

Canine Link: An Emerging Protective Factor for Berkshire Hills Students

April 4, 2013

WHAT: Canine Therapy Program being utilized in Berkshire Middle School Setting

WHEN: Academic Year 2012–2013

WHERE: Monument Valley Regional Middle School, 313 Monument Valley Road, Great Barrington, MA 01230

CONTACT: Dominick Sacco, Med, LCSW, school adjustment office

Canine Link is a program designed let trained dogs work as therapeutic support agents for a variety of populations at schools, nursing home and other health care settings in the Hudson Valley, Berkshires and New York City. Each dog and their human partner must undergo a twelve-week training period to be prepared for canine therapy work.

Monument Valley Regional Middle School has benefited richly from Canine link in the 2012–2013 school year. An English Pointer named Clarke and his partner Leslie Miller have been useful with reading intervention classes, where students mastering certain skills will read aloud to the dog. Tomboy, a Great Pyrenees sheep dog and his human partner Liz Marino, has been working as a therapy dog in a variety of group and individual sessions with students who may be experiencing personal, academic or social challenges. And Gabby, a smaller dog, Cairn terrier and her human partner Mandy Pieczarka have been also doing therapeutic work with students dealing with a host of sensitive subject matter.

The magic of canine therapy is its ability to cut through people's defenses with such simplicity. Even the most jaded middle schooler begins to melt in the presence of a Great White Pyrenees. "It's like having Santa Claus in the room", states Margo Davis-Hollander, an MSW intern in the school adjustment office, "Each time we invite students into a therapeutic meeting with a dog we are amazed by the results. Students let down their burdens quickly and are able to share their stories and support other students with genuine

compassion. The presence of the dog removes the taboo many teens and pre teens project about emotional needs. I see it as a significant new addition to the potential protective factors offered to students at the middle school.”

Dom Sacco MEd, LCSW, who directs the canine program at the middle school, sees this as one of the most effective modalities for working with this age group, “Middle schoolers tend to care a lot about what others think of them, yet the canine presence has made a huge difference is how candid and available these teenagers can be.” The program has also had some unexpected positive outcomes; “We have had a couple of school wide experiences of loss this year” Explains Mr. Sacco, “first with the Newton tragedy as well as losing one of our staff due to sudden death, and each time the dogs have been a tremendous source of comfort and support to students, faculty and administration.”

“We employ a host of tools and strategies to support students who may be at risk academically or socially,” says Ms. Davis–Hollander, “including a student based mentor program, an new after school homework and enrichment program, and a rich mix of subject specific academic interventionists, yet the canine therapy program has fostered an environment of trust and acceptance among the students that feels at the heart of the excellence we strive for here—maybe even at the heart of our school.”

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