

Somerville Public Schools

Guidelines for SPS Staff and Therapy Dog Teams for Safe School Visits

Since 2012 Somerville Public Schools has welcomed, screened and matched therapy dog teams to serve in schools. Certified therapy dog teams are matched by request with educators or counselors for small group or individual sessions, classroom visits, for serving as Reading Partners or for staff wellness visits. Studies have shown that positive interactions with therapy animals can help reduce stress and anxiety, promote concentration, attention and motivation, stimulate memory and provide cognitive, and social and emotional benefits.

The guidelines below outline expectations and best practices for SPS staff and therapy dog teams. Please review all guidelines prior to starting visits to ensure that visits continue to remain safe and enjoyable for the animals, their owners/handlers, students and staff and the school building community.

SPS Staff Guidelines

- Confirm with your school's Administration authorization of therapy dog team visits, preferred entrances and any other site or staff restrictions.
- Provide school nurse with the schedule of therapy dog visits so they can be prepared in case of an unexpected allergic reaction or other event.
- Be culturally and emotionally aware and sensitive to school community and the different perceptions of dogs. Be aware of these differences; observe students' body language, actively seek students' views and feedback of therapy dog team visits.
- Understand needs of those with allergies.
- **Secure parent/guardian consent or opt-out prior to visits.** [See this folder](#) for consent forms and further resources.
- **Prepare students for visits.** Share the 'Meet Therapy Dog Team' flier and picture of animal to be visiting. Speak to students about expectations when therapy dog team is in their classroom, and how to interact with the team if they choose. **Reinforce that visiting with the team is optional.** See resources in folder.
- **Do not allow therapy dog team or dog to roam free, roam hallways, or visit classrooms or students that have not been previously authorized for therapy dog team visits.** Therapy dog teams are not permitted to conduct their visits outdoors, including in school courtyards or playgrounds.
- Be responsible for your students; handler/owner is solely responsible for their animal. **Do not let students or staff lead or control therapy dog team at any time.**
- Ensure that students wash hands immediately after contact with dog.
- Establish a cleaning protocol for after the dog's visit (ex: vacuum rug, wipe down surfaces as needed).
- Limit durations of visits as needed.

Continued

Therapy Dog Teams: Before You Serve

- Check to ensure that your animal is interested in and suitable for school visits. See [Traits for Good Therapy Dog Teams in Classrooms](#).
- Schedule an in-person screening for your dog and background check for you (CORI) with Somerville Public Schools Volunteer Coordinator or designee.
- Provide documentation of training and/or current certification for serving as therapy animal team, and documentation of animal's up-to-date immunizations.
- Schedule a meet and greet without students with the educator or counselor where you'll be serving to review expectations and to establish a schedule.

During Your Visits

- Ensure that your animal is clean and well-groomed before each visit.
- Use only pre-planned entrance and exit as designated by school site.
- Visit only designated classrooms or areas as authorized by the school. Do not stop to visit with other classrooms or with persons in hallways as they may be susceptible to allergens.
- Be responsible for your animal at all times, considering its needs and care first.
- Limit duration of visit if necessary and do not exceed two hours/day.
- If needed, use blanket or drop cloth under animal to reduce spread of dander.
- Always stay with your dog and remain in control of the situation with the lead in your hand. Never tie animal to people, equipment, or furniture while visiting.
- With handler, staff and student consent and only for smaller dogs/animals, dog may be placed on lap of student with lead in owner/handler's hand.
- Clean up after animal both inside and outside the facility.
- Do not take photographs or videos of students or staff without consent from school personnel.
- Notify your supervisor and SPS Volunteer Program if therapy animal is no longer suitable for serving due to illness, injury, non-certification or recertification, age or other.
- Feel comfortable offering recommendations to school personnel for ensuring the continued safety and enjoyment of therapy animal visits in Somerville Public School.

Please reach out if you have any questions or would like to be connected with SPS staff who have worked successfully with therapy dog teams in Somerville Public Schools or would like to speak with an experienced SPS volunteer therapy dog owner/handler.

For further information

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