

Hopewell Valley students manage stress with help of Attitudes in Reverse therapy dogs

By Tricia Baker and Kurt Baker • Attitudes in Reverse • www.air.ngo

The beginning of the 2020-21 school year is different.

Students entering buildings must wear masks while social distancing. Class sizes are reduced significantly. Plexiglass barriers loom in classrooms, protecting children from the spread of illness. Some students continue to be on a hybrid schedule, meaning part-time on school property and part-time home doing virtual learning.

All these changes and the unpredictability of the future have created many stressors for our students, teachers and school administrators.

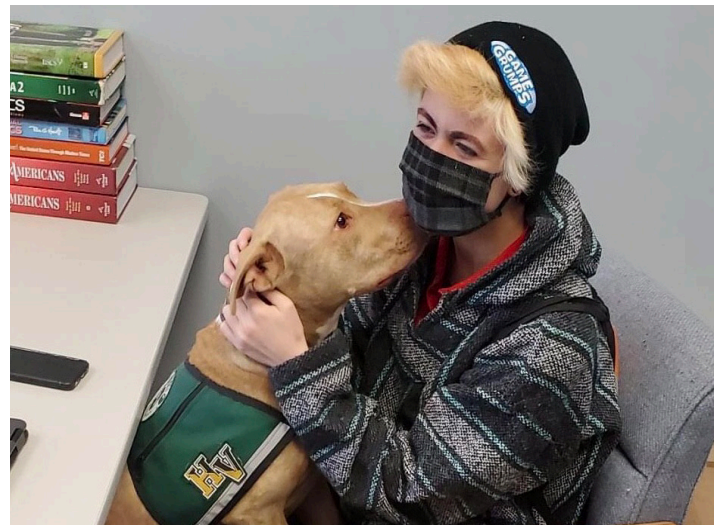
Fortunately, however, not all changes are stressful.

At the Hopewell Valley Regional School District (HVRSD), there is one major positive change to help students manage the stressors that they face each day in our “brave new world” – The addition of the certified HVRSD/AIR (Attitudes In Reverse) therapy dogs.

The simple action of looking at a dog releases oxytocin, the relationship hormone. Petting a dog releases serotonin and dopamine, feel-good brain chemicals. Petting a dog also lowers our cortisol level, which is our stress hormone. Overall, interacting with a dog is a positive thing for our mental well-being.

Therapy dogs have been assisting people for more than 50 years, but it has only been in the past 10 years that their support has expanded from visiting nursing homes and hospitals. The AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds program has helped expand the support of therapy dogs to mental wellness and suicide prevention programs in schools, and supporting students during crises and the loss of friends.

The HVRSD/AIR Dog’s School Therapy Dog program is a full comprehensive program that not only teaches and certifies each individual handler and dog, but also teaches all the handlers and dogs to work together as cohesive school teams. Behavioral assessments of the dogs are done during class. Observations are made about which dogs may not want to work as therapy dogs. Observations are also made about which dogs can’t work together. School therapy dog teams are assigned a set of rules to follow to ensure the safety of all students, staff and dogs.



Administrators spent more than one year, on their time, training their personal dogs to become HVRSD/AIR Therapy School Dogs. This past July, these six dog teams passed all their testing and became certified. Six schools, six dogs. We have begun the 2020-21 training of the second cohort, including eight additional teams. The goal is to have at least one dog on every school property, every single day.

Dr. Thomas Smith, superintendent of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District said, “People can marginalize what therapy dogs do. When you see the dogs connect with students and you see how the students open up and share with counselors or another adult through the dog, you realize that it is really magical. It really made a difference with many HVRSD students and that is something that convinced me to expand the program further.”

Rosetta Treece, director of Curriculum and Instruction, lost her son, AIC Ronald Jenkins Treece, to suicide just over two years ago. At 21 years old, he had just finished a year with the United States Air Force.

“He was a kind soul who was always helping others,” Treece said. “He is why I do the work I do in his loving memory.”

Treece and her rescued pit bull mix was one of the teams recently certified as an HVRSD/AIR therapy dog.

Treece first saw AIR dogs during their annual visits to the high school during finals.

“We then had a traumatic loss and were able to use AIR as a resource to help to heal our community,” she said.

“I have seen firsthand the power of therapy dogs on people who are struggling emotionally or grappling with a traumatic experience,” she continued. “Seeing the dogs’ ability to uplift grievers in the middle of a traumatic loss has been so powerful. After having experienced such horrible loss, I feel compelled to do whatever I can to teach others the importance of mental health. Being a part of AIR allows me and Bruno to offer that support to others.”



Nicole Gianfredi, principal of Timberlane Middle School, was very excited about the new program, but wasn’t certain Lucy was therapy dog material.

“She had no sense of personal boundaries. She thinks she’s a lap dog,” Gianfredi said. “I just kept picturing her just sitting on the kids.”

But, after months of training to prepare for the therapy dog test, Gianfredi and 12-year-old Lucy became certified and the yellow lab is a professional.

“Mental health and the social and emotional learning for our students are so critical,” she said. “The dogs make it a comfortable and safe environment to engage in this conversation, which is important for such a young age.”

Lucy recently provided some therapy during a Zoom meeting with a student and at some training visits at school, and Gianfredi is looking forward to bringing Lucy to Timberlane on a regular basis.

“Bringing her into the school, it seems she knows that it’s her job to make people feel better,” Gianfredi said. “It’s really rewarding. I wish I had started when Lucy was younger, but she has proven to us all that no matter what age you are, you can make a difference in someone’s life.”

Scott Brettell, vice principal of Hopewell Valley Central High School, recalled a high school student with unique emotional needs, and how just showing that student a photo of his dog made a huge impact.

“To calm him down, I would just talk about my 10-year-old black Labrador retriever, Baxter, and I’d show him a picture and right away, his whole demeanor would change,” Brettell said. “He could be physically upset and then it was a complete transformation, just talking about and seeing pictures of my dog.”

When he learned that he could enter his own dog in AIR’s new program to train and certify therapy dogs owned by district staff members, Brettell said he jumped at the opportunity.

“If just a photo of my dog could make such a difference to that student, I can only imagine the impact of actually having a dog in the building on a regular basis,” he said.

“It’s another resource where we can help students. That’s our duty as educators: to take care of our students and make people more aware of mental health and put our kids in better positions to deal with life and life beyond school,” he continued.

Brettell is excited to see how much the therapy dog program could evolve within the district.

“I’d like to eventually see a fleet of dogs in the building,” he said. “We’re just breaking the ice here with what AIR can do in the district. We’re off to a great start.”

Other HVRSD/AIR Dog Teams are: Rosie and Steve Wilfing, principal of Stony Brook Elementary School; and Hopkins and Vicky Pilitsis, director of STEM (science, technology, engineering, math).

“It is no secret that our students are struggling, and we want to provide different and innovative ways to support them,” Smith said. “Don’t be afraid to do it. You can get through all the logistics. It really makes a difference. It is rewarding for you, but it is especially rewarding for others.”

Attitudes In Reverse (AIR) was established by Tricia, Kurt and Katelyn Baker of Plainsboro in 2010 soon after their son/brother Kenny died by suicide following a long battle against severe depression and anxiety. Their mission is to save lives by educating students about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. Since January 2011, they have presented to more than 95,000 students in middle and high schools and colleges in New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Missouri, Texas and Arizona. AIR also offers youth mental health first aid instruction and includes the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds program, bringing dogs into schools to help students de-stress and engage in the conversation about mental health. In addition, AIR trains and certifies emotional support animals and offers a lunch-and-learn program for businesses. For more information about AIR, visit www.attitudesinreverse.org or call 609-945-3200.



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