertans with disabilities who use qualified service dogs now have access to all public places in the province. These are the same rights as blind and/or visually impaired persons who use a guide dog.

Procedures

1. A service dog is defined a “dog trained as a guide for a disabled person and having the qualifications prescribed by the regulations. (Service Dog Act) For the purposes of this policy, the service dog definition would include dogs that have been trained by a recognized program such as Canine Vision Dog Guides, Special Skills Dog Guides, Hearing Ear Dog Guides, Seizure Response Dog Guides, and Autism Assistance Dog Guides, etc.

2. An Educational Assistance Animal (EAA) is defined as an animal that works with its owner/handlers as a team to improve a student’s physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functioning. An EAA can be useful for educational and motivational effectiveness for participants. An EAA is not a “certified Therapy animal/dog.” Although therapy animals are specially evaluated, trained, and registered for their volunteer work, they do not undergo the same extensive specialized and unique training required of i.e. guide dogs, hearing dogs, and therapy dogs. Examples of EAA's are library dogs and therapy animals.

3. Parent/guardian must request in writing to the School, permission to use a service dog or therapy animal.

4. Prior to the transition of a service dog or a therapy animal into a school, the principal will work with parents/guardians to provide:
4.1. a copy of the Service Dog Team Identification Card issued by the Government of Alberta. All financial costs to obtain this card are the sole responsibility of the family. Parents can apply to servicedogs@gov.ab.ca for a service dog license. In the case of a therapy animal, provided documentation that the EAA is a certified therapy animal.

4.2. a copy of the Service Dog Identification Card will be placed in the cumulative file;

4.3. a copy of medical certification that the Service Dog or therapy animal is required to assist the student to attend school.

4.4. for the responsibility of care of the service dog or therapy animal. This includes the need for portable kennel, vest, leash, “bio-breaks”, disposal of waste, provision of storage food and water;

4.5. training for the student’s school team and bus driver(s) by the service dog organization and to educate the student body in the school and those on the bus on the role of the service dog and on the rules of conduct concerning the dog. In the case of a therapy animal the EEA handlers must remain under the direct supervision of a staff member at all times. This process will be ongoing as staff changes, grade changes, and other circumstances warrant it;

4.6. signage (generally provided by the service dog organization) alerting visitors/emergency service providers to the service dogs’ or therapy animals’ presence; and

4.7. indication of who will accompany and handle the service dog or therapy animal both inside and outside the school and what arrangements have been made with regards to alternate handlers when necessary.

5. When an administrator receives a request to have a service dog or therapy animal accompany a student to school, the administrator will:

5.1. inform the Director of Student Services of the request;

5.2. arrange a case conference involving:

   5.2.1. parents/guardians,
   5.2.2. teachers
   5.2.3. classroom assistants,
   5.2.4. Transportation Officer, if appropriate,
   5.2.5. Administration from feeder schools, if appropriate
   5.2.6. a representative of the service dog organization, if appropriate, and
   5.2.7. appropriate Student Services personnel to discuss the following:

   5.2.7.1. review the purpose and function of the service dog in relation to successful learning and/or safety for the student;
   5.2.7.2. notification and involvement of staff;
   5.2.7.3. clarify all responsibilities of the family, school and Division;
5.2.7.4. transportation of the student and service dog or therapy animal, if appropriate.

6. Development of a comprehensive transition plan for the introduction of the service dog or therapy animal which may involve the use of social stories, visits by the service dog or therapy animal to the school/classroom including:

6.1. inform school staff, school council representatives and parents of the arrival of a service dog or therapy animal to the school;

6.2. send a specific letter home to the parents of students who will be in any of the classes where the service dog or therapy animal will possibly be present in case of allergies, anxieties or other concerns;

6.3. may arrange an assembly for the student body involving representatives from the service dog or therapy animal organization, the parent and possibly the handler to explain the role of the service dog;

6.4. explore other concerns including interference with delivery of an educational program, possible changes to in-class routines and procedures, increased demands on staff, other children and staff who are allergic to dogs or therapy animals, recognition of children with fear of dogs and other animals, cultural sensitivities to groups that will not share space with a dog or animal;

7. The service dog or therapy animal transition into the school will be finalized by the Director of Student Services based upon the recommendation of the school administrator and a review of the documentation pertaining to the:

7.1. student’s educational needs;

7.2. fulfillment of family responsibilities;

7.3. fulfillment of school and Division responsibilities to all stakeholders, including liability; and

7.4. eligibility for transportation, the Human Rights Code and the Blind Person’s Rights Act establish the right for the service dog to be allowed to accompany the student on the bus. The same duty to accommodate can be applied to a therapy animal.

8. Staff, students/parents of a student with medical issues that are impacted by dogs or other animals (such as respiratory diseases) should contact the principal if they have a concern about exposure to a service dog or therapy animal. The staff member, student/parents of student will be asked to provide medical documentation that identifies the disability and the need for an accommodation. The principal, in consultation with the Director of Student Services, will facilitate a process to resolve the conflict that considers the conflicting needs/accommodations of all persons involved.

9. Any student/parent of a student with a service dog (or therapy animal) or staff or parent/guardian of a student who is aggrieved by the principal’s decision may appeal
that decision to the Superintendent or designate. That appeal must be in writing and provide detailed information regarding the basis of the appeal.

10. At the end of each year a comprehensive transition plan will be communicated to those who need to know.

APPENDIX A: Sample Letter of Parent/Guardian Understanding
APPENDIX B: Sample Letter to the School Community
APPENDIX C: Sample Letter to Families with Children in the Classroom
APPENDIX D: Principal Checklist
APPENDIX E: Transportation Protocol

Reference: Section 11,33,52,53,196,197,222 Education Act
Alberta Service Dogs Act
Alberta Service Dog Qualification Regulation
Alberta Blind Persons’ Rights Act
Alberta Human Rights Act