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Hearing a Tale, While Wagging the Tail

Canine listeners aid some young readers

By Ben Feller, Associated Press | November 28, 2005

GAITHERSBURG, Md. -- Ross, as the students call him, embodies a new breed of reading teacher in public schools. He's great with kids, he's patient, and he likes to have his ears rubbed.

He's a dog.

On Tuesday at Washington Grove Elementary, students who struggle with reading get a session with Ross, an Irish setter, or with Tucker, a golden retriever.

For about 30 minutes, each child reads to one of the two trained therapy dogs. Neither teachers nor other students are in the room. The animal's handler guides the lesson, but even she poses her questions as if the dog is the one who wants answers about the story.

Unusual? Sure, school leaders say. But the students seem inspired.

"They like the nonjudgmental character of the dog," said Barbara Murgo, the human partner in the therapy team with Ross, whose formal name is Rossini.

"If they make a mistake, the dog isn't going to correct them," Murgo said. "The dog is not going to laugh at them. It's just going to listen, and love every word."

The teams for READ, or Reading Education Assistance Dogs, are redefining teachers' pets across the country. Dogs and their handlers are being welcomed into schools to help children overcome any fear of mistakes.

For years, beside being companions, dogs have been trained to help the blind, sniff for explosives, and provide a soothing calm for hospital patients. Now they've found a niche as listeners.

Feel-good folly? No way, said Kathy Brake, the principal at Washington Grove. For schools to raise reading scores, children must improve in pronouncing and understanding words. So first, she said, some kids must learn to relax and enjoy reading.

The children do not question if the dogs are listening. They assume it.

When Robin Kirk runs her READ lessons at Chevy Chase Elementary in Maryland, some students ask if her dog, Scout, has any questions for them. One child brought in four books and asked Scout to pick the one he wanted. Kirk went with the one Scout had put his nose on.

The idea is catching on.

The number of dog-and-owner reading teams in schools, libraries, and other sites totals more than 750 in 45 states, according to Intermountain Therapy Animals, a nonprofit group based in Utah that created the program. That was up from less than 100 registered teams in early 2004.

Yet Kathy Klotz, executive director of the organization, acknowledged that the idea does not appeal to everyone.

When people do not want dogs in schools, they cite health, safety, skepticism that an animal could help.

"If somebody doesn't want us, we don't try real hard there," she said. "There are so many places that do want us, and there aren't enough teams anyway right now."

It is difficult to measure the program's four English-language learners' progress, in reading to dogs. Officials are hoping to collect such data, just as national coordinators of the READ effort voice hope that more research will win over skeptics.

Catherine Snow, a specialist on childhood literacy development at Harvard University, said that anything that helps poor readers find enjoyment in books is good, but isn't enough on its own.

"If the kids are freaked out about being corrected, and this gets them over the hump, then fine," Snow said about reading to dogs. "But if they need to be guided to attend more carefully to the words and the way you sound out those letters, and all this does is give them a respite, then it really isn't going to help reading at all. They need that instruction."

The students at Washington Grove get a heavy dose of teaching in vocabulary and comprehension, Van de Poll said. But reading to dogs is pure enjoyment, because the animal cannot quiz the child.

Not just any dog will do. To be a therapy animal, dogs are screened to ensure that they have the right skills, temperament, health and cleanliness. Then, to be a reading assistance dog, they must prove they can handle a school environment.

Handlers, too, must go through training with their pets. The teams are volunteers, supported by donations, which means there are no direct costs to schools.

Said Washington Grove's Brake: "We have 370 children, and I'd love to have all 370 of my children reading with a dog."

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