

Danvers Herald

Thursday, December 28, 2017

Therapy dogs promote reading, stress relief for Danvers students



Following the success of Riverside Elementary School's "reading buddies" program, Danvers High recently welcomed therapy dogs into one of its classrooms.

The doors of Danvers High School blew open, and on the other side stood a crowd of students — snacking on cookies and hot chocolate, anxious to start Winter Break.

But Nikita, a Husky, and Paxton, a West Highland White Terrier, remained calm. They were trained for this. They welcomed the attention.

That's because Nikita and Paxton are two of Perfect Paws Pet Ministry's certified therapy dogs. Perfect Paws is a ministry of All Saints Episcopal Church of the North Shore, partnering with Dog B.O.N.E.S. Therapy Dogs of Massachusetts.

And on Friday, they visited an English class at Danvers High. Their visit, according to DanversCARES Assistant Director Lyle Harrod, was part of a pilot program seeking to find alternatives to marijuana use for stress relief.

"We want to promote healthy, fun stuff," Harrod said. "I hadn't really considered therapy dogs before... That idea grew out of the students' ideas."

He said the initiative came in response to a 2016 Danvers High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in which 25 percent of students reported using marijuana. When asked why they choose to use, many cited stress reduction.

So, at the suggestion of students, DanversCARES piloted a therapy dog program this fall after one of the town's elementary school's found success implementing a program with therapy dogs in its classrooms. Therapy dogs, after all, have been shown to provide multiple health benefits, including stress relief.

Paxton's and Nikita's handlers, Fran Weil and Bill Hooper, too, say the dogs have the capacity to bring down an individual's heart rate, effectively relaxing them.

But until Friday's in-class visit, the dogs had only been brought to an afterschool Youth Leadership group at the high school.

"We're trying to learn from what Riverside is doing," Harrod said.

Since the spring of 2016, Riverside has teamed up with Perfect Paws Pet Ministry of Danvers, creating a program that allows for therapy dogs to visit the classrooms of Riverside periodically throughout the school year.

These furry friends help out as classroom "reading buddies" for the pre-K to grade 5 students, according to Kimberly Silva, Riverside's social worker. A visit from Perfect Paws means each student is given the chance to read to one of the dogs.

"It's non-judgemental," she said. "It's very relaxing, very calm. Children are inspired to read."

And according to Silva, the program was a success from the start. "Students cannot wait for their turn to read to them," she said.

Silva and Riverside Principal Violetta Powers said they decided to contact Perfect Paws after learning about the benefits of having therapy dogs in schools. Schools across the country, in fact, have brought therapy dogs into their classrooms to promote a positive, judgement-free environment for students to learn how to read.

Powers also noted that Great Oak Elementary, years ago, had an afterschool reading program with the therapy dogs. After the dogs' first visit, Silva and Powers said they knew the dogs presence had the potential to benefit all of their students.

Teaming up with Perfect Paws has been an "amazing experience" for both the students and the teachers, according to Silva.

"Everyone lights up when the dogs arrive," she said. She also noted the dogs also have an effect on students who can sometimes be challenging in the classroom.

"Their behaviors lessen when they're around a pet," she said. "And our learning center kids come together, and that can be a challenge to get them all to come together, but they do that when there is a pet in the building."

Both of the dogs are loved by all of the students throughout the elementary school, she added.

In addition to the reading buddies, Riverside also decided to incorporate therapy dog visits into classrooms as rewards for students. Students must work together to earn a Perfect Paws therapy dog visit.

"When they fill the marble jar or the compliment jar... over and over again they're saying they want the therapy dogs," Silva said. "They're not asking for extra recess or a class movie."

Both Silva and Powers said the school hopes to have weekly visits from the therapy dogs in the near future. Daisy — Powers' boxer, who she recently had certified as a therapy dog — is next expected to join the students on Jan. 4; Paxton, then, is scheduled for a Riverside visit on Jan. 8 and Jan. 11.

And as for the high school, Principal Jason Colombino said he hopes to see the program expand and reach more students.

"It's great for students to be able to connect with the dogs and get social and emotional support," he said.

Senior Brianna Milbury, 17, said the visit from the dogs on Friday brightened her mood and was a nice "change up" in the day.

"It makes a difference," she said.