

Testimony in Support of HB 981

My name is Lucy Ordoobadi. For the past four years, I have been volunteering with my 160 pound Newfoundland dog, Captain, once a week in a public elementary school in a different jurisdiction. At school, Captain helps students in grades PK through 3 practice reading.

Every Thursday morning around 10:00, when I walk with Captain into school, you can hear children shouting from their classrooms, "It's Captain!" "Captain's here!" "Today is Captain day!" What are the kids shouting about?

The kids are hoping to have the chance to read aloud to Captain who has been trained and qualified as both a therapy dog and a reading therapy dog.

What is a reading therapy dog? A reading therapy dog generally has multiple qualifications. As a first step, the dog must be trained and certified as a therapy dog. This generally requires that the dog pass a basic behavior and temperament test, like the AKC Canine Good Citizen test, to make sure it is obedient and gets along well with people. Then, it must be trained and certified as a therapy dog by one of the many different therapy dog organizations in the country. Finally, it must qualify as a reading therapy dog to make sure that both the dog and its handler know how to work with children learning to read.

How does reading therapy work? In the school setting, reading therapy dogs come with their handler to the school and generally work either one-on-one with students or with students in small groups. Children get acquainted with the dog, sit next to it and pet it, and then read aloud to the dog either from a book they chose or one that is chosen for them by the school.

Studies show that children who read aloud to dogs demonstrate measurable improvement in their literacy attitude. The most recent such study was published by Tufts University in 2018. (Tufts University Institute for Human-Animal Interaction, May 2018)

Reading therapy dogs allow children to practice reading in a relaxed, happy, and nonjudgmental setting. Struggling readers are often self-conscious reading aloud in class in front of other classmates. When sitting next to a dog and reading aloud to the dog, the child can focus on reading without worry about judgment. Reading skills improve because the child is building fluency by practicing reading aloud. In addition, the child gains self-esteem and learns to associate reading with something pleasant—and fun! Even strong readers enjoy the experience of reading aloud to a dog. Encouraging reading practice for readers of all levels helps improve reading skills. Improved reading skills are associated with better academic performance across the board and positive attitudes about school in children.

From my own experience with Captain, I can testify that Captain brings tremendous joy to the lives of the children who read to him. Whether or not a child's reading actually improves is, to my mind, almost secondary because spending time with a dog at school provides a moment of true happiness in a busy school day. I am convinced that this joyful moment in the child's life has tremendous spillover benefits and serves to meaningfully enhance the child's emotional wellbeing and positive attitude toward school.