

## News Release from Dripping Springs ISD



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## **THERAPY DOGS SUPPORT STUDENTS IN DSISD**

DRIPPING SPRINGS, Texas— Sometimes support for children can come from many directions, including four-legged friends. Walnut Springs Elementary and Dripping Springs Elementary have turned to an unusual method for supporting students, and bringing a positive force into the learning environment at their campuses.

At Walnut Springs, about a year ago, school principal Julie Pryor and counselor Melissa Fleming had been trying to generate out-of-the-box ideas to provide extra support to students who had lived through a traumatic experience in their lives or were dealing with difficult issues. Then Mrs. Fleming attended a conference where she first heard about the use of therapy dogs in the school environment. She couldn't wait to tell Mrs. Pryor about it when she returned! Quickly the two were creating a proposal to share with the superintendent, which eventually was accepted.

"Some of the benefits of a therapy dog include reducing stress, increasing self esteem, reducing anxiety, enhancing trust ... all things that will help students, especially those who have experienced loss or trauma in their lives," pointed out Fleming. Additional benefits of interacting with a therapy dog can include: reduced loneliness or feelings of depression, improved emotional well-being, mood-lifting, motivational or goal-setting effects, increased socialization, positive assertiveness, unconditional acceptance, and responsibility.

Mrs. Fleming also points out that there is a natural chemical reaction in the brain that makes people feel better and smile when they are petting an animal. According to research findings from the Veterinary Journal, both canines and humans experience increases in

oxytocin and dopamine levels – both neurological signs of happiness, after positive interactions between the two species.

Students on campus already have shown a positive reaction to Zoe’s presence. Mrs. Pryor shares that one student in particular who previously had been non-verbal now reacts with enthusiasm when seeing Zoe and clearly identifies her using the spoken word. If he sees the counselor without Zoe, he questions “Dog?”

In order to get Zoe acclimated to campus and be sure that students understand how to interact appropriately with her, Mrs. Fleming has been visiting all classrooms to lay some ground rules. For instance, she requests that if students are with their classes walking down the hallway and she is walking down the hallway with Zoe, all the children do not try to stop and pet her. Students are happy to oblige so that Zoe will feel comfortable and be able to do her job. Zoe is quickly becoming an integral part of the Walnut Springs family. In fact, she even has an official DSISD employee badge!

Zoe was purchased with funds provided by the Walnut Springs PTA after the membership heard about this opportunity last year. The PTA also funded special training that she received. There are five trained dog handlers on the campus, including the principal, assistant principal and counselor. At night, Zoe goes home with Mrs. Pryor.

Two student volunteers – “Friends of Zoe” – help with the dog in the mornings. The students stop by the office when they arrive to put fresh water out near both of Zoe’s beds and check to see if she has everything she needs for her workday.

“She is going to be a great influence in the lives of our students, as well as faculty and staff,” said Mrs. Pryor.

Dripping Springs Elementary also is benefitting from this unique approach, but is using therapy dogs in a slightly different way. Local dog trainer Pam Fusselman brings dogs Lady and Buffy to campus twice a week to serve as an “audience” to young readers who need a little confidence boost. So far, the dogs have limited their visits to certain classrooms, but children have responded with excitement and increased self-assurance.

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