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At Some Schools, the Teacher's Pet Walks the Halls and Sleeps on the Floor

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS

Room 125A at Public School 75 in Manhattan has all the usual trappings of an elementary school classroom. There are low tables and little chairs. There is student work on the wall, covered in crooked, wobbly letters and the occasional rainbow. There is a computer for the teacher and a colorful carpet.

And then there is the dog bed, puffy and yellow with toys burrowed in its crevices. That belongs to Maisy, a friendly beagle-Jack Russell terrier mix, who works at this public school on the Upper West Side. She commutes to school each day by subway with her human, a kindergarten teacher who carries Maisy in a large black bag.

Maisy is a part of the Comfort Dog program of the Education Department, which pairs certain schools with dogs from the North Shore Animal League America, an animal rescue and adoption organization on Long Island. A staff member at the school adopts a specially screened dog, who is then welcome at the school as a dose of furry emotional support.

So far, seven schools participate in the program, which began in the fall, with 10 dogs among them. There are big dogs and little dogs, old dogs and young dogs, and there are two dogs named Peter (or Petey) Parker. All the schools use a curriculum called Mutt-i-grees, written by a research scientist at Yale, that structures interactions with the animals around lessons on things like empathy and resilience. But beyond that, each school uses the dogs a bit differently.

Maisy has a standing appointment with a boy with special needs every eighth period. A beagle named Izzy is sent in to de-escalate tantrums. Jumah is offered as an incentive to encourage good behavior. And Peter Parker, a golden retriever-Border collie mix, lends an ear, without judgment, to students receiving speech therapy.

"When we tell the parents we have a dog, some of them look at us like we have seven heads," said Glenda Esperance, principal of M.S. 266, Park Place Community Middle School in Brooklyn, where Peter Parker works. "First, they look at us like we're nuts, but then they want to be part of the circus."

Petey Parker — no relation to Peter — is the comfort dog at M.S. 88 in Brooklyn. The principal, Ailene Altman Mitchell, described him as an elderly Shih Tzu.

Petey sticks to a fairly strict schedule. To start the day, he goes for a walk with three eighth graders, Stacey Jordan, Chiara Cruz and Sanell Rosario, who take him to a tree just outside the building's front door. Each girl has a role.

"She's the walker, she's the treat giver and I'm the pooper scooper," said Stacey, evidently untroubled by her designation. "I have three dogs at home."

Petey spends most of his mornings sitting in on meetings with the guidance counselor, providing comfort and a soundtrack of gentle snoring to students



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Above, Brianna Celaya with Jumah at Public School 200 in Brooklyn. Jumah is offered to children as an incentive for good behavior. Jumah and Maisy, left, are part of a program that places dogs in schools as social support.



who are struggling, or to those with special needs. In the afternoon, he goes to the principal's office and takes a long nap.

"When I see him, it makes me feel calm," said Alyona Podchoshova, a student who spends time with Petey. "Sometimes my temper just gets in the way, and Petey helps me with that."

Bonnie Durgin, an assistant principal and sometime dog walker at the school, said that some of Petey's most important work was with students having a hard time for one reason or another. But he

can be helpful with all kinds of students. "Kids can become islands when they're 13," Ms. Durgin said. "He becomes a way to draw them out of themselves."

As incongruous as it might seem to have a dog wandering the halls, Carmen Fariña, the New York City schools chancellor described it as a very successful program, and one the city could expand if other schools were interested in having a "nonperson" in the building.

"If a child is having a temper tantrum, an adult might just be in the way, but a dog soothes," she said. There are also students, like some with autism, who have trouble connecting with other people, but might have an easier time connecting with an animal, she added.

"To me," Ms. Fariña said, "this is common sense."

Adults seem to enjoy the program, too. Ms. Fariña said she has received pictures of staff members at M.S. 88 grading

papers with Petey on their laps. A little tan-and-white dog named Sugar roams free in the morning at P.S. 209, Clearview Gardens in Queens, to greet the staff.

Imagining most dogs surrounded by hundreds of young children is not a particularly soothing exercise. But Jayne Vitale, director of outreach and youth programs at North Shore, said that a pet behaviorist worked hard to make good matches.

"The pet behaviorist will question the educator: How do you get to school every day? Do you take the train?" Ms. Vitale said. "If so, the behaviorist will take the dog on a train. They make sure the dog is not food aggressive or toy aggressive. They walk them in busy, busy streets. And we look at the environment of the home, as well."

Ms. Vitale said much of what made these dogs a good fit for schools had nothing to do with training. Take Shelby, one of three dogs at Shell Bank Junior

High School in Brooklyn. Teri Ahearn, the school principal, said that once, a little boy with special needs was petting Shelby, when suddenly, he yanked out some of the dog's fur. Shelby just got up and walked away.

"You can't teach that," Ms. Vitale said. "That's temperament."

While they may be effective speech therapists and counselors, they are still dogs. Shelby is a Border collie mix, Ms. Ahearn explained, so they try to keep her out of the halls in between classes — because she will try to herd the children.

"She doesn't like the kids to be all over the place, they have to be in a line," she said. "If she's in the hallways during passing, she may bark and she may try to push you into the wall. If there's a lot of mayhem, she will bark, because they really shouldn't be doing that, they should be walking quietly."

"That's her breed," Ms. Ahearn said, "and we use it as a learning experience."