



Comfort Support Smiles

Senator Ben Kramer Maryland State Therapy Dog Senate Bill

Oral Testimony Thursday, February 11, 2021

My name is Nancy George-Michalson, Executive Director of New York Therapy Animals, a New York City 501(c)3 charity organization and an affiliate of Intermountain Therapy Animals. We are the official NYC Reading Education Assistance Dogs® (R.E.A.D.®) children's literacy support program with partnerships with the NYC Department of Education (DOE), private and charter schools, the New York Public Library, the Queens Library and Brooklyn READ718.

New York Therapy Animals educates both ends of the leash (human partner and their dog) in required handler workshops, therapy dog training classes and in continuing education courses. Our criteria for dogs are well-mannered, social and predictable and will inspire confidence in their interactions with people, and above all the dog must enjoy this job. The dog may never have shown aggression towards people or other animals. Our teaching methods promote healthy relationships through humane education and training and the dog has been thoroughly examined by a veterinarian for health, safety and appropriate temperament and behavior. The handler, the human end of the leash, is a proactive advocate for their dog demonstrating a solid, loving relationship. They are a team working closely together to help support students in school environments.

New York Therapy Animals has partnered with 62 schools for volunteer therapy dog team visits with children ranging from pre-K to high school seniors. Through our hands-on training classes and education curriculum, handlers and their dogs develop the tools needed to become a trained, registered and insured therapy dog team. Once passing the evaluation requirements, qualified teams can then begin their journey of volunteering and engage in specific student needs requested from social workers, psychologists, teachers, guidance counselors, speech and occupational therapists and for exposure-based interventions. These interactions in a school setting can be a catalyst to social connection and conversation helping the student to open up and feel more at ease. It is a time for the student to experience touch, to give and receive affection to and from the dog. It can also be a learning exercise to divert attention away from internal anxieties and to enjoy nonjudgmental visits with the goal of improving self-confidence and self-awareness, building courage and creating a positive experience by sharing thoughts and questions.

Special needs students with a variety of challenges and diverse disabilities benefit from these interactions encouraging shared activities and enhancing social and emotional skills designed for suitable behaviors and allowing students to connect with a calm and gentle dog in a safe way, respectful of boundaries. Our teams participate with students with dog phobias, depression, reading and language challenges for struggling and ESL students through the R.E.A.D. program, with the direction of the school representative for the particular students' needs.

We also coordinate meet and greet wellness visits in schools for students during stressful and demanding exam times that offer a take a break moment for relaxation and refocusing.

There are many sound benefits of interacting with a therapy dog: Blood pressure and heart rate decreases, breathing slows, there is an overall significant measurable feeling of relaxation, lowering stress and anxiety levels, and the release of Oxytocin, the natural miracle feel good drug for bonding.

And it's fun! A dog walks into the room and it changes the entire atmosphere. Faces light up, shoulders relax, deep breaths are taken, and big smiles appear. Students often wake up in the morning and are motivated to get out of bed knowing that the therapy dog team will be coming to the school that day.

Faculty, staff and students depend on us. They trust New York Therapy Animals education and training platform and they know that our teams are well-prepared, kind and compassionate for the many placement opportunities to be of assistance to student's needs and goals with this extra attention, guidance and support.

This sums it up from students:

"I think that the program is helpful because you can practice reading and if you mess up a word you don't get embarrassed." **Churchill School and Center**

PS94 The Spectrum School

"It's so exciting to have WLLY (Willy) visit my school! I calm down so that I can use my energy with WLLY."

"I like to say Hi to WLLY and he's very soft. He makes me feel good and I like to brush him."

R.E.A.D.® Reading Education Assistance Dogs® children's literacy support program



"I have been so happy to see my students with ADHD sit calmly for 20 minutes and focus on a book. One of my students who stutters when he gets nervous, is able to read a book with the therapy dog team without stuttering, and his face lights up every time he pronounces a difficult word correctly and gets a "high five" from the handler and the dog." **Jane Nunez, Guidance Counselor PS155**

"The students are absolutely thriving with the help of the R.E.A.D. literacy program! Each week students, who were once very apprehensive and uncomfortable reading aloud, eagerly select and practice a text they are going to read to the R.E.A.D. therapy dog and handler. We have noticed a HUGE increase in not only the students' reading skills but also their confidence. Families tell me that their children value their time with the R.E.A.D. therapy dog and handler so much that they don't want to EVER miss school on the days they visit." **Kristi Evans, Reading Specialist, Stephen Gaynor School**



"My daughter looks forward to reading with Ziggy every Friday. She picks out her book to read to Ziggy, and she is excited and feels special that she gets to read to the dogs. She has never seen it as being singled out as struggling, and that is so important. Before the READ program she stopped wanting to read aloud to me at bedtime, and now she does it eagerly. I think introducing furry friends to students who struggle with reading is a brilliant idea because it builds confidence, makes the students feel special instead of challenged and it creates excitement around reading in a way that the classroom cannot. The R.E.A.D. program is wonderful, and we are so lucky to have it in our school."
St. Stephen of Hungary Elementary School



R.E.A.D. team: "I have two kids who at the beginning assured me that they could not read-at all, yet they happily come to read to Luna and 'monitor' if Luna likes the book .One of them, a very sad little boy, is always complaining about physical pains and does not want to be in school... except when he reads to Luna! I see his demeanor before and during the session and it's totally different. Even the way he walks out of the room is different!" Fanny and Luna **PS241 STEM**

Grimes Elementary School



Testimonial from a parent of a 3rd grader at PS59 New York City: *“With regard to the R.E.A.D. program itself, the most telling remark that my son made is that Melanie and “Mia”, the therapy dog team, listen to him non-judgmentally when he reads. He actually reiterated that point to me several different times. I think his greatest hurdle in school has been getting over his fear of letting everyone down. He wants to succeed in school for himself, but it’s even more important to him to show the people that he respects, his teachers and family members, that he’s able to keep up with his peers in school. What the R.E.A.D. program has provided to him is a period during the day in which he can enjoy reading without fear of letting anyone down. I think the program has preserved his love for reading despite his challenges, which, from my perspective, is priceless.”*



Handlers are thoughtful and patient assisting with fluency and comprehension engaging children with ease all the while being supportive of their dog.

Reading levels have significantly improved for students with feelings of pride and accomplishment.

*“A.N. is a student at our school for the past two years. His first year, A.N. was reluctant to speak with others and kept to himself for most of the day. A.N.'s second year at our school provided him with a significant change. It was the year that his teacher began the R.E.A.D. program with her class. A.N.'s first session with the reading was a surprise to many of us at school. A.N. independently chose a book and began to read with ease. The non-judgmental and comfortable environment provided by the R.E.A.D. dog team gave A.N. a voice and the opportunity to practice his reading. Currently, A.N. looks forward to the R.E.A.D. team. Aside from improving his reading skills, A.N. has established friends in school as well as becoming a “big brother” to other students.” - **School Psychologist***

“Hello. My daughter had a wonderful experience reading to Mia. She is a child who has been reluctant to read aloud. She has insecurities stemming from receiving speech therapy over the years. Reading to Mia, the therapy dog, has been such a confidence booster! She so looks forward to her time with Mia. On days that she is scheduled to read to Mia, it is the first thing she announce upon waking up (“It’s Thursday, I get to read to Mia today)! One sentence best describes what reading to Mia means to my daughter. She told me, “I don’t feel nervous at all when I read to her.” This program has been invaluable to my daughter’s self-confidence. I am so grateful for her to have participated in the READ program. It truly makes a difference.”

Mary H. parent of child at Beekman International School

PS94 The Spectrum School

Our teams work with students on the autism spectrum, sensory impaired with significant cognitive delays, severely emotionally challenged, and/or multiply disabled.



"The R.E.A.D. therapy dog benefitted these students tremendously! They touched tackled the nervous aspect of reading to a group and the freedom of being judged. The dog calmed and soothed students with aggressive behaviors and supported them with a friendly atmosphere."

**PS94 Special Education
Teacher**

**PS38 Roberto Clemente
Learning Center**



Pathways Children's School is for students with various neurophysiological disorders, multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury and orthopedic disorders. Our teams are helping with sensory stimulation.





New York School for the Deaf

The therapy dog is learning sign language to assist with the student's needs.





Kennedy Child Study Center

Students with developmental delays interact with therapy dogs to acquire trust building techniques through humane education such as on how to approach a dog and learning respect and boundaries.



Manhattan Star Academy

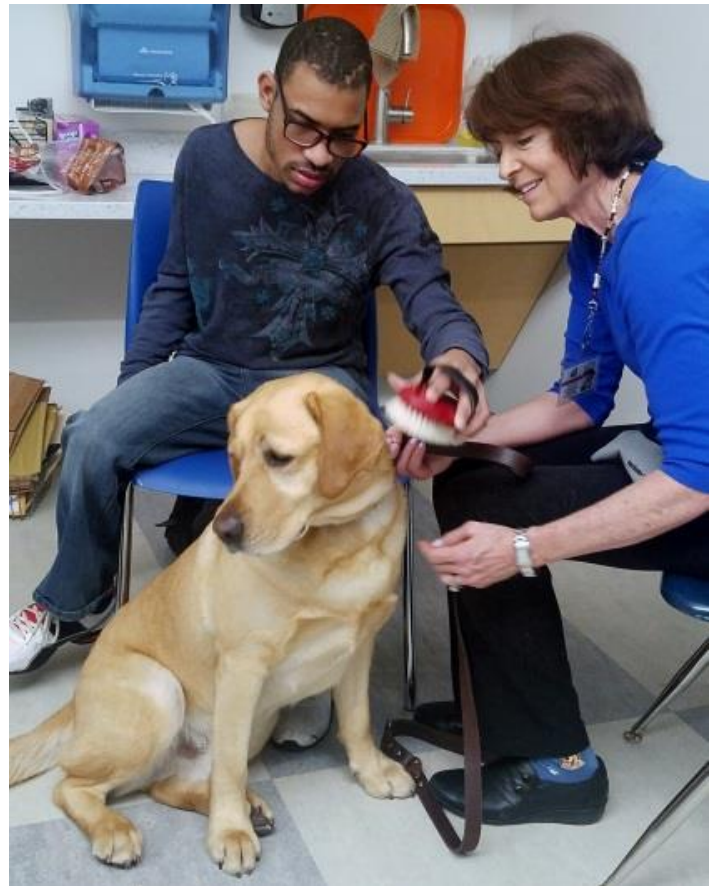
The School Occupational Therapist created an Animal-Assisted Therapy program curriculum for these students with social/emotional, communication and language challenges, children on the autism spectrum (to many varying degrees--some higher functioning, some lower functioning and non-verbal), cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, different genetic disorders, and overall global developmental delays. The children who have been participating in AAT are on the autism spectrum and have difficulty engaging, interacting, and connecting with others as well as significant difficulty with self-regulation.



New York Therapy Animals also partners with the NYC Office of the Mayor for the Family Justice Centers engaging with families in distress and life style changes. Hospitals, nursing home and assisted living facilities, shelters, supportive tenant residences and universities benefit from our therapy dog team visits.

Lighthouse Guild Harriet & Robert Heilbrunn School for the Blind

Therapeutic services to children who are blind or visually impaired and have other disabilities allowing for students to interact with a calm and gentle dog and to have the tactile experience of feeling their fur.





High School Wellness Visits

Exam time is demanding and stressful for students and we offer therapy dog wellness visits to help calm their nerves during exam times.



National Humane Education Presentation

PS32 Brooklyn

We value the opportunity to speak with students about humane education and the intrinsic benefits and rewards of volunteering and



A hug from a therapy dog is worth a thousand words and fills hearts with joy.

