

Sit, stay! Dogs may be coming to N.J. classrooms under proposed law.

By Tina Kelley • NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

When the dogs came into one New Jersey school, the students' faces "lit up," recalled the school superintendent overseeing his Mercer County district during a difficult time.

A student had recently died by suicide at the high school and counselors were brought in to try to help her friends, said Tom Smith, the former head of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District in Pennington.

But, the students sat in silence until therapy dogs were brought into the room to join them, Smith said. Then, the girls were able to start talking about their grief.

Though New Jersey schools have experimented with therapy dogs in student counseling sessions and classrooms for years, the state Legislature is considering a bill that would create a pilot program in elementary schools to assess whether the pups should, well, sit and stay.

"We know coming out of COVID there have been a lot of mental health issues with our student population around the state, so this was one way I thought that would help settle the nerves of kids" and help them academically, said Anthony Bucco, R-Morris, one of the bill's sponsors.

"Hopefully, we could extend it all across the state," Bucco said.

Under the proposed law, six school districts would apply to be part of a three-year pilot program to bring dogs into elementary schools. The districts would include two each in South, Central and North Jersey in a mix of urban, suburban and rural areas of the state.

At the end of the three years, the state education commissioner would submit a report to the Governor and the state Legislature on how effective the therapy dogs were to help determine if the program should spread statewide.



Trisha Baker, center, with book, talks to a class with her therapy dog, Goober, at Toll Gate Elementary School in Pennington last year. courtesy of AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds

Bucco said the funding for the program has not been determined yet, but the money would likely come from the state Department of Education.

The bill, S-1253, notes some research shows therapy dogs in schools can help with student attendance, motivation, confidence, and reading and math skills. An identical, Democrat-sponsored bill was introduced in the state Assembly last month.

Smith, former head of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District, said he used to have therapy dogs greet students before midterms and finals, which made them feel less stressed. But, he really saw the dogs' impact after tragedy hit the high school and a student died by suicide in 2019.

"The therapy dogs acted as a conduit to getting the students to talk. It was really heartwarming to watch," he said.

The family of the student who died by suicide also requested the therapy dogs attend the child's viewing to help students who attended to mourn their friend, Smith said.



Timberlane Middle School principal Nicole Gianfredi and her dog Lucy are taking part in the district's Attitudes in Reverse Therapy Dogs program in Hopewell. Courtesy of Attitudes in Reverse

Smith said he wanted therapy dogs in each of the district's seven schools all year to provide emotional support and comfort. He and other district administrators were trained with their own dogs for an hour a week for 40 weeks by AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds, a pet therapy group in Princeton that has been visiting schools since 2011.

Tricia Baker is the program director of the nonprofit group. When she lost her son to suicide in 2009, there was little support in school for her daughter, Katelyn, who is now a certified dog trainer. That experience inspired the family to begin mental health programs for schools.

Therapy dogs at Hopewell schools

AIR Dogs has worked with students in Hopewell, Lyndhurst, Middletown, South Hunterdon Regional, Ewing, Hopewell, Trenton, Red Bank, Maple Shade and at Rutgers Prep in Somerset, she said.

The dogs are always on a leash and students interact voluntarily with the dogs, who are watched carefully so they don't become overworked, Baker said.

She recalled 200 fifth graders singing "Happy Birthday" to her Pomeranian therapy dog, Goober. "They love your dog, and it makes you smile even more," she said. "It's how I heal."

Since the pandemic, therapy dogs have been in high demand, so her organization helps train the pets of school staff to become certified. The participating schools obtain insurance to host the dogs, and her group has insurance to cover dog training, Baker said.

If the pilot program for therapy dogs is approved, the state commissioner of education would come up with guidelines for school districts on how to train and use the dogs, according to the legislation.

Under the bill, the commissioner would advise districts about activities for students and therapy dogs, training requirements for therapy dog handlers and what insurance districts would need for the program.

The bill was recently advanced by the Senate Education Committee in a 5-0 vote. The legislation has not had a hearing in the Assembly yet.

To become law, the bill would need the approval of the full Senate and the full Assembly before it goes to Gov. Phil Murphy for his signature. A similar bill reached the Senate Appropriations Committee in 2022, but died in the Assembly Education Committee.

Back at Hopewell Valley, Smith said he paid for therapy dogs with the help of grant money. He continues to use state grants to pay for them in his new job as head of the Pennsbury School District in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

"Students have reported a reduction in overall stress and anxiety," he said. Teachers report the same.

"Unless you actually see it, I don't think you can appreciate it," he said. "It truly does make a difference."