

INTEROFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

Los Angeles Unified School District
Independent Analysis Unit

INFORMATIVE

TO: Members, Board of Education

DATE: April 16, 2025

FROM: Andrew Thomas, Director, Independent Analysis Unit

SUBJECT: Therapy Animals in L.A. Unified

Summary

This memo addresses inquiries from school site constituents regarding the potential inclusion of therapy animals in schools for their social-emotional benefits. It outlines the current District policy, which prohibits therapy animals on campuses, recommends changing it, and explores the benefits, risks, and implementation challenges associated with therapy animal programs.

Definition of Therapy Animals

Therapy animals are defined as trained animals that provide comfort and emotional support but lack legal protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), unlike service animals. (Service animals are trained to perform specific tasks for people with disabilities, such as guiding someone who is visually impaired or alerting someone to a medical issue like seizures or low blood sugar.) Because therapy animals lack legal protection, they may only enter facilities by invitation or as part of a structured program.

There is no official state or county registry or certification required for therapy animals in California, including Los Angeles County. However, many therapy animal handlers choose to become certified through national or local organizations, such as Pet Partners or Alliance of Therapy Dogs. These organizations set standards for training, temperament, and behavior, and may provide ID badges or certificates for therapy teams.

Research on Therapy Animals in Schools

The integration of therapy animals and classroom pets in educational settings has gained attention for its potential to enhance student well-being and academic outcomes. However, research also highlights risks and implementation challenges that require careful consideration.

Social and Emotional Benefits

Research has connected therapy animals to lower cortisol levels and improved mood among students. A 2023 randomized controlled trial found students interacting with therapy dogs showed sustained **reductions in depression and stress** (Pendry et al., 2023). Similarly, 95% of teachers in the Pets in the Classroom survey observed **decreased student anxiety** and 98% reported **increased empathy and compassion** in students with classroom pets (Pets in the Classroom, 2023). Research has also shown human-animal interactions **activate the oxytocin system**, fostering emotional stability and bonding (Beetz et al., 2012). According to one study, therapy animals can act as social catalysts, **encouraging peer interactions among shy students** (Brelsford et al., 2017). Another

study found structured therapy dog programs correlate with **fewer disruptive behaviors and improved classroom climate** (Kropp & Shupp, 2017). However, not all research has shown positive effects. A 2024 study found 15% of students showed **no stress reduction from therapy dogs, and 5% reported increased anxiety** (Lee & Thompson, 2024).

Academic Performance

Reading programs with therapy dogs **boost fluency and confidence**, particularly for reluctant readers (Kropp & Shupp, 2017). Classroom pets were linked to **improved academic performance** in 76% of the classrooms surveyed (Pets in the Classroom, 2023). Survey research has also pointed to increased student attendance, with **80% of teachers noting better engagement** (Pets in the Classroom, 2023). However, a 2022 meta-analysis found **no significant improvement in standardized test scores** despite subjective benefits (Garcia et al., 2022).

Support for Special Populations

Animal-assisted interventions improve communication, self-confidence, and coping skills for students with disabilities (Brelsford et al., 2017).

Health, Safety, and Cultural Concerns

Therapy animals may cause allergies or infections in schools. Liability is a concern due to rare bites/scratches (Anderson & Olson, 2021). Additionally, not all students and families welcome therapy animals in classrooms. One study found 20% of parents in diverse schools opposed therapy dogs due to religious or cultural beliefs (Khan et al., 2023). Further, programs targeting “high-need” students risk excluding others, which can foster perceptions of unfairness (Wilson et al., 2025).

Major Therapy Animal Organizations Serving Schools in Southern California

Several organizations offer therapy animal services to schools across Southern California. These groups provide trained therapy animal teams to visit schools for reading programs, stress relief, social-emotional learning, and special events. Typically, these organizations are not-for-profit. Here are some of the most active organizations in the region:

Love On 4 Paws

<https://www.loveon4paws.org/>

Based in Los Angeles County, Love On 4 Paws provides animal-assisted therapy visits to schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. Their teams are experienced in working with children and educational settings.

Paws 4 Healing

<https://paws4healing.info/>

This all-volunteer nonprofit serves much of Southern California, including schools, libraries, and children’s centers. Their teams include dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, guinea pigs, and even mini horses. They offer reading programs and participate in school events, science fairs, and de-stress activities.

Pawsitive Teams

<https://pawsteams.org/>

Based in San Diego County, Pawsitive Teams runs a therapy dog program that partners with community organizations, including schools, to help children and adults achieve specific goals through animal-assisted activities.

Paws-to-Share

<https://www.paws-to-share.com/>

Paws-to-Share partners with schools to bring therapy animals—primarily dogs and cats—onto campuses to provide emotional support, stress relief, and social-emotional benefits for students. The program recently launched at Mountain View Middle School in the Lamont Elementary School District, near Bakersfield, where students interacted with therapy animals to help reduce stress and improve mood. The initiative is recognized for enhancing mental health and comfort in educational settings.

BARK Reading Therapy Dogs

<https://barkdogs.org/schools>

BARK (Beach Animals Reading with Kids) is an all-volunteer program based in Long Beach that encourages children to improve their reading skills and self-confidence by reading aloud to certified therapy dogs. BARK teams visit more than 60 schools and libraries, offering regular reading sessions where students, especially reluctant or shy readers, read to therapy dogs in a supportive, non-judgmental environment. BARK also visits nursing homes, senior living facilities, and colleges, but its primary focus is literacy support for children in schools and libraries across Southern California.

Alliance of Therapy Dogs (ATD)

<https://www.therapydogs.com/facility-information/>

A national organization with many local volunteers in Southern California, ATD provides certification and support for therapy dog teams that visit schools and other community sites.

Current Policy on Therapy Animals in LAUSD

Bulletin 3895, titled “Live Animals In Classroom, Service Animals, and School Sponsored and Non-School Sponsored Activities Involving Animals,” dated July 31, 2007, governs the District’s policy on therapy animals. Section III(A), Page 3, includes the paragraph:

Therapy or companion animals, including pets, are not service animals, are not covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act, therefore, are not permitted on District facilities or at District-sponsored activities.

The paragraph explains that therapy or companion animals, including pets, are not considered service animals under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As a result, **they do not have the legal protections or public access rights granted to service animals under the ADA**. In other words, businesses and public spaces are not legally *required* to allow therapy animals.

However, the fact that therapy or emotional support animals lack legal protections for public access rights under the ADA **does not necessarily mean they are *prohibited* in public spaces**.

Their access depends on the policies of the specific location and state or local laws. Public spaces have discretion to allow therapy animals even though they are not legally obligated to do so. For example, some schools, hospitals, or libraries voluntarily permit therapy animals because of their therapeutic benefits.

School districts justify allowing therapy animals despite being excluded from ADA protections by emphasizing their potential benefits and distinguishing them from service animals. Conversely, districts that prohibit therapy animals, such as L.A. Unified, often cite legal, safety, and logistical concerns.

Recommendations

The District has the discretion to make an affirmative choice for therapy animals. The District can focus on their broader benefits for student well-being and academic performance while addressing implementation challenges through policies and guidelines.

The Board can ask the superintendent to update Bulletin 3895 or develop a new bulletin on therapy animals. The development of this bulletin may involve, as appropriate, collaboration between the Division of Instruction, Risk Management, and Office of the General Counsel. Considerations for the policy governing therapy animals in District schools include:

1. **Health Protocols:** Grooming requirements, sanitation, and allergy-friendly zones
2. **Training and Consent:** Handler certification, education for students on animal behavior, opt-in policies
3. **Equity Audits:** Ensuring programs are inclusive and address cultural concerns

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