



Story by Nicole Rafacz - D211 Student Press Corps
Photos by Patrick J. DeGeorge

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Thanks to a partnership with Comfort Dog Ministry – a care initiative launched in 2008 with Golden Retrievers – therapy dogs are a common sight in the District's schools, offering an opportunity to relieve stress and provide comfort whatever the situation. Additional dogs owned and fully trained by staff in the buildings also are part of the therapy team.

"I couldn't believe how much better I felt after just 20 minutes sitting by a dog," said Julia Amaro, a junior at Schaumburg High School who visited with the therapy dogs during finals. "It really just made me feel more relaxed, and like I had what I needed to get through the day well."



At Schaumburg, the dogs are brought into empty classrooms for students to visit during half a period at lunch, and also are invited to accompany students at special events.

"The effort is part of an overall focus on students' emotional health, and more can still be done," said Joyce Mariano, who works in Student Services at Schaumburg High School.

Various dogs can be used as therapy dogs, including German Shepherds, Border Collies and Labradoodles – all great breeds for reducing anxiety or handling stressful moments.

As the program grows in popularity, the appointment slots for dog visits have filled quickly, said Ginger Haas, a social worker at Schaumburg High School.

At Conant High School, therapy dogs have been invited to mental health fairs and health and wellness fairs, and Conant's Student Council also welcomes therapy dogs at the start of the school year and prior to final exams.

"There is always a crowd around them," said Paula Hill, the Department Chair for Guidance at Conant High School who also noted staff and students alike love having the dogs at the school. Some have

noted that just a few minutes of petting the dogs creates increased focus.

“Just from observing the interactions, students are at ease,” said Miriam Castro, a Fremd High School counselor. “They are always happy to see the therapy dogs and it is always a huge hit. We find that our faculty also comes down to spend time with the therapy dogs.”

Fremd invites two comfort dog organizations during finals, both first and second semester. They also invited therapy dogs to attend the school’s Wellness Fair that took place in the spring.



“Students often enjoy therapy dogs because they provide a calming and comforting presence, helping to reduce stress and anxiety,” said Tessa Strzempek, Guidance Department Chair at Ho man Estates High School, who had her pug, Lola, trained to be a therapy dog. “The dogs offer a non-judgmental space where students can relax, take a break from academic pressure, and feel emotionally supported.”

Like other schools in District 211, Ho man Estates has welcomed the dogs during finals and at a wellness fair, noting their presence reduces stress and tension and enhances counseling services.

Therapy dogs are assessed for effectiveness in a variety of traits, including sociability, patience, non-reactive behavior, obedience, comforting skills and the ability to understand emotional cues.