# Pathways for Implementing a School Therapy Dog Program:

# Steps for Success and Best Practice Considerations

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## Abstract

Animal-assisted interventions intentionally incorporate the power of the human-animal bond into the therapeutic process. Research findings indicate that therapy dog programs can reduce student stress and build connections within the school, strengthening student response to school-based interventions and providing a foundation to achieve a diverse range of goals. Two main pathways for school counselors in implementing therapy dog programs are described, including (a) utilizing community-based volunteer teams and (b) creating a comprehensive therapy dog program. Strategies for incorporating best practices in animal-assisted interventions, including counselor competence and animal welfare, are offered.


*Keywords:* human-animal bond, animal-assisted interventions, school counseling programs

# Pathways for Implementing a School Therapy Dog Program: Steps for Success and Best Practice Considerations

Despite the ever-growing popularity of animal assisted interventions (AAIs), the concept of integrating animals into school counseling is not new. In the 1990s, articles published in school counseling journals described the human-animal bond and proposed ways to incorporate animals into school counseling by using anecdotal stories and case examples (Burton, 1995; Nebbe, 1991; & Trivedi, 1995). Since then, the AAI field has flourished. Research literature supports the positive role animals have in child development in educational settings (Gee et al., 2015) due to the powerful connection between children and animals (Melson & Fine, 2015). Nevertheless, there is a lack of scholarly literature that describes how to implement AAIs within school counseling (Zents et al., 2017).

The first author designed a therapy dog program at B.F. Kitchen Elementary in Loveland, Colorado, after participating in a research study conducted by the Human-Animal Bond in Colorado (HABIC, 2020). The study explored the emotional availability of students when working with a therapy dog team. Findings suggested that the therapy dog team's student showed a decrease in office referrals from pre- to post-test and started demonstrating empathy. Over the past decade, the first author's comprehensive school therapy dog program has expanded to include a thriving volunteer team component with six therapy dogs in total. Since the beginning of the program, there have been over 12,000 positive interactions between students and dogs.

Building upon the program's success, the first author developed a website (School Therapy Dogs, n.d.) and a corresponding social media group that provides an

opportunity to network and share information about school therapy dogs. Presently, the group consists of approximately 5,500 members who actively ask questions, share best practices, and celebrate accomplishments. However, the social media posts reflect current issues within AAI, such as animal welfare and counselor competence, illuminating the need for a best practice model widely accessible by practicing school counselors. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide hands-on, research-based information for school counselors who are considering a school therapy dog program at their school.

Chandler (2017) proposed that animals facilitate positive social interactions between students and among teachers and students. Animals may enhance empathy and promote prosocial behaviors (Tissen et al., 2007), in addition to increasing opportunities for connections with others (Sloan-Oberdier, 2018). Chandler (2017) also surmised that within a school setting, animals could assist children by (a) providing touch and affection, (b) giving affirmation and acceptance, and (c) offering a space for connection and relaxation. Therapy animals may also reduce stress and burnout for counselors, teachers, staff, and administrators (Chandler, 2017; Stewart et al., 2013). Zents and colleagues (2017) confirmed these benefits, highlighting the physiological benefits of therapy animals. Due to the calming effect on students, there are fewer behavioral problems and increased levels of attention. Integrating animals into the practice of school counseling may create rich and powerful teaching moments when addressing various issues such as feelings, self-control, personal responsibility, grief, and attachment (Flom, 2005; Sloan-Oberdier, 2018).

Attachment theory provides one basis for understanding how AAIs work; a therapy dog is a type of "holding environment" as the person integrates themselves within the environment, which is critical in making stress more manageable (Geist, 2011, p. 252). Therapy dogs serve as a secure base and an internal working model (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011), providing a new, safe place to explore painful thoughts and emotions. Research studies also support the notion that therapy dogs bring positive regard, empathy, and congruence to the counseling process (Jenkins et al., 2014; Zents et al., 2017). Indeed, therapy dogs create conditions for school counselors to enhance therapeutic rapport and promote positive social and emotional outcomes (Jenkins et al., 2014). Through the effects of human-animal interaction on children's motivation, engagement, self-regulation, and social interactions (Gee et al., 2017), academic outcomes may also improve.

Overall, research findings suggest that school therapy dogs promote a positive school climate (Sloan-Oberdier, 2018). These programs are used efficaciously to promote psychological well-being in students (Zents et al., 2017). So, how might a school counselor new to AAIs start up such a program? The following sections describe two pathways for implementing a school therapy dog program: a volunteer team model and a comprehensive program model. Within each model, different types of focus areas are presented, including example interventions. The table in the appendix provides a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of each model.

## Volunteer Team Model

A volunteer therapy dog team consists of a therapy dog and its handler. Handlers are the human side of a registered team and typically care for the dog outside of the

school setting. To become a registered team, the handler and dog have demonstrated an ability to work safely and effectively together and have successfully completed an evaluation by an established therapy animal organization that follows recognized AAI standards of practice. School counselors can locate volunteer teams in their area through a couple of methods. Some therapy animal organizations match volunteer teams with opportunities in the community (Pet Partners, 2020). Contacting local libraries, hospitals, and retirement homes to inquire about established programs can also yield potential contacts. It is helpful to meet with potential teams to discuss how they can complement the school's needs. Four different types of volunteer models are available to school counselors: (a) social-emotional interventions, (b) literacy programs, (c) special events, and (d) crisis response.

**Social-Emotional Interventions**

When a student has a social or emotional counseling goal, the therapy dog team may join the student and school counselor at a designated time. For example, a student with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder benefits in developing attention and focus skills. During a team visit, the student and counselor play a game of Red Light/Green Light, in which the student facilitates the dog's movement. The school counselor and handler have different roles as the handler coaches the student to communicate with the dog to move forward and then stop. In contrast, the school counselor provides the student with tools to maintain their focus. While this appears to be a seemingly simple intervention, this game increases the routine focus exercise's complexity. The student processes cues from the school counselor, but the student communicates with the dog through words and hand signals.

Therapy dog teams can also work alongside a school counselor facilitating an anxiety group. As part of a discussion on how stress manifests in the body, the conversation includes the dog. Students can guess what the dog worries about and where the dog may feel anxiety in their body. The handler provides information about how the dog shows stress (e.g., withdrawing, yawning). The discussion then shifts back to students as they describe where they feel anxiety and stress. The students also learn how the handler assists the dog when stressed, and in turn, the students share how they manage their worries. In this scenario, the team works within the context of the school counselor's social-emotional counseling objectives.

**Literacy Programs**

In addition, bibliotherapy may address students' social-emotional goals in counseling. Students read a book to a therapy dog about a challenge in their life or about an event impacting their life. For example, reading a book about foster care and adoption could generate a meaningful discussion about this sensitive and emotional subject. The school counselor highlights ways that book characters cope with situations or asks the student to reflect on how the book parallels their experiences. While handlers are not expected to lead discussions about social-emotional topics, the dog's presence provides a safe holding environment and offers unique opportunities for touch and affection.

Students can have academic goals related to literacy skills (e.g., increase fluency or comprehension). In this context, the team typically works independently with students under the supervision of school staff. Indeed, canine-assisted literacy programs are popular, and the evidence base is growing. Through a systematic review of literature,

Hall et al. (2016) concluded that reading to dogs may improve reading performance by positively impacting the learning environment. Multiple volunteer teams can work in the same area, such as a classroom or school library. These teams have specific training in reading interventions (e.g., Intermountain Therapy Animals, n.d.), allowing them to work with students in consultation with school staff.

The presence of the dog considerably impacts this special reading time. Trained handlers creatively incorporate the dog into the reading process. For example, the handler becomes the dog's voice (e.g., "Copper seems puzzled. I am not sure if he understands what this character is doing. Can you explain it to him?" or "That is a new word for Copper, can you tell him what that word means?). Beyond improving literacy skills, teachers may select students to increase confidence and instill a love for reading. Thus, the handler maintains a positive and supportive learning environment for reading practice (Jalongo, 2005). Students believe they are helping the dog, leading to a sense of pride and enhancing overall motivation to read.

**Special Events**

The third model utilizes unique, one-time events and is a useful first step for school counselors to explore regular AAI programming at their school. Volunteer teams come to school to meet with many students for a specific purpose. They may attend a book fair to promote reading engagement or offer opportunities to interact with a team during finals week. Colleges and universities have been utilizing this model with great success. There are approximately 1,000 animal-visitation programs across colleges in the US (Crossman & Kazdin, 2015). Typically, these AAI programs are designed to help students transition to college life or ease stress during final exams. Time-limited therapy

dog sessions (e.g., 20 minutes) on college campuses can produce immediate stress relief for students (Binfet, 2017). School counselors may apply this model to the school setting by providing a stress relief event for students, teachers, and staff during standardized or achievement testing dates.

Therapy dog teams may also promote counseling services. At one university, students were more likely to approach counseling staff at an informal gathering with therapy dogs than at gatherings without dogs (Kronholz et al., 2015). These students visited longer due to the dog's presence, helping to increase connections with the counseling and student services staff. Likewise, school counselors can maximize opportunities to build relationships with students and families by having therapy dogs present during special programming. With this model, teams occupy a specific room or area in the school, and attendees choose to interact with the dogs. The handlers monitor the dogs and instruct visitors about how to best interact with the dog. Handlers may also share information about the dogs to increase opportunities for connection. During events like health fairs, handlers may host a booth or table to share information about dogs and their work. Students frequently gravitate to these booths in larger numbers than other topics at the fair. The school counselor or other school personnel may need to monitor teams during these special events to ensure appropriate numbers of students interact with teams.

**Crisis Response**

School counselors are integral to any crisis response intervention, such as the death of a student. Having a specialized therapy dog team with training in crisis response provides valuable grounding opportunities to those impacted by a crisis;

indeed, trusting a dog can feel more natural than a person, especially in times of high stress (Stewart, Bruneau et al., 2016). Animal-assisted crisis response teams offer comfort, help reduce acute trauma symptoms, and facilitate sharing emotions (Chandler, 2017). Also, the presence of animals provides an emotional and psychological buffer for professionals providing psychological first aid.

These specialized therapy dog teams come from organizations such as HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response (HOPE, 2020). For example, HOPE's mission is to provide comfort and support to persons affected by crises and disasters. The handlers have additional training in crisis response and a specialized evaluation for suitability in the field, and all teams have background checks and insurance. Once a call to the organization is made with a deployment request, teams are typically onsite the next day.

These teams are utilized as a component of a broader crisis response plan (Greenbaum, 2006), becoming a stable, comforting presence and offering unique grounding opportunities for those students deeply affected by the incident. Indeed, for students who tend to withdraw during times of crisis, petting a dog may be the first step in working through their isolation. As handlers have training in crisis support, they can identify students who may need additional mental health professionals' help. Therefore, school counselors work in tandem with these teams to teach coping, relaxation, and mindfulness skills while processing the event (Stewart, Bruneau et al., 2016).

## Benefits and Limitations of the Volunteer Model

Numerous benefits exist for starting a program with a volunteer team, particularly when considering potential administrative concerns. A school can start a volunteer therapy dog program at almost no cost, and these programs can be up and running

within a few weeks. Utilizing volunteer teams reduces risk as the team is onsite for a limited amount of time (e.g., 1-2 hours a day). Volunteer teams typically work with a small number of students in a single room or area, limiting interactions with the entire school. Through registration with an organization, volunteer teams have insurance coverage and follow established rules and protocols to ensure safe and positive interactions. When a volunteer team partners with the school counselor, the handler can focus exclusively on the therapy dog. The handler is keenly aware of behavioral changes in the dog and can respond accordingly. School counselors new to AAIs significantly benefit from starting with a volunteer model as an experienced handler brings skills honed through their extensive work history.

However, not all volunteers or dogs work comfortably in the school setting. For example, dogs who do well in hospice or libraries may not enjoy work in busy schools. Handlers who do not like working with children are also not a good match. However, as the number of teams increases, the availability and the diversity of skills also increases. Preferences are also relevant. An older dog may prefer calm interventions (e.g., individual student reading a book) and a younger dog may prefer something more active (e.g., attending a special event like a health fair). A handler may thrive with adolescents but grow anxious at the thought of working with kindergarten students. In addition to preferences, teams may have specific skills that are an excellent match for a particular student. For example, a student with selective mutism may benefit from a dog that knows hand cues for communication.

Scheduling limitations occur due to the volunteer's schedule. Other priorities might arise, resulting in cancellations of planned interventions. Additional meetings may

be necessary for the handler to better understand and respond to the student's goal. Given that the school counselor does not have in-depth knowledge of the dog, the handler must offer insight into skills that best align with the planned intervention. Thus, careful planning is required, including documentation such as confidentiality agreements and permission forms. As the information presented in sessions may be highly sensitive, school counselors should talk with volunteers about disclosures. Debriefing with handlers is useful for evaluating specific interactions. School counselors should keep an ongoing record of sessions and activities that positively or negatively impacted the student and the therapy dog.

## Steps to Build a Volunteer Program

For school counselors interested in starting a volunteer therapy dog program at their school, the following steps highlight best practice considerations.

- **AAI knowledge and skills:** School counselors should have (a) knowledge of the human-animal bond and up-to-date research in the field of human-animal interactions, (b) an ability to read and respond to canine body language, (c) awareness of requirements to obtain registration with therapy dog organizations, and (d) demonstrated proficiency with safety protocols. If school counselors are leading the therapy animal intervention, they should have competency in AAI knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Stewart, Chang et al., 2016) and competence as a school counselor *without* the inclusion of a therapy dog.
- **Site assessment:** Gaining administration approval and support is required before moving forward. School counselors should review district policies that address animals on school grounds. Further evaluation includes identifying the physical location for the intervention, including (a) entrance and exit routes, (b) outdoor areas for dogs to relieve themselves, (c) off-limit areas, and (d) considerations for emergency events. The administration should obtain school-wide support and evaluate any expressed concerns. School personnel inform

parents and guardians about the potential for a therapy dog program, allowing families an opportunity to provide feedback before bringing a team into the building.

- **Mission and goals:** School counselors establish the program's overall mission, having specific educational and therapeutic objectives in mind (Chandler, 2017). Gee (2019) argued that AAIs in schools should be for fun and provide an educational experience. Therefore, counselors should screen students for interventions through careful discussions. Knowing if a child or adolescent has caused harm to animals may be warranted when determining intervention modality.
- **Finding potential teams:** Many therapy animal registries have systems in place to match their volunteers with potential sites. For example, Pet Partners has a procedure where school personnel may request to have teams contact them. Internet searches may uncover local groups, which may align with the larger organizations. The American Kennel Club (n.d.) has a listing of therapy dog organizations it recognizes for the AKC Therapy Dog title. When working with local groups, school counselors confirm insurance coverage, evaluation requirements, positive training methods, and established protocols.
- **Selecting teams:** School counselors assess potential teams for their fit with the intervention. School counselors must have basic knowledge of canine stress signals to evaluate the dog. An open discussion of the teams' strengths and experiences can match teams to students and intervention goals. Handlers should be able to identify dog stress signals, as well as the strengths of their dog. Having a passion for this work and staying calm during unexpected situations are highly desired key attributes (Stewart et al., 2016).
- **Risk management documentation:** Once teams are selected, multiple layers of agreements and permissions are needed. First, schools sign a contract with each team. This agreement identifies the school's point of contact, in addition to therapy animal organization registry guidelines (e.g., health certificate, identification, copy of liability insurance policy). Handlers should be registered as

school volunteers and follow relevant protocols, such as background checks. The district may also want specific permission forms for students.

- **Intervention planning meeting:** Meeting with the handler ensures an understanding of the students' goals. The handler may suggest how to utilize the dog's temperament and skills best. School counselors with foundational knowledge in AAIs may have ideas on facilitating the intervention, but each team has different levels and skills to bring to the intervention.
- **Student education:** Students are taught behavioral expectations around a working dog (e.g., do not crowd the dog, do not touch the dog without the handler's and dog's permission). Students can learn more about the therapy dog and how to best interact with the dog. This preparatory work may help build the foundation of the human-animal bond before the student begins the actual work.
- **Gather intervention data:** School counselors have options for measuring outcomes. For reading interventions, teachers may track fluency or comprehension skills. However, school counselors may modify data tools or create their own for other interventions. Students, teachers, and parents can provide pre- and post-intervention data using a behavioral rating scale. Pre-intervention data help plan and design the intervention, and post-intervention data may highlight growth in other areas. Handler feedback is useful in documenting the dog's response and making adjustments for subsequent sessions or programs. Counselors may share post-intervention data with teachers, parents/guardians, and students, and general outcomes may be shared with the handler to strengthen future interventions.

## Comprehensive Program Model

In contrast to the volunteer model, the school counselor is the therapy dog's handler in a comprehensive program. The counselor and therapy dog work together to provide specific, goal-directed interventions for students. The team may also offer animal-assisted activities such as incentives for individual or classroom goals, recess

duty, crosswalk service, crisis support, or extracurricular groups and clubs. Having the dog present for specific classroom lessons can emphasize the subject matter. Nevertheless, the school counselor must provide a reason for the dog to be present with each activity. For example, during recess duty, the dog may assist new students in connecting and starting conversations with their peers. Additionally, a dog might help to build relationships with families during crosswalk service. A comprehensive school therapy dog program can address academic, career, and social/emotional goals.

**Academic and Career Goals**

School counselors can help students improve their organizational skills, a key component for academic and career success. An example activity is identifying what a therapy dog brings to school each day and then packing a bag with these necessary items. After packing the dog's bag, the student can reassess items in their backpack or desk and organize them appropriately. Students can further hone this skill by being responsible for packing and organizing the dog's bag at the end of the day and have the dog watch as they arrange their belongings and workspaces.

Therapy dogs can also assist in the classroom by helping with regulation skills. Teachers identify potential times for this intervention, such as when presenting new material or when students are displaying anxious behaviors. Having the team walk around a classroom during and after teacher instruction can positively impact learning. Students may experience a decrease in stress, allowing for more function in the prefrontal cortex. Students struggling with the material could explain concepts to the dog, reinforce learning, and provide teacher support opportunities. The counselor assists by giving verbal cues to maintain emotional regulation as students work through

the material. Students may also benefit from improved focus and attention skills through experiential work. School counselors can modify the Red Light/Green Light game mentioned earlier. In this scenario, the school counselor monitors *both* the dog and the student. As such, the dog may be off leash, increasing the complexity of the activity for everyone involved, particularly for the school counselor and dog.

Career exploration can identify different jobs dogs have, such as drug enforcement canines, military canines, and search and rescue. School counselors may shift to talking about jobs for dog handlers. Students interested in working with dogs can learn various vocational skills like dog grooming or dog training, which may eventually lead to internships or job shadowing experiences. School counselors may also highlight the partnership dogs have with their handlers and how most jobs require people to work together. A small group exercise to address teamwork asks students to move a dog through an obstacle course. Students do not pull on the lead, but instead verbally encourage the dog together. A simple obstacle course can be set up in a classroom by moving around chairs or utilizing space under a table.

School counselors might also want to consider how to partner with local animal groups as a way of providing further vocational training or community service (Chandler, 2017). Local humane societies are eager for volunteers to interact, play, and walk dogs. For example, reading to shelter cats (Hovitz, 2014) is a popular animal-assisted literacy intervention, meeting multiple student goals, in addition to improving the welfare of animals. Chandler (2017) also recommends that school counselors consider out-of-the-box programs that connect students with nature and animals outside of the school setting (e.g., participating in Audubon society bird count).

**Social and Emotional Learning Goals**

Numerous interventions can support social and emotional learning. Working with therapy dogs is known as a social lubricant (Levinson, 1969). A student who self-isolates or has difficulty initiating conversations can benefit from interactions with other students when a dog is present. Therapy dogs attract many visitors at recess. The school counselor and dog may intentionally approach a student who is actively working on building friendships, allowing for the practice of prosocial skills. The dog serves as a bridge for making connections among peers.

A common AAI goal involves increasing empathy. Counselors can give students specific roles to care for the dog during school hours. For example, students can be in charge of refilling the water bowl or putting on the dog's working vest or bandana. These caring actions and behaviors can extend to humans in the students' lives. Since body language is crucial in communicating with the dog, learning both human and canine language is essential. The tone of a person's voice is also vital; if a student uses a harsh tone, the therapy dog may not do what the student is asking of them, which becomes a powerful teaching moment.

Social and emotional goal interventions may also be combined. In the previous example, the student becomes frustrated if the dog is not listening. Thus, school counselors can address emotional regulation skills in the moment. For example, "I do not think Copper understands what you want. I think he can hear in your voice that you are getting frustrated. What do you see in his body language? What can we do to help him feel calmer about the situation?" Meaningful discussions around communication

skills, feeling identification, empathy development, and coping skills are typical in therapy dog work.

Dogs can also assist with mindfulness and grounding exercises to address various goals, including self-regulation and empathy development. In these scenarios, counselors ask students what the dog sees, and smells or which fur is softer (e.g., the shoulder or the chin). Students can focus on their breathing by placing a hand on the dog's side and matching breaths. Students may also speculate on the dog's feelings in each moment and explore how these feelings may be similar or different to their own.

Students with self-esteem or impulsivity goals may also benefit from learning about dog training and then working with them intentionally. Students are proud to demonstrate what they have learned to staff and peers. Teaching what they have learned to others provides significant improvements in self-esteem. Adding clicker training to an intervention protocol can address impulsivity goals. Students develop patience when waiting for the exact moment the dog is doing the preferred behavior. Then, students must coordinate movements to click just at the right time. Overall, there are countless options for school counselors to address social and emotional goals through AAIs. Books by Chandler (2017) and VanFleet and Faa-Thompson (2017) provide examples from various counseling theoretical orientations and contexts to help school counselors develop creative AAI interventions in self-efficacy and relationships, self-regulation, and problem-solving.

## Comprehensive Program Benefits and Limitations

The key benefits of a comprehensive program are knowledge and flexibility. These school counselors have an in-depth understanding of their dog's skills,

preferences, and body language and know students' skills, preferences, and goals. The ability to match a dog's skill to a student's goal enhances the overall impact. School counselors can also make adjustments to decrease stress on the dog. A school setting requires significant flexibility, and school counselors may adjust interventions to adapt to changing needs. School counselors may modify therapy animal registry protocols to allow for off-leash work and long work hours. School counselors may also work with other professionals in the building (e.g., throwing a ball or attaching a leash can be fun ways to work on gross and fine motor skills in occupational therapy).

In addition, a school counselor may extend work outside a single room or area, unlike the volunteer model. This access allows for more student-dog interactions and developing Tier I, II, and III interventions in a multi-tiered system of supports schema. A comprehensive model provides school counselors with the ability to respond to various needs and issues as they arise. However, school counselors can be easily overwhelmed with service requests that overcome the dog's working schedule. This model significantly increases the risk to both the dog and the students. Dogs respond best to familiar environments and predictable people and behaviors (Ng, 2019). Therefore, school counselors need to be keenly aware of the dog's stress signals and prioritize and advocate for their needs first.

The startup time can also be very lengthy. With a puppy, the dog will not be ready for work in the schools for at least a year, and the schedule needs to increase to two to three days per week slowly. Dogs should not be working through the entire day. Attention should be given to breaks and significant downtime that align with the needs of the dog. Comprehensive programs can also cost thousands of dollars to start and

then several hundreds of dollars each year to maintain. Costs may include the dog, training, veterinarian bills, professional development, evaluation and registration fees, insurance coverage, and essential equipment such as kennels, working vests, leashes, brushes, and toys.

The two most important considerations for this model are the counselor and the dog. Due to the complexity, the school counselor needs a solid foundation in AAI-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Stewart, Chang et al., 2016). Counselors should also have an in-depth understanding of their dog and their limitations. It takes an exceptional dog to love working and sharing a space with hundreds of students for a limited time each week. Dogs must actively engage in this work and forcing an animal to do this work goes against best practices and sends the wrong message to students about the humane treatment of animals.

## Steps to Build a Comprehensive Program

For school counselors interested in starting a comprehensive therapy dog program at their school, the following steps highlight best practices for consideration.

- **Begin with a strong volunteer program:** Successfully implementing a volunteer team lays the foundation for a comprehensive model. These prior experiences give the counselor unique awareness about what works. Working with multiple volunteer teams across various interventions provides a wealth of experiences to begin a more complex program. A volunteer model allows new school counselors to focus on their school counseling program and build their skill set as a school counselor first and foremost.
- **Selecting a therapy animal partner:** Choosing a dog to partner with can be a difficult task. Some therapy dogs merely tolerate work, while other dogs love working with students and being in a complex setting. These therapy dogs are often unique and extraordinary. Fortunately, there are resources to assist with

dog selection (VanFleet, 2014). School counselors may also consult with a professional dog behaviorist. Amazing therapy dogs are found from both rescue groups and ethical breeders, and dogs can be of various breeds, ages, and sizes.

- **Handler training:** A therapy dog is only half of the team; training is also necessary for the handler. Continuing education for school counselors on canine communication and behavior, dog training, animal-assisted interventions, and animal husbandry is foundational to this work. Canine Good Citizen is a well-established program that provides a good start for learning required skills. All training should be force-free as the human-animal bond is central to this work. Only flat collars and harnesses are permitted. Like any AAI professional, school counselors are never to correct a dog's behavior through force.
- **School needs assessment:** While working towards a team evaluation, the school counselor may complete a thorough needs assessment. Gaining input from administration and staff about the current volunteer program helps determine the comprehensive program's scope. Questions may include: (a) Should the mission and goals change? (b) How could a comprehensive program benefit the unique student population? (c) Where can the dog be in the school and what protocols are needed? (d) How can we work with staff or student aversions to dogs? and (e) How can the program complement the work of existing volunteer teams or other animals present in the building?
- **Funding and insurance:** Running a comprehensive therapy dog program can be expensive. School counselors may apply for grants or engage in special fund-raising opportunities. An additional hurdle is liability insurance coverage, as therapy dog organizations typically provide insurance for *volunteer* work only. Since school counselors are employees, they are not covered under the registry insurance plan and must find alternatives. School district insurance policies do not always cover this type of work, so school counselors should consider purchasing professional liability coverage, such as Healthcare Providers Service Organization (HPSO). Quotes typically cost $150 - $250 per year for school

counselors in public school settings. School counselors should update any risk management protocol and documentation to reflect employee status.

- **Therapy dog registry:** Joining a therapy dog registry is crucial as this provides a foundation for training, evaluation, support, and ongoing professional development. Having a group of teams in the area may be beneficial when questions arise or when resources are needed. Some registries have local groups that will offer practice evaluations for new teams. Of note, not all organizations follow the same evaluation process. Thus, selecting a registry well before the evaluation process will streamline the overall timeframe.
- **Team evaluation:** A team should have their evaluation completed before starting interventions at a school. To be successful, the handler and dog should train with each other for at least six months. If the counselor purchases a previously trained dog for therapy work, they need to develop their handling skills, in addition to getting to know the dog. Typically, dogs should be at least 18-24 months of age. Working in a school is complex and will cause undue stress on a puppy or young dog. Bringing young dogs to school before evaluation increases risk. Not all dogs are good candidates for this work. Just because a counselor has a well-behaved pet dog does not mean the dog is the right partner for intense work in a school setting. Dog selection and obtaining professional assistance in doing so is paramount for this work.
- **Preparing the school community:** All students and staff must learn behavioral expectations, including how and when to approach the team and how many people can approach them. Other behavior expectations are (a) how to ask for permission to interact, (b) how to communicate with the dog physically and verbally during interactions, and (c) how to end the visit so others can interact. Being proactive about these expectations will ensure a sense of school-wide culture and decrease overall risk.
- **Managing the dog's working schedule:** *S*chool counselors create intervention schedules to meet their dog's needs. A dog who is more active early in the morning may be better suited to interventions that include movement during that

part of the day. However, the same dog may slow down in the afternoon, which may be a good time for a less active activity. School counselors should also pay attention to the work environment, as stress can wax and wane over the school year. As school stress increases, the work schedule for the dog should decrease. School counselors have many tools to assist students with stress and regulation and should limit extra strain on the dog when possible.

- **Animal welfare considerations:** Therapy dogs should not be working all day, every day. Although a dog may only work for a couple of hours during a school day, the school building is not conducive for a resting place. If a counselor notices the dog no longer voluntarily engaging with students, the counselor should remove the dog from working and consider retirement.
- **Ongoing dog training:** Dogs with an expanded skill set could provide richness to and flexibility with interventions. Summer breaks offer an opportunity to try new training with therapy dogs. Training classes in areas like nose work, rally, agility, or trick training can benefit the dog and strengthen the bond between the handler and dog.

## Practical Applications for School Counselors

School therapy dog programs fit with the ASCA mindsets and behaviors (2014). These programs may increase positive attitudes towards work and learning and enhance a sense of belonging in the school environment. Indeed, many school therapy dogs become unofficial mascots for the school, "embodying the very spirit of the school environment" (Chandler, 2017, p. 337). Gee and colleagues (2015) acknowledged the research evidence supporting incorporating animals into schools but note that most existing policies are district-based and focus more on child safety than animal safety without federal and state laws to regulate this practice. Emerging best-practice standards in the AAIs make clear that welfare measures must extend to animals so that the experience is mutually beneficial to both the student and the dog (Gee et al., 2015).

In essence, dogs should welcome and enjoy human interactions rather than merely tolerating interactions with strangers (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations [IAHAIO], 2018). School counselors who work as dog handlers must recognize the animals are living, sentient beings and are not to *be used* to benefit others (IAHAIO, 2018). However, recognizing tolerance is not always easy. Ng (2019) describes therapy dogs as often eager to please: "What can be perceived as a tolerant and quiet dog in the presence of an emotional human could actually be a dog suffering from learned helplessness" (p. 60). For a comprehensive review of animal welfare issues in AAIs, refer to Ng (2019). Recommendations for school counselors who wish to start volunteer or comprehensive programs include the following (Ng, 2019):

- Allow the dog to be themselves and make use of the dog's natural and spontaneous behaviors.
- Be attentive to behavioral cues and advocate for the dog's safety at all times.
- Remain in control of the intervention but permit the dog's freedom of choice.
- Ensure comfort and security for the dog (e.g., safe flooring, comfortable temperature, access to water).
- Instruct the student how to interact with the dog safely and respectfully.

At the very core of this work is the human-animal bond. The American Veterinary Medical Association (2019) defines the human-animal bond as a "mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors essential to the health and well-being of both." Therefore, the bond between the handler and the dog must be well-established. However, a current trend is for school counselors to purchase already trained therapy dogs for work in schools. VanFleet (2018) questioned this practice as handlers must go beyond the necessary basic training and

establish relationships and bonds with animals. Van Fleet stated, "It's all about the relationship…there is no such thing as a pre-selected or pre-trained therapy dog for this reason" (2018, para, 12).

School counselors should also enhance the bond between the student and the dog to maximize the intervention's overall success. If a student or a dog is not interested or involved in the process, counselors should choose a different intervention to meet the student's goal. Issues of consent are central to ensuring safe and ethical practice in AAIs. If a dog must be at school for an entire day, Chandler (2017) advised counselors to have times throughout the day when the dog can have a quiet place to rest without any interruption or distraction. While some students may be understandably disappointed by not seeing the dog, this is a teachable moment about respecting the dog's personal space and choice (Chandler, 2017).

## Summary

The field of AAIs is rapidly growing, and school counselors are naturally excited about this creative and effective modality. As the research literature continues to expand, particularly in animal welfare, school counselors have ample opportunities to develop robust school therapy dog programs based on the best evidence possible. The models presented in this article fill a gap in the AAI literature, and the authors hope school counselors are excited to get started.

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# Appendix

*Advantages and Disadvantages of Volunteer and Comprehensive Model*

| **Volunteer Model** | | **Comprehensive Model** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Advantages | Disadvantages | Advantages | Disadvantages |
| Faster start up time | Extra time to coordinate with volunteer(s) | Can build tailored interventions based on team's skills and student goals | Lengthy startup |
| No or low cost | Confidentiality risks | Ability to work with other school professionals | Significant costs |
| Benefits of registry insurance/protocols | Scheduling issues | Tier I, II, and III interventions | Additional Insurance policy required |
| Focus on therapy dog when working with school counselor | School counselor does not have in-depth knowledge of dog | School counselor has in-depth knowledge of dogs' preferences and skills | Complexity - must have focus on therapy dog and student(s) |
| Limited presence/ lower risk in building | Smaller number of students | Reaches more students | Increased presence and number of visits increases risk and animal welfare |
| Established protocols | Limits flexibility for interventions | Flexibility with registry protocols | Requests for services outweigh dog's limited schedule |
| Best for school counselors new to this modality | Not all registered teams work well in school setting | Ability to change intervention in session | School counselor needs experience with modality |

## Biographical Statements

Jennifer VonLintel, MS, is a licensed school counselor at B.F. Kitchen Elementary School in Loveland, Colorado. She works with her golden retriever, Copper. She is the 2018 Pet Partners Magic Award recipient due, in part, to her development of a trauma-informed canine-assisted intervention that supports students with significant trauma histories. She is the administrator for an international group of educators who share best practices, research, and tools to support registered therapy dogs' work in the school setting.

Laura Bruneau, PhD, is a professor of counselor education at Adams State University in Alamosa, Colorado. Her research interests lie in creative approaches in counseling, including bibliotherapy and animal-assisted interventions. In particular, she has written several book chapters addressing canine welfare issues. She and her therapy dog, Moose, are a retired Pet Partners therapy animal team who provided a canine-assisted literacy program in their community for seven years.