

Dear Parents/ Guardians of _____ Students:

September 20, 2018

Mrs. Flack is a Certified Professional Dog Trainer as well as our 8th grade ELA teacher. She would like to bring her own trained reading therapy dog into school for reading time with students. Her dog, Hugo Boss, loves to have students read to him. This would be only for students who are allowed to participate. *Not everyone has to participate*, if they do not want to do so. However, studies show that reading to a reading therapy animal can increase reading and vocabulary levels in students. The animal provides a non-judgmental opportunity for students to increase their read aloud time and phonetic techniques for practicing new vocabulary. Students will also summarize what they read to the animal.

However, to be allowed to do this, our school must ensure that students who participate do not have dog allergies. If a child has a severe dog allergy, it must be documented by a medical physician. By signing below, you are allowing your child to participate in reading lessons involving a trained dog and the classroom teacher. If you child has *documented* allergies from a doctor and cannot be in a room with a dog, please indicate below as well.

We are just trying new ways to make reading more exciting and motivating for all students.

Thank you,

Mifflin Middle School

Yes, my child _____ may participate in the Reading Therapy Dog Program. I am aware that my child may be allowed to pet or participate within the designated reading area.

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____

No, my child _____ may NOT participate in the Reading Therapy Dog Program due to doctor documented allergies to dogs. (Please attach doctor's form.)

Parent: _____ Date: _____

Yes, my child _____ may walk Ace as in incentive if all of their work and behavior is approved by their teacher. I am aware that my child may be allowed to participate in the training of Ace to become an Emotional/Therapy Dog.

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____

No, my child _____ may not walk Ace as in. My child may not be allowed to participate in the training of Ace to become an Emotional/Therapy Dog.

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____

Canines in the classroom

Reading, therapy, careers: Dogs' roles in K12 districts span the therapeutic to the academic

Alison DeNisco and Angela Pascopella

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Byron Nelson High School students in Texas train puppies to become guide dogs.



Therapy dog Bella visits with sixth-grade students during a lunch period at Green Intermediate School. Many students often stop for a visit to say hello to Bella or to quickly pet her as they walk down the hall.



Therapy dog Maggie visits classrooms in California where students read to her to gain better literacy skills.





A guide dog puppy at Byron Nelson High School gets ready for his close-up.

A cadre of canines visits San Francisco Bay Area elementary schools, where struggling readers gain confidence and improve literacy by reading aloud to their furry friends.

Readers of the Pack, a program run by the nonprofit 4Paws Learning and Wellness Center, sends certified therapy dogs and handlers to schools, libraries and after-school programs. "Young students really believe the dog is listening to them," says Mara Kahn, 4Paws coordinator of Sonoma County. "It's greatly improved their reading."

Kahn volunteers in El Verano Elementary School, part of Sonoma Valley USD, with her 6-year-old chocolate lab, Fenway Bark. She and Fenway visit the same class each week, and sit on mats in the back of the room with two or three students who take turns reading to the dog.

When a student stumbles over a word, they can ask Fenway to correct them, and he "tells" Kahn, who offers guidance. Kahn does other reading exercises, such as asking students to explain the story they've just read to Fenway in their own words.

A recent study from the University of California-Davis found that reading aloud to a dog for 10 minutes, once a week, for 10 weeks, improved the reading fluency of third-grade students in another Northern California district, Dixon USD, by 12 percent. A control class that did not read aloud showed no improvement in reading fluency over this period of time, researchers found.

School's certainly in session for canines throughout the nation. In the absence of state laws, districts have made their own dog policies, particularly in how the animals are used to assist students with disabilities, says Stephanie Aragon, a policy researcher at the K-12 Institute of the Education Commission of the States.

Therapy dogs, security dogs, and service dogs walk the halls alongside students in many schools. Here is a look at five more districts that have welcomed canines into classrooms in recent years.

Improving behavior

Back in 1995, Lori Morgan, then a special ed teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students, began bringing therapy dogs to Bryden Elementary School in Ohio's Beachwood City Schools.

"I had dogs in my classroom way before dogs in schools were common," Morgan says.

After students read a book about a dog, Morgan brought in her Rottweiler, Amber. While collecting data on a student with severe behavioral problems, Morgan noticed that just the presence of the therapy dog changed the student's behavior—for the better.

Morgan started a behavior management program, in which her students received tokens for completing homework or for good behavior, and could "buy" individual time with the dog.

Her progress inspired other teachers to use the dog to motivate positive behavior. Morgan's deaf and hard of hearing students brought Amber to classrooms that earned time with her. This also helped bridge the communication gap between hearing and non-hearing students.

Morgan became a school counselor in 2000 and integrated her dog into her sessions at Green Local School District in Uniontown, Ohio. Today, she brings her 11-year-old yellow lab, Bella, to Green Intermediate School every other week.

"With the dogs, students are more apt to be open and share information," Morgan says. "Dogs promote safety and security. Even if the kids know me, they feel safer to discuss something that makes them vulnerable."

The dog encourages students to talk about their own pets and home lives—including problems the kids are struggling with, Morgan says. From there, she can sometimes transfer emotions between students and their pets with phrases such as "How does your dog react to that?" She also brings the dog to a grief group for students who've had a parent die. "The energy of the group changes—the mood is much warmer and lighter," she says.

Spontaneous speech

On any given day in New Jersey's Randolph Township Schools, one of five certified therapy dogs may sit with a student during a counseling session or help in a lesson for preschoolers with special needs.

"We found that most of our students, particularly those who are nonverbal, responded really well to having the dogs be part of their lessons," says Walter Curioni, Randolph's director of special services. "Students are more available to learning as a result of this experience."

The dogs and their owners live in the community and visit classrooms regularly. For example, one preschool teacher recently read a story about dogs doing tricks. An owner led a dog through a series of tricks while explaining the training involved. The teacher also created a math lesson around the dog's age and a science exercise comparing the dog's ears to human ears.

“The challenge for students with disabilities in that classroom is getting them to speak, and there is no more authentic way than to bring in an animal—you get that spontaneous language you can’t always simulate in a speech lesson,” Curioni says.

Students now associate the therapy dogs with positive learning experiences. The dogs, even if they don’t visit every week, immediately get students more excited and ready to learn, he adds.

Training guide dogs

Byron Nelson High School in San Antonio recently welcomed a quartet of four-legged friends on an important mission from Guide Dogs for the Blind, a national nonprofit.

The initiative started earlier this school year when a Future Farmers of America student volunteered to train two puppies to be guide dogs for the organization. Other students got involved, and the school, part of Northwest ISD, became a local chapter of a group of volunteers that trains puppies for Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Students will raise the six pups over 18 months, and then the dogs will return to Guide Dogs for the Blind for more formal training. Students teach basic obedience and socialize the puppies through exposure to a variety of situations, places and people.

Students and their families must commit to taking care of the dog full-time before receiving a puppy, says Principal Ron Myers. The students attend chapter meetings outside of school to learn more about training the puppies.

Administrators should consult with colleagues, teachers and local guide dog organizations if a student expresses interest in such a project, Myers says. No one in Myers’ school raised any objections to having the dogs present, he adds.

“You have to have the support and understanding from teachers that having a dog in your classroom is outside the norm, but there’s a greater purpose for it,” Myers says. “The students who are interested in this see it as a career beyond high school.”

Teaching responsibility

Pella Middle School, part of Pella Community Schools in central Iowa, welcomed its first service dog in December. Seventhgrader Nick Showman, who has muscular dystrophy and navigates school in a wheelchair, now has an English golden retriever named Harley at his side each day.

“The biggest goals for Nick were to build his independence, maintain his composure and relieve stress,” says Pella Middle School Principal Josh Manning. Teachers and administrators noticed a difference in Nick’s behavior right away. “He knows that to manage Harley, he has to manage himself, and he’s done a good job maintaining higher levels of composure and respect for teachers.”

Harley follows Nick through the halls and into classes all day. He walks backward in front of Nick as they go through doorways, to ensure Nick's chair will fit through. If Nick needs a "brain break," he will take Harley for a five-minute walk around the school to refocus.

Nick's parents and the school's administrative team developed a plan for transitioning Harley to the school and Nick's daily schedule. Before Christmas break, Manning held a schoolwide assembly on the topic of responsibility, introducing Harley and educating students about how to treat a service dog. Students were disappointed to learn that they could not play with Harley, but have so far respected the rules, Manning says.

Administrators should research the potential benefits when a student requests a service animal and then create a detailed plan for how the animal will function in school. Manning also advises communicating regularly with the student's parents and the wider school community on what Harley does while at school.

Concerns were expressed about students who are allergic to pet dander. But those allergens are not a problem if students don't pet Harley, Manning says. Another student expressed a fear of dogs, but after the assembly, she told Manning she felt comfortable knowing she would not have to interact with Harley at all.

"I was one of the first people to be skeptical about the idea, but now I'm the biggest advocate for what it's offering this young man," Manning says.

Patrolling schools

Throughout Texas, security dogs patrol school halls, staying on the lookout for criminal activity.

The nonprofit K9s4KIDS provides K12 and college campus police with trained canines who can sniff out narcotics, weapons and explosives. Some of the dogs can smell gunshot residue for up to 10 days, says Kristi Schiller, chairman and founder of K9s4KIDS.

"There's no machine that's made that can do what a dog can do," Schiller says. The canines can also act like watchdogs by scaring off people with guns or others looking to harm students or staff, she adds.

"It's an extra added layer of protection," Schiller says. "If a dog is placed at a school, an active shooter will think twice before approaching the area."

The dogs patrol 12 districts throughout Texas, and will expand to a New York school system this year. Some are stationed permanently at one school, while others rotate.

The police handlers often lead class demonstrations on crime and safety, and how the dogs help. "The dogs almost act as a mascot," Schiller says. "There are a lot of ways they comfort children."

Alison DeNisco is news editor.