

**Adirondack Central School District is Pleased to Introduce Our First Two Therapy Dogs  
January 11, 2024 (by Kristy McGrath, Superintendent)**

It is with great excitement that I share with you, that our first two therapy dogs will begin coming into school next week. We began the work to get this initiative going well over a year ago, and I give all the credit to the staff members who have volunteered countless hours and assumed the expenses to make this happen.

**Why did Adirondack pursue a therapy dog program?** Over the past few years, many schools across the state and country started therapy dog programs. The research supports having therapy dogs as an effective mental health tool, stress relief option, and as an intervention in helping with anxiety/depression. Therapy dogs in schools also increases overall morale and excitement about school for staff and students. In addition to schools, therapy dogs have become popular in hospitals, nursing homes, dentist offices, and many other locations. Some schools utilize therapy dogs as reading buddies for younger children. Research has even shown that therapy dogs in schools increases attendance. The dogs will also allow for opportunities for developing empathy and compassion for animals and people alike.

**What steps has Adirondack taken to prepare for this?** In November of 2022, the district created a team of interested staff members to work on a plan to have therapy dogs in our schools. Multiple meetings were held to read policies and to understand how other schools are doing this, such as Brighton, Beaver River and South Lewis. My thanks goes out to the volunteer committee consisting of Courtney Foll, Toni Trifeletti, Liz Ritter, Heather Sweeney, Miranda Youngs, Nadine Medvit, Mareissa Lisowski, Rebecca Houser, Amy Tabor, Wendy Foye, Dee Krutz, Michael Faustino, Heidi Smith, Katie Orr, and myself. This team met with Donna Gato from the Alliance of Therapy Dogs to understand the approval process. Last year, the Adirondack Board of Education updated our Board policy to include therapy dogs.

**What training or steps must be met for a therapy dog to be approved to be in schools?** The staff members who were interested in having their personal pets approved to be therapy dogs volunteered their time to do dog obedience training with Janice LaFave last spring and summer. Thank you to Janice for volunteering her services. This past fall, two staff members (Toni Trifeletti-AIS Teacher at Boonville Elementary and Miranda Youngs-Occupational Therapist for the District) both completed the approval process (through Alliance of Therapy Dogs) with their respective dogs. This is a rigorous and thorough process, where the dogs and handlers are evaluated in multiple settings, including a preschool. In addition to the approval through the Alliance of Therapy Dogs, the owners are responsible for providing proof of insurance, proof of vaccination records, and licensure. The district does not assume any of these costs; it is the responsibility of the owner. We have a couple other staff members who are in the process of getting their approval complete, so we expect to gradually increase the number of therapy dogs in our schools moving forward.

**What if children or staff are afraid of the dogs or are allergic?** If a parent or staff member has a concern about this, please feel free to contact your principal. In the schools we have spoken to that already have dogs, they have had little concerns with this. However, we will ensure that we work with

any family that has a concern, as we want this to be a positive experience for all. The dogs will always be on a leash and/or under the control of their handler. We will also work to educate students to ask the handler first before petting the dogs, especially when they are first getting used to the dogs.

The Adirondack Central School District's Therapy Dog program is a testament to the district's commitment to student-centered education and well-being. By implementing this program, the district aims to enhance the educational experience of its students and staff, promote mental health, and create a supportive and nurturing environment for all members. As the therapy dog program launches, the Adirondack Central School District is excited to witness the positive impact these furry companions will have on its students and staff. It is an innovative step towards building a brighter future for everyone involved. Be on the lookout for posters, trading cards, and screensavers introducing our newest Team Adirondack members...Konan (the Newfoundland with Miranda Youngs) and Sigmund (the Maltese Papillon mix with Toni Trifeletti).

