



Therapy dogs aren't just a teacher's pet at these NJ schools. They're staff.

By Jackie Roman • NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

It may sound odd at first, but agreeing to bring a pack of dogs on as staff in Hopewell Valley Regional School District was the easiest decision then-Superintendent Thomas Smith ever made. And he's not the only one.

NJ Advance Media spoke with half a dozen administrators, counselors, and other school staff who, in the search for new therapeutic modalities, chose to bring a certified therapy dog into their schools on a permanent basis.

The results have been overwhelmingly positive, those interviewed said, and not just because it's fun to have a dog on school grounds. Providing support through loss, stress, and now a worldwide pandemic, these certified therapy dogs are more than pets — they're invaluable members of the team.

It was spring 2019 when Hopewell Valley Regional School District, located in Mercer County, suffered the loss of a student to suicide. In the days following, Smith, who now leads Pennsbury School District in Pennsylvania, arranged for a variety of resources to support grieving students and staff, such as quiet rooms, discussion groups, and private counseling sessions.

"We did what you're supposed to do, we provided a safe space, but this young individual's good friends were together and they still weren't talking, and they weren't talking to any adults either, they were just quiet," Smith said in an interview.

The district decided to bring in therapy dogs from Attitudes in Reverse (AIR) Dogs: Paws for Minds, a comprehensive program utilizing trained and certified therapy dogs to spark conversations about mental health and suicide prevention, which had previously visited the school during high-stress periods like midterms or finals. Smith observed the dogs as they went right up to the affected group of students "and whatever wall was around them just melted."

"They started petting the dogs and interacting with the dogs and through that, they started talking — amongst themselves and to the therapists that we had — so the dogs really became a conduit for the students opening up and being able to share their feelings," Smith said.

"That was when we knew there was something special here," he added.



Photo courtesy of Tia Bassano

Soon after, Smith pitched the idea of a partnership between AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds and the school district in an administrative meeting with the ambitious goal of having at least one certified therapy dog on each school property every day. He had eight people volunteer on the spot to train their own personal dogs in the AIR School Therapy Dog Program, "a comprehensive program that not only teaches and certifies each individual handler/dog but teaches all the handlers/dogs to work together as a cohesive school team," according to its website.

According to a recent study in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, "therapy dogs have been found to reduce physiological symptoms of stress through lowering cortisol levels, increasing positive emotions, promoting engagement in learning activities" and more.

The training was paid for with grant funding, but the owners are responsible for all other costs (care, feeding, vet bills, etc.) Six stuck with the rigorous year-long commitment, including Smith and his yellow lab JoJo. The district is now working with its third cohort and has grown its program to 13 dog/handler teams.



Photo courtesy of Tom Smith

“We had a lot of people roll their eyes at first about the efficacy of dogs in schools, but I will tell you, I’ve seen it make a difference,” he said.

Suzanne Keller, supervisor of The Source (a school-based youth services program) and Freshman Academy at Red Bank Regional High School, located in Monmouth County, can attest to that. When she first brought the idea of a permanent in-house therapy dog to administration, they weren’t entirely convinced — there were questions about liability, funding, efficacy.

“But I was determined to make this happen,” Keller said in an interview.

She went ahead and got Riley, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel and poodle mix. Keller began having him trained through AIR Therapy Dogs and started to introduce him to the people she needed to get approvals from.

“Once they met Riley and they saw how sweet and kind and loving he was,” they were more amenable to the idea, Keller said.

Keller secured funding for Riley’s training from The Source and after a year, was able to present him to the Board of Education as a certified therapy dog, along with research detailing the impact of therapy dogs on children’s well-being and learning.

Riley officially joined The Source and began working at Red Bank Regional High School in fall 2019. He starts each morning by welcoming students as they enter the building, then heads to The Source offices to await drop-ins. Occasionally he is booked for classroom visits and even the occasional staff meeting. Now administration, staff, and students alike can’t imagine life without the 3 1/2 years old cavapoo.

“He’s had such a positive impact on our environment,” Keller said.

The programs in Hopewell Valley and Red Bank have served as a model for other districts interested in implementing their own school therapy dog programs. This was the case in Middletown Township Public School District, also in Monmouth County, where the conversation of getting a therapy dog had been raised several times but never came to fruition, said Peter Smith, principal of Leonardo Grade School.

“When Middletown Public Schools learned of the comprehensive program that AIR Therapy Dogs implemented in HVRSD, the possibility of this idea resurfaced,” Peter Smith wrote in an email.

With assistance from assistant superintendent Patrick Rinella, Smith spearheaded a partnership with AIR Therapy Dogs and Middletown, which officially began this past summer with a cohort of eight human/canine teams.

“Although the dogs are not working directly with students just yet, the staff and some of our community members are aware of the upcoming implementation of the program. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive,” Smith said.

Maple Shade School District in Burlington County is another recent enrollee in the AIR Therapy Dog Program, at the suggestion of Tia Bassano, school psychologist and board certified behavior analyst.

“They’re more stringent in their requirements, in their testing skills and in their training program, too, which I think is important especially when you’re in fragile environments like schools where you really need to have well-behaved and mannerly dogs,” Bassano said.

Bassano and her labradoodle Tuckerton, or Tucky, completed certification this summer and welcomed students at Yucom Elementary School, where Bassano is based, on their first day back at school this year. He spends an average of two days a week on the job — to make sure he has a work-life balance, Bassano added — and has already visited several classrooms throughout the district.

“He brings a smile to lots of people’s faces,” Bassano said.

Tricia Baker, co-founder of AIR, said it has been “amazing to see the responses that young people have with the dogs.”

She was inspired to launch AIR 12 years ago after her own son died by suicide and since then, the nonprofit has used therapy dogs to educate thousands of students and staff about mental health disorders and suicide prevention.

“My hope is to be able to bring more dogs to more people, more children — just to bring about more smiles and hopefully make people happier in life, because life can be really hard sometimes,” Baker said.