



INTERMOUNTAIN THERAPY ANIMALS

PETS HELPING PEOPLE



READING EDUCATION
ASSISTANCE DOGS®

Since 1999

A PROGRAM OF
INTERMOUNTAIN THERAPY ANIMALS

Statement in Support of Permitting Therapy Animals in Maryland Schools

February 10, 2021

Good Afternoon,

My name is Kathy Klotz, and I am the executive director of Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA) in Salt Lake City, Utah. ITA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in 1993, providing animal-assisted interactions in a wide range of settings. **Our mission is to enhance quality of life through the power of the human/animal bond.** We have more than 300 teams—meaning a therapy animal and its handler—who have been screened, trained, tested and insured to be healthy, safe and appropriately skilled.

These ITA volunteer teams have been serving their communities for more than 27 years at no cost to any client or facility, visiting those who are physically or developmentally disabled, emotionally or psychologically impaired, lonely or suffering from depression, in more than 100 facilities ranging from hospitals, counseling centers, nursing, extended care and memory care centers, detention homes, schools and libraries in Utah, Montana and Idaho.

Our methods and practises have proven so successful that we now also have 21 other colleague organizations throughout the U.S. who use our standards and materials for training and testing protocols.

We have been invited to speak to you today about the value of therapy dogs being present in schools, so of first importance is to **differentiate therapy animals from service animals.**

While service animals are highly trained to support one person, therapy animals support a wide spectrum of other people. Simply put, service animals have a full-time career and therapy animals volunteer part-time. That does not mean, however, that being a therapy animal is a simple or casual undertaking. Many people consider volunteering as a therapy team for animal-assisted interactions to be more like a para-profession than a typical volunteer role, requiring extensive training and a solid relationship between animal and handler. The foundation for their success is an animal who has the right temperament, enabling them to light up at each new stranger they encounter, day after week after month. Without such a temperament, connection will not occur and change cannot happen. It's an individual thing, not suited for most dogs—or just any pet—but all breeds *can* qualify if they have that temperament coupled with the crucial training for skills and behavior.

The first concern of teachers, parents and school personnel at all levels is of course the safety and well-being of their students, and that's why therapy animals are rigorously trained, tested, licensed and insured for liability, and why your bill includes detailed criteria for who might qualify.

When all those precautions are in place, therapy animals become **catalysts and motivators.** They offer love, hope, comfort, joy, normalcy—and fun, when all those qualities are in short supply.

Research has established that animals can have a significant positive impact for people with a whole range of diagnoses and situations, and can further therapeutic goals that include:

- Empathy • Physical contact
- Outward focus
- Nurturing • Mental and sensory stimulation
- Rapport
- Acceptance of self and situation
- Patient compliance • Socialization
- Physiological improvements, including lower blood pressure, slower breathing, greater calm and relaxation.

In our case, since you are considering the benefits of having therapy animals in schools, we have been asked specifically to tell you about what we have witnessed through our signature program, called **Reading Education Assistance Dogs®—the R.E.A.D.® Program**—which we launched in 1999. It was the original literacy support program in which children read to therapy dogs, and it has now been emulated by other therapy organizations, but R.E.A.D. was the first and foremost. We have trained and registered more than 6,500 teams throughout the U.S. and in 26 other countries around the world. To teach and help implement this program, we have traveled as far as Japan and Taiwan on one side of our planet and Sweden, England, Spain and Portugal on the other.

These licensed teams work to help children not only improve their basic skills like fluency and comprehension, but also to inspire children fall in love with reading and books, and the presence of a R.E.A.D. dog can truly change their lives forever. We focus primarily on children aged 4 to 8, when it's crucial for them to **learn to read** so that they can **read to learn** forever after, although we have partnered with many other demographics, as Nancy George-Michalson will tell you.

In our more than 20 years with this program, I have accumulated literally cabinets full of testimonials and enthusiastic feedback from parents, educators and children themselves. Among the many commendations and recognitions the program has received are a Points of Light award from President George H.W. Bush, a commendation from the United States Senate, a partnership with PBS Television, and a TED talk.

But more important to us than quantitative numbers or awards is the effect this program has on each and every child, one by one, session by session. And we know that for children reading with a dog:

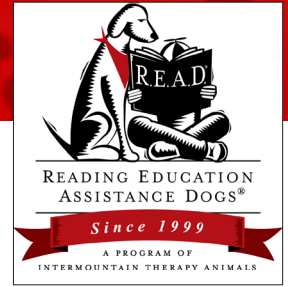
- Their relaxation increases and stress and blood pressure decrease (Fear and/or stress, especially chronic stress, make it literally impossible for a brain to engage in learning)
- They are highly motivated to participate and happily engaged
- They are freed from judgment and/or intimidation—real or perceived—from their peers, constantly citing how important it is to them that dogs do not judge, laugh or criticize when they make mistakes
- They love that the dogs are great listeners, and really care about them
- Their confidence, self-esteem—and even attendance—increase

An episode of the NOVA series (on PBS) called “The School of the Future” (aired in September of 2016) made the urgent point that we need to emphasize helping children **be capable of learning** rather than **what to learn**, because the world is changing so rapidly that we don't know what they will be needing to learn even in the near future. It went on to highlight all that research now knows about **brain development and what children need to be able to learn**. Reading with dogs satisfies every

one of the important building blocks that need to be in place to support brain development and help children be able to learn. (*Please see attached paper.*)

I will add a personal note here, that I started as a volunteer with my own dog, an Australian Shepherd, about two months after Intermountain Therapy Animals was launched in 1993, and we worked as a team for 8 years, primarily with children in residential care and with our R.E.A.D. program from the outset. And I have been executive director since 1997, so I have been living with and experiencing these benefits with thousands of encounters for 27+ years myself, and I will state unequivocally that putting people together with animals, for the mutual healing benefits of both, has been rewarding beyond words.

The benefits of including therapy dogs at school, whether for actual learning support or for counseling and the whole spectrum of social and emotional development, are numerous and compelling, and could be a powerful adjunct for your teachers, counselors and other staff. They will change the entire atmosphere in your schools, and we urge you to seriously consider this bill and the positive possibilities that can be opened up for your students.



21 Years – 26 Countries

These are all the countries and regions, in addition to the United States, where R.E.A.D. is currently flourishing:



Austria



Dominican Republic



Luxembourg



South Africa



Belgium



Finland



Mexico



Spain



Bosnia-Herzegovina



France



The Netherlands



Sweden



Canada



Germany



Norway



The United Kingdom



Chile



Iceland



Portugal



Wales



Colombia



Italy



Republic of China/Taiwan



Croatia



Kazakhstan



Slovenia



There are as many different ways to enjoy reading together as there are R.E.A.D.® dogs and kids.



“Mom! Today I had the BEST day of my life...EVER! I got to read to a dog! It’s the best thing I’ve ever done in school!”





Selected Quotes

From a Librarian:

As supervisor of Youth Services at Twin Falls Public Library, I am always looking for creative ways to bring children and books together. I am very aware of the need of beginning readers to find someone who will listen in a non-threatening manner to them as they struggle to learn to read. Therefore, when I heard about the work of Intermountain Therapy Animals, I was intrigued but had some concerns about bringing dogs into the library. Would the dogs be overwhelmed by the excitement of the young participants? I also worried about allergic reactions. But ITA allayed all my concerns and I was soon sold on their professionalism, their dedication and their enthusiasm. Our program has been a HUGE success. The R.E.A.D. program is a wonderful service to this community!

- Annie-Laurie Burton
Youth Services Supervisor
Twin Falls (Idaho) Library

From Teachers:

Dear Mrs. Johnson & Alexis (the R.E.A.D. team),

You have no idea just how much you have encouraged my students this year. I have been teaching first grade for 15 years and never have I seen the majority of my students develop such a strong love for reading as I have this year.

Every Tuesday the students shout for joy because they know that you and Alexis will be here. They know that they can read and no one will laugh or lose interest in them no matter how long it takes them to read their book. Your kind words of encouragement mean so much as they attempt to decode each word. You and Alexis are wonderful!

Our test results were amazing! Eight of my students were reading above grade level! Your program has been so helpful. Thank you so much for all you do and for making this a great year for my kids. May you, your family and Alexis be blessed.

Love ~ Lisa Perrault

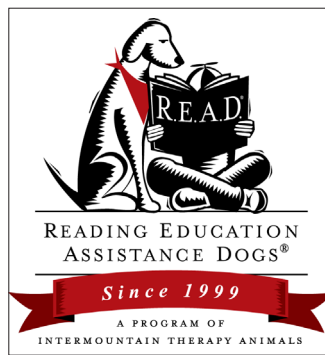
From Parents:

I just want to tell you what a wonderful program this has been for my daughter Hanna. She has shown more interest in reading since reading with the dogs. She loves animals, and this is one program that she has talked about throughout the year. How wonderful and lucky we are to have this available in our schools.

- Terri Vaflades

When my son started reading to Buddy ... I began to notice how excited he was about reading, how he talked about it, and about the dog, all the time, and how the excitement and interest in reading carried over, even when the dog wasn't there.

- Keegan's dad, Twin Falls, Idaho



The Reading Education Assistance Dogs® (R.E.A.D.®) Program Meets the “School of the Future”

Intermountain Therapy Animals launched R.E.A.D. in 1999 at the Salt Lake City Library, designing it to be an innovative and exciting opportunity to engage struggling young readers through the help of therapy dogs. We already knew that therapy animals were effective in medical settings—providing motivation, healthy physiological benefits, distraction and happiness—and we were convinced the same benefits would apply to children who were anxious about reading.

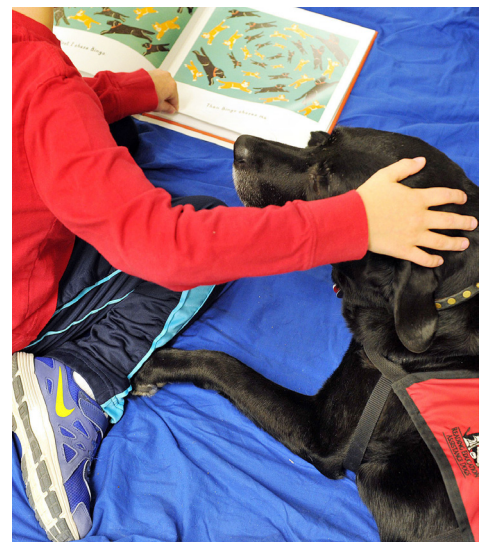
R.E.A.D. is the original literacy program in which children read to therapy animals, and still the most respected and endorsed by educators, librarians, parents, and kids everywhere. After more than 20 years, the program continues to grow while it fosters a love of books and reading for children who participate. As of November 2019, there are now over 6,500 registered R.E.A.D. teams (tested, insured therapy animals and their human owner/handlers) licensed for the practice of R.E.A.D., with active programs in all 50 of the United States and 26 other countries.

How It Works

Key to the R.E.A.D. program is that our teams establish a warm, supportive, trusted relationship with individual children, who always blossom in such an atmosphere—dog or not. But the attraction of children to dogs is so powerful that, as in other venues where animals participate in therapies, the “client” is extremely motivated to participate. They clamor to be part of the program; they feel accepted and supported, not judged or criticized or threatened.

In the R.E.A.D. program, each child reads aloud to a therapy dog. A skilled handler offers support and help as needed, and animated discussions ensue, about the books, the ideas, the words, and of course the dogs. As goals are accomplished, children get to choose a brand new book that is age- and reading-level appropriate and have it “pawtographed” by their R.E.A.D. dog. Thus, new (and highly valued) books are sent into the homes of the children.

Real change for children comes through high-quality, individualized learning opportunities, dependable trusted relationships, and one-on-one interest and attention. Typical reading intervention programs in schools and libraries do not address the root causes of why children struggle to read. School budgets are tight throughout the nation and there is little funding for reading support programs.



Many teachers are overwhelmed with what they need to accomplish in the classroom, as are parents at the end of the day, and many do not have or make the time to read with their children. It is all humiliating, demeaning, and ineffective—the percentage of children unable to read at grade level by fourth grade has been stubbornly resisting change in the United States over the past 40 years (see reports by the Annie E. Casey Foundation), *still hovering at almost 70%*. Thus, the R.E.A.D. program focuses primarily on children K-3, when it is crucial that they *learn to read* so they will be able to *read to learn* forever more.

What Educators Have Learned

A recent book provides more insight: in *The Smartest Kids in the World, and How They Got That Way*, journalist/author Amanda Ripley traveled the world to study and compare educational systems. One factor that surfaces consistently is the importance of meaningful relationships, whether with teachers or family. Some have gone so far as to beg parents—even those willing and eager to help—not to volunteer in the usual ways in the classroom, but rather to spend any available time reading at home with their children.



Further, in a recent (September 2016) PBS Nova episode called “School of the Future,” educators spoke passionately about all they have learned about the brain and its development. We are living in unparalleled times of change, both technologically and socially, and we need to know how to teach kids to be able to adapt so they can succeed in education and in life. At an ever-increasing pace, today’s young kids are going to be dealing with technologies that haven’t even been invented yet, so adaptability is key.

Our R.E.A.D. theories and practices are affirmed as we have seen how powerfully R.E.A.D. responds to the very latest in what scientists know about young children and learning. Some salient points:

- **Reading interventions impact a child’s developing brain, and early reading interventions produce great brain growth.**

Reading is not a skill that the brain is wired to do. A child must learn to orchestrate functions designed for other purposes, and two parts of the brain are essential. Research suggests that the development of these two areas of the brain—that influence language production and language comprehension—depends a lot on a child’s environment.

Children need to hear language—not from TV but from people—and have books in their home. Growing up in a less advantaged household may slow development of brain areas critical to language and reading. The lower the socio-economic status, the greater the risk. (One sobering study notes that children in the highest socio-economic level households have an average of 14 books each, whereas in the lowest socio-economic households, the average is *one book per 300 children*.) Early reading interventions change the physical structure of children’s brains, showing marked improvement in several reading skills and, most striking, the greatest gains in the size of these crucial brain areas.



The R.E.A.D. program not only provides the practice with all reading and communication skills, but also sends new books home with children.

- **Chronic stress hampers development in areas where learning and processing emotions intersect. Feeling safe and nurtured opens up whole new brain pathways. Children need a safe place and a positive environment.**

With chronic stress, the body is flooded constantly with cortisol, which disrupts the brain in several ways. Whether due to family life or neighborhood, kids in high-risk environments are already in defensive mode before their day even starts. They have no school supplies, they're hungry, they have no money for a class trip, and on and on. There is a prevention for this—a human buffer. When children feel safe and nurtured, that there is an adult who cares, this stress is ameliorated.

R.E.A.D. teams absolutely provide this “buffer” (human AND canine)—beings who care, who are consistent, who are safe and trustworthy, who provide physiological calm and relaxation.

- **Children need to collaborate, and they respond when they have someone to collaborate with.**

Effective learning requires activities both alone and together with others.

Parents and family are the ideal goal for the “together” parts, but when they are not available, R.E.A.D. teams have proven to be a powerfully effective substitute.

- **In many other fields, we have learned that there is no such thing as AVERAGE, and that effective learning and training needs to shift to individuals and their unique needs.**

A child's education needs to be focused around the best way for *that* child to receive learning. Our one-size-fits-all education model lets many children flounder. Individual children who think differently, who learn differently, need to get the methods that work best for them.

A R.E.A.D. team is able to focus one by one on the particular interests, abilities and preferences of each child, with no peer pressure. In such an atmosphere, each child can blossom with both skill and confidence.

- **Learning and emotion are intimately connected. Effective learning requires emotional engagement. Emotional connections change attitudes toward learning.**

This is another area where the R.E.A.D. program absolutely excels. A R.E.A.D. dog provides both physiological benefits that help a child feel calm and relaxed and good from the inside out, along with the emotional attraction of a beautiful non-judgmental animal to interact with. Combining these advantages with a skilled handler to facilitate and the resulting environment is powerfully charged with positive learning possibilities.



• **Dramatic erosion in reading skills occurs during the summer. It is a major contributor to the learning gap, because for children who get no ongoing support, it takes until the end of November for them to catch up from the “summer slide” to where they were in the spring.**

This summer slide happens most to children at the lowest socio-economic levels, and the effect is cumulative because they may never have the opportunity to catch up to their peers. But just a 5-week session of reading intervention in the summer helps a child maintain his level of skills.

R.E.A.D. participates in many summer reading programs for this very purpose, to prevent the summer erosion, and provides a really fun and engaging way to do it.

Summary

All these crucial factors can be positively influenced by a R.E.A.D. team when a child is not able to get the individualized help s/he needs in other ways.

The R.E.A.D. Program has been welcomed and sought after by educators, parents and librarians throughout the country as a successful, innovative way to engage young children who are struggling to read.

ITA receives constant feedback from educators that the children who participate in the program see literacy gains of 1–4 reading levels over a school year. In addition, children learn to love reading. R.E.A.D. is now proven to make a dramatic and substantial difference for thousands of children, especially those whose families and socio-economic situations may not be able to cope.

If we agree that children are our most valuable resource, we need to make sure we can help kids of *all* backgrounds learn successfully. The opportunity to give such children a consistent relationship with a caring adult and dog has had life-changing benefits, not only for individual children but for our society as a whole.

This teacher’s observations are classic regarding the value of the R.E.A.D. program:

“The R.E.A.D. program is a huge success in our school. We are an elementary school in East Harlem. Many of the students are very poor and many have emotional or learning disabilities. R.E.A.D. has been a great motivator for children with emotional regulation issues, a strong academic influence for children with learning disabilities, and also teaches humane treatment of animals as well as social skills. The children often ask when the therapy dogs are coming and get prepared by choosing a book to read to them as well as making positive behavioral choices to be a part of the program.”

– *Patricia Foley, LCSW, PS102 Jacques Cartier School,
New York City, NY*

