

BRING JOY WITH THERAPY DOGS

BY REBECCA GREER



Last year when I transitioned from working in public libraries to a school media center, I realized I could achieve one of my career goals: bringing therapy dogs into the library. The idea was to have therapy dogs come in for a few days during midterms and finals to help alleviate stress and bring joy back into the students' days.

The first step was to get the administration on board with the idea, necessitating research into the subject, focusing on the benefits of bringing therapy dogs onto campus. I started by looking at similar programs in Florida and found one at the University of South Florida (USF). At USF, "the Center for Student Well-Being invites dogs and other animals to come to campus during exam time to help students cope with the added stress" (Paws, 2024). At Berkeley Preparatory School in Tampa, Florida, the AP Psychology teacher and clinical psychologist Dr. Michelle Barrett stated

...petting these dogs actually brings about physiological changes, particularly when stressed or anxious. Research consistently supports a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure when petting an animal. Even more significant is the documented reduction in cortisol levels (stress hormone) and increase in oxytocin (feel good/social connection

hormone). This is really strong evidence that there can be a decrease in stress/anxiety and a mood boost, potentially for depression/loneliness, simply by petting a dog.

There are very few interventions that are this simple, fast, and effective (Therapy, 2024).

I was extremely fortunate to immediately get the full backing of my school administration. The school's Student Government had been trying to get a Therapy Dog program for the last few years, but needed someone to help facilitate it. As I have experience with running large-scale library programs, I was happy to volunteer myself and have the assistance of these students in promoting the program and getting the student body to sign up to participate.

A high school in upstate New York had therapy dogs visit their school library and stressed the importance of having officially registered Therapy Dogs for their long-running program (Walker, 2021). Based on this information, I knew I needed to reach out to local therapy dog organizations that ensured the dogs were well-trained, healthy, and approved for visits along with their handler.

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There are several national and even international therapy dog organizations that test the dogs and provide them with certifications for visits. These organizations often have local chapters from which visits can be requested. I reached out to as many places as I could, not knowing how many local members might belong to each group or what their availability would be. The organizations I reached out to were the Alliance of Therapy Dogs, The Bright & Beautiful, and Pet Partners.

The organizations did not provide me with the names of contacts, but instead had me fill out a form with information about my event. I had to include dates, times, location, information on who would be participating (students), and if there would be someone from the school present to oversee the visits. As the handlers are only responsible for the dogs, a school representative needs to run the program.

Once I started getting interest from the handlers and their dogs, I put together a spreadsheet listing the dates and times of the visits. This made it a lot easier once the students signed up, and I could assign them a time slot to visit with a therapy dog. With help from the Student Government, I posted flyers with QR codes to advertise that therapy dogs were coming to visit for midterms, making it easy for students to download and fill out the sign-up form I created along with a parental permission sheet that parents/guardians needed to sign. Additional forms were kept in the library for students who may not have access to a printer. As students filled out and returned the forms, I added their name to a time slot in my spreadsheet and tried to

schedule an equal number of students for each therapy dog visit.

Students were e-mailed with the information for their therapy dog visit; the date, time, and name of the dog they were going to get to hang out with. Since students don't reliably check their e-mails, I also had Student Government post the spreadsheet I made so students could check the time of their scheduled visit with the therapy dog.

On each therapy dog day, I met the handler and dog at the front door and escorted them to the library. I had Student Government help students sign in as they arrived at the library and make sure each visit was capped at 30 minutes to allow for turnover. Seeing the students' faces light up as soon as they saw a dog on campus is absolutely amazing. You can see them come into the library looking tired, exhausted, and stressed out from taking or studying for their exams, and a switch was flipped once they laid eyes on the dogs. When they left, they were smiling and laughing, looking refreshed and no longer bogged down by exams.

I had several students write thank you letters or directly thank me for bringing the dogs in and brightening their days. Having therapy dogs at the school for midterms was such a success that there was no question we would be bringing them back in for finals. The therapy dog handlers are absolutely amazing and deserve all the accolades for taking time to train the dogs in the first place, and then donating their free time to bring the dogs into the school. I made a big point to write each handler a personal thank you letter after their

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final visit and let them know what it meant to the students. For finals we had even more therapy dogs visit; some were repeats from midterms and others were brand new. Many of the handlers who came for midterms recommended friends who might be interested in scheduling future visits and helped to spread the word that we were looking for therapy dog teams to come to our school.

Now, I'm in my second year at a school media center, and I'll soon be reaching out to dog handlers to bring them back for midterms this year. Thanks to last year, I have a huge list of therapy dog teams that I can now reach out to directly, and hopefully fill up all the open time slots for midterm week.



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