

THERAPY DOGS IN SCHOOLS

Background

Therapy dogs are interactive dogs trained and certified to work for a handler to provide affection, comfort and love to many people in many different settings. The presence of a therapy dog can decrease anxiety and provide a level of comfort that enables students to work through a variety of challenging issues. Their responsibilities are to provide psychological or physiological therapy to individuals other than their handlers. It is important to note that therapy dogs are **not** service dogs. Service dogs are trained to perform tasks to ease their handlers' disability, helping them to attain safety and independence.

Definitions

Child Certified Therapy Dog Team	This refers to a handler and dog team that have successfully passed the tests and monitored visits necessary to be certified to work with children as well as adults. In British Columbia, this certification can be granted only from a recognized therapy organization (e.g. St. John's Ambulance therapy dog program, Companion Paws therapy program, Vancouver Eco Village therapy dog program).
Therapy Dog	A dog that works with its owner/handler as a team to improve a student's physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functioning. A therapy dog can be useful for educational and motivational effectiveness for participants.
The Handler	An adult dog handler that was part of the certification process for the therapy dog. The adult dog handler must accompany its therapy dog at all times. A school district staff member cannot assume the role of handler.

Procedures

1. Criteria for Use of Therapy Animals in Schools:

- 1.1 The therapy dog and handler must be trained and annually certified by one of these recognized training schools:
 - St. John's Ambulance Therapy Dog Program;
 - Companion Paws Therapy Program; and
 - Vancouver Eco Village Therapy Dog Program.
- 1.2 The introduction of the therapy dog to a school community must not create barriers to students' learning.

2. Application

A handler who wishes to apply to use their therapy dog must provide the following information:

- 2.1 Provide a letter to the school district requesting the therapy dog admittance;

- 2.2 Provide a certificate of training for the therapy dog and handler from an organization approved by the Canadian Kennel Club Association;
- 2.3 Accept responsibility for the actions of the therapy dog by signing a school district release of liability;
- 2.4 Attain and provide the school district with a copy of liability insurance that covers possible injuries or property damage; and
- 2.5 Annually, provide the school district with proof of a municipal dog license, proof of annual re-certification from the appropriate agency and proof of up-to-date vaccinations provided by a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine confirming the therapy dog is in good health.

3. School District/School Responsibilities

- 3.1 Consult with the handler, principal and director of inclusive education, to determine:
 - 3.1.1 The purpose and function of the therapy dog;
 - 3.1.2 The role/duties of the therapy dog handler;
 - 3.1.3 Arrangement for the therapy dog and handler team to visit the school or worksite outside of regular hours in order to familiarize it with the building prior to commencement of service;
 - 3.1.4 A timetable for the introduction of the therapy dog to the school/class; and
 - 3.1.5 Rules of conduct around the therapy dog for students, staff and the public.

4. Expectations for Dog Handlers

The school district must approve any person who is authorized to assist in the care and supervision of the therapy dog while on school property. The term handler refers to the adult dog handler that was part of the certification process for a particular dog.

Responsibilities of the handler:

- The handler will provide evidence that they have been certified as a therapy dog handler.
- At no time are the handler and dog permitted to be alone with students.
- The dog must always be under the direct control and supervision of the handler. If any changes in behaviour occur that may affect the safety of the students, the handler will immediately remove the dog from the school and notify the principal.
- School district staff members cannot, at any time, assume the role of handler.
- As a school volunteer, the handler will be required to complete a Volunteer Application (see Operational Procedure 430). Volunteers must respect the confidentiality of all information received regarding students or staff members while providing services in the school. The handler will not share or disclose any confidential or personal information that may be directly or indirectly disclosed to them.

- The handler will be required to undertake a criminal record check with vulnerable sector screening through the school district's process. (see Operational Procedure 421).

5 Notifications

5.1 The following letters shall be forwarded to all students or colleagues, to inform:

- 5.1.1 Of the arrival of the therapy dog, its purpose, rules and regulations regarding the existence of the therapy dog. (Form 154-1 Therapy Dogs in Schools – Letter to the School Community);
- 5.1.2 The other students or colleagues where the therapy dog will be present to elicit information concerning allergies or extreme phobias. (Form 154-2 Letter to the Families of Children in the Class(es); and
- 5.1.3 Inform all staff including teachers, education assistants, custodians, support staff, volunteers and health and safety representatives of the presence of the therapy dog(s). (Form 154-3 Notice: Therapy Dog in School Today).

6. Removing or Excluding a Therapy Dog

The school district may limit, remove or exclude from school facilities or property, any therapy dog that no longer is meeting the annual certification of the recognized training school, is no longer deemed necessary for the original therapeutic intent or for reasons that may include: aggression, allergies, accidents, or interference with teaching.

7. Restrictions and Off-Limits for Therapy Dogs

The determination to restrict the access of a therapy dog to specific programs or areas of the school facility will be on a case-by-case basis.

8. Conflict Resolution

Employees, students/parents of a student with medical issues that are impacted by dogs (such as respiratory diseases) should contact the school principal or their supervisor if they have a concern about exposure to a therapy dog.

The school principal in collaboration with the director of inclusive education or, in the case of an employee, the director of human resources and/or the supervisor and, if necessary, a representative from the accredited organization, will facilitate a process to resolve the conflict that considers the needs/accommodations of all persons involved.

Related Forms: [Form 154-1 Therapy Dogs in Schools – Letter to School Community](#)
[Form 154-2 Therapy Dog – Letter to the Families of Children in the Class\(es\)](#)
[Form 154-3 Notice – Therapy Dog in School Today](#)

Related Procedures: [OP 152 Animals on school district property](#)
[OP 153 Guide dogs and service dogs in schools](#)
[OP 421 Criminal Record Checks](#)
[OP 430 School Volunteers/Volunteer Team Coaches](#)

Revised: May 2024
 December 2023
 January 2021