

# FOR TEACHERS: USING THERAPY DOGS SUCCESSFULLY IN THE CLASSROOM

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As the Nor'wester Readers canine assisted learning program evolves, the role of the therapy dog in the educational environment also evolves.

When Nor'wester Readers started in 2007, the program was patterned after the original R.E.A.D. program which was initiated by Sandy Martin, RN, in 1999 as part of the Intermountain Therapy Animals in Salt Lake City, Utah. Our goal at that point was to provide "reader dogs" to teachers in the Council Rock School District, working with students who had reading challenges.

But, due to a creative pilot teacher that first year, we quickly learned that the therapy dogs could contribute substantially to the enrichment of the classroom learning environment in a myriad of ways. We then felt it was appropriate to change our name to "canine assisted learning program."

Because many administrators and educators are sometimes misled by our name, Nor'wester Readers, we have made a point of providing orientations for all new teachers who have requested therapy dogs for their classrooms. We are constantly urging teachers to be creative and think "outside of the box" while serving as a host teacher for an NWR therapy dog team. We have found that the host teachers who have the greatest success in promoting academic achievement and motivating their students, incorporate the therapy dog into their total classroom environment throughout the entire week and not just when the dog visits. These teachers are cognizant of the necessity of careful planning to use the dog as a "teaching tool" in their instructional strategies when presenting their curriculum.

The alert teacher will observe individual student responses to the therapy dog and will reinforce or build upon those interactions for increased impact. Many students have multiple educational needs or challenges, and thoughtful utilization of the therapy dog teams by teachers can often address those needs successfully. We once had a child with both reading and social challenges in a second grade class. The teacher observed this and gave the student 15 minutes of one on one time with the therapy dog weekly; this gave the child an opportunity to read and relax with the dog in a non-threatening environment. Eventually the teacher added activities which also addressed the child's social needs and continued to creatively build on the presence of the therapy dog as the child progressed in successful social interaction with his peers.

There is no "prescription" for how to use a therapy dog team. It merely requires a teacher who understands that the therapy dog is a genuine teaching tool and knows how to successfully implement this tool in presenting the curriculum. They quickly discover that the dogs are *magic* and offer unlimited potential for reaching unmotivated or struggling learners.

## **THE "CANINE MAGIC" FORMULAS:**

Nor'wester Readers has become unique for its canine assisted learning program. While "reading dog" organizations emphasize using therapy dogs to foster motivation and a love for reading with students who have reading challenges, Nor'wester Readers has become a true learning program. Not only does the Nor'wester Readers organization promote a specific program, it also offers occasional Act 48 (Pennsylvania) workshops to guide teachers in ways to effectively use therapy dog teams in their classrooms. It has become apparent over the years of our work with teachers and children that there are "*canine magic*" formulas which provide the keys to the success in utilizing a canine assisted learning program.

It is our goal to supply the “keys” to educators, to access that magic so they are able to create powerful spells for learning within their classrooms.

***Dog + Child = comfort, happiness, relaxation***

Research has proven that the presence of an animal lowers blood pressure and stress, setting the scene for a relaxed learning environment, which is highly conducive to academic achievement.

***Dog + Child + facilitator = confidence and self-esteem***

In addition to dog and child, a skilled facilitator (teacher and/or handler) shifts performance pressure off the child and provides positive support throughout the learning process, whether it is reading or in other curricular areas. This formula has been shown to boost student confidence and self-esteem.

***Dog + Curriculum + Strategies = motivation, focus, and success***

Put a dog into the hands of an enthusiastic, creative host teacher and educate them how to effectively use the canine assisted learning team to maximize the power of motivating their students and directing their focus so they experience the success of academic achievement. We strongly encourage the host teachers to plan in advance for the team’s weekly visit time and to consider the team as a teaching tool (strategies) to add a powerful punch to successfully presenting their curriculum.

***Dog + Child + Books = joy of reading***

Putting a dog into the equation of child plus books encourages the child to tackle his/her reading challenges, whether remedial or of an \*aliterate nature, in the presence of an accepting, non-judgmental companion. The presence of a dog shifts performance pressure off the student and aids them in perceiving themselves as a teacher or mentor to the dog. This is validating, empowering, and satisfying for the student and ultimately results in discovering the joy of reading.

***Dog + Child + Love of Reading = read to learn***

When a child embraces a love of books and reading at the side of a therapy dog, the groundwork has been set for the child to read to learn and become a lifelong reader and learner. This formula conquers the dilemma of \*aliteracy so prevalent today

The Nor’wester Readers organization keeps books and articles on file which can be borrowed for more information on how to use therapy dogs in the classroom. We are working on a “Teacher Page” for our website which will offer supportive information about our canine assisted learning program. Teachers interested in requesting a therapy dog can complete and return the request form which is currently on the FORMS page of our website.

We also hope to gain approval to offer an Act 48 Council Rock in-service workshop for teachers this winter titled “There’s A Dog In My Classroom!”

In the meantime, be creative, think outside the box, and put the dogs to work!

\*ALITERACY: A new phenomenon which is simply the lack of the reading habit in capable readers. People who are alliterate are not essentially illiterate, but choose not to read for some reason. Aliteracy is becoming known as the invisible epidemic.” (Anderson, T. “The Dangerous Step Above Literacy.” Lifestyle Channel, February 2011)