

Please Join Me in Welcoming Skye and Hope, District Therapy Dogs, to our Absecon Learning Community

Given the impact therapy dogs can have on overall student well-being, schools around the country are increasingly [adopting therapy dog programs](#) as an inexpensive way of providing academic, social, and emotional support for students. The human-animal bond can impact people and animals in positive ways. Research shows therapy dogs can reduce stress physiologically (cortisol levels) and increase attachment responses that trigger oxytocin – a hormone that [increases trust in humans](#).

Dogs also react positively to animal-assisted activities. In response to the human-animal bond, dogs produce [oxytocin and decrease their cortisol levels](#) when connecting with their owner. Often dogs [feel the same](#) when engaging in animal assisted activities as if they were at home, depending on the environmental context.



The human-animal bond can impact people and animals in positive ways, as supported through research documented by the Ohio University Libraries/Flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND](#).

What are therapy dogs?

The [role of therapy dogs](#) is to positively react and respond supportively to people and their environment, under the guidance and direction of their owner/handler. For example, an individual might be [encouraged to gently pat or talk to a dog](#) to teach sensitive touch, calm interaction, modeling appropriate behaviors, or by following directions

Therapy dogs can also be used as part of [animal assisted therapy](#). This approach aims to improve a student's social, cognitive and emotional functioning. A healthcare professional who uses a therapy dog in treatment may be viewed as [less threatening](#), potentially [increasing the connection](#) between the client and professional.

There are also [animal-assisted activities](#), which is an umbrella term covering many different ways animals can be used to help humans. One example is to facilitate emotional or physical mental health and well being through pet therapy or the presence of therapy dogs. One of the goals of this program is by implementing these strategies into our self-contained classrooms, and embedding fundamental principles of animal-assisted activities into our curriculum, that we can ultimately better serve our students with special needs. In addition, [Research](#) suggests using therapy dogs in response to traumatic events can help reduce symptoms of depression, post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety.

Benefits of therapy dogs

Animal assisted therapy can:

- teach empathy and [appropriate interpersonal skills](#)
- help individuals [develop social skills](#)
- be soothing and the presence of animals can more quickly build [rapport between the professional and client](#), and
- improve individual's skills to pick up social cues imperative to human relationships. Professionals can process that information and use it to [help clients see how their behaviour affects others](#).

More recently, therapy dogs are being used as a form of engagement with students at school.



Research shows therapy dogs can be used to assist with social/emotional learning needs. Pioneer Library System/Flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Therapy dogs go to school!

A recent [report](#) highlighted children working with therapy dogs experienced increased motivation for learning, resulting in improved outcomes. Therapy dogs are being used to support children with [social and emotional](#) learning needs, which in turn can [assist](#) with [literacy development](#). [Research](#) into the effects of therapy dogs in schools is showing a range of benefits including:

- [Increase in school attendance](#)
- [Gains in confidence](#)
- Decreases in learner anxiety behaviours resulting in improved learning outcomes, such as [increases in reading](#) and [writing levels](#)
- Positive changes towards learning and [improved motivation](#), and
- Enhanced relationships with peers and teachers due to experiencing trust and unconditional love from a therapy dog. This in turn helps students learn how to [express their feelings](#) and enter into more trusting relationships.

Despite these known benefits, many schools choose not to have therapy dog programs due to [perceived risks](#). These range from concerns about sanitation issues to the suitability of dog temperament when working with children. But therapy dogs and owners are carefully selected and put through a strict testing regime prior to [acceptance into any program](#). Both Skye and Hope have been Nationally Certified as Official Therapy Dogs by [FURever as Friends](#) and are recognized by the AKC:

- Skye, THDX: Silver Medal of Excellence with over 200 visits to schools, libraries, and hospitals across the State.
- Hope, THD: 85 visits to schools, libraries, and hospitals across the State.

Within our Absecon Schools this year, in grades kindergarten through five, we will be implementing the [Silent Mentors In Literacy Education Program \(S.M.I.L.E.\)](#) under the direction of Ms. Wescoat and our newly revamped Library Program. The goal of the S.M.I.L.E. program is to improve, encourage, and nurture the literacy skills of children with the help of certified pet therapy pets in library and school settings. A child who has some reading difficulties or is hesitant to read aloud may find it more relaxing and less stressful reading to a pet than to a person because the pet doesn't judge, criticize or correct the child's reading. Our expert listeners, Skye and Hope, can be a FURever Friend!

In addition to the S.M.I.L.E. Program, Skye and Hope will be featured members of our school community. Under the guidance of their handlers, both dogs will assist in responding to students experiencing emotional duress and will take part in character education lessons throughout the year in all of our classrooms.

We are committed to providing a positive learning environment for your children, and will only include Skye and Hope in activities with your child with your consent. Not only do our handlers participate in a rigorous training process, but we remain in coordination with the school nurse regarding potential allergens as well. If you are interested in having your child benefit from this worthwhile experience, please see the attached Permission Slip and return to your child's teacher at your earliest convenience.

*****Please see attached parental permission slips for participation*****

Our Absecon Schools Therapy Dog Team Members:

Here in the Absecon School District we can now offer animal assisted therapy in grades Preschool through Eight by training our current staff as Handlers:

- **School Counselors**, Mrs. Mary Alvarado (Marsh) and Ms. Jessica Torcicollo (Attales)
- **District Social Worker**, Mrs. Kathy Guenther
- **District School Psychologist**, Transition-TBD
- **District Behaviorist**, Mrs. Katherine Irwin
- **Special Education Teacher**, Stephanie Swift
- **Director of Special Services and Curriculum**, Ms. Lindsay Reed



Therapy Dogs in the News....

The main reason for the lack of adoption of practice and program by all schools has been linked to the limited research into the benefits of therapy dogs in schools; however, we welcome you to peruse the below articles which have featured Skye and Hope's prior work and impact on students as therapy dogs:

Press of Atlantic City - 2/17/17:

http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/gallery/news/skye-therapy-dog-at-haleyville-mauricetown-school/collection_ccf46499-f28e-5cb4-9412-e951344eeef9.html#48

http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/education/from-westminster-to-the-classroom-this-show-dog-is-good/article_0c3c36cb-5922-5fa2-9516-1cc18525a186.html

The Daily Journal - 2/13/17:

<http://www.thedailyjournal.com/story/news/2017/02/13/commercial-township-school-district-therapy-dog-competing-westminster/97868590/>

The Daily Journal - 11/21/17:

<https://amp.thedailyjournal.com/amp/887723001>

SNJ Today - 2/13/17:

<http://www.snjtoday.com/story/34493544/commercial-township-therapy-dog-to-compete-at-westminster-dog-show>

Daily Journal - 2/9/18 :

<http://www.thedailyjournal.com/story/news/2018/02/09/cumberland-county-therapy-dog-westminster-bound/325466002/>

Daily Journal - 2/11/18:

<https://amp.thedailyjournal.com/amp/325466002>

Press of Atlantic City - 2/12/18 :

http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/news/breaking/commercial-township-dog-goes-for-gold-at-westminster-dog-show/article_oacf20a8-ef9f-5777-b1d7-ca449fbf1c4f.html

Philly.com/Inquirer - 2/13/18:

<http://www.philly.com/philly/news/breaking/westminster-kennel-club-dog-show-new-jersey-therapy-dog-greater-swiss-mountain-skye-20180213.html>

CBS 3 Facebook Live - 2/14/18:

<http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/video/3810636-meet-skye-a-therapy-dog-in-commercial-township-school-district/>

Nat Geo Wild/Fox Sports - 2/13/18:

<https://www.facebook.com/foxsports/videos/10157241394144552/>

SNJ Today - 2/13/18:

<http://www.snjtoday.com/story/37497096/south-jersey-therapy-dog-competes-in-westminster-dog-show>

CBS 3 Eyewitness News - 2/14/18:

<http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/video/category/news/3810875-south-jersey-therapy-dog-gets-heros-welcome-after-competing-in-westminster-dog-show/>

