

Nixon School Therapy Dog FAQ

We anticipate families will have questions about the dog and we hope this answers many of them. We are excited to share this news with you. If you have questions, please reach out to Susan Woods, Principal or Maureen Acton, Psychologist for more information.

Q: What is the specific role of the Pets and People dog at Nixon:

A: The Pets and People website states, “To touch people’s lives in a positive way and to provide a sense of well-being to those we meet. Inspired by our specially trained animal assisted therapy teams, we strive to ease sadness and spread joy, laughter, comfort and warmth. Here at Nixon, the dog would be used in this exact manner. We would use the dog to assist in the emotional and therapeutic needs of students. The dog would attend therapy sessions, recess and help in classroom settings”.

Q: How is this not a violation of the School Committee policy preventing pets in a school other than for specific, time-bound reasons?

A: Unlike a dog families would have at home, this animal would be a member of the staff, not a pet, but a certified therapy animal. He/she would work to provide therapies and social/emotional support. This is aligned with School Committee policy (Section IMG), which allows for animals to support educational purposes.

Q: Does the “benefit” outweigh the “costs?” Meaning if a staff member is always with the dog around the school, what won’t get done because staff will be busy supervising the dog and his/her interaction?

A: We anticipate this dog will only further our workflow and ability to get the job done by meeting the unique needs of students.

Q: What will we do if a child/adult is fearful of dogs?

A: We will work together either with the adult or with the child’s family to create a plan to become better acquainted and more comfortable around the dog. We see this as a learning opportunity for all students and staff. In our research with other Massachusetts Elementary Schools, each handler reported that this was an unforeseen benefit with students who were fearful. They each reported that a Pets and People dog is the perfect animal to help with fear as they do not do anything that is unpredictable or without command. Each school reported initial concerns from a small amount of families who are now so happy with how their students interacted with the dog. That being said, no child or staff member will be forced to be part of the experience with the dog.

Q: What will we do if someone is allergic to the dog?

A: We asked this question to the various elementary handlers and they reported that diligent hand washing both before and after contact as well as thorough grooming of the dog alleviated 95% of allergic worries. Most often people who are allergic to dogs are allergic to dander. A thorough brushing each morning to ensure the removal of dander mitigates this. If we find this does not help, we will be sure to avoid the classroom settings of the allergic staff member or child.

Q: Will the Assistance Dog be allowed to roam free throughout Nixon?

A: No. The Assistance Dog stays with the handler. It will wear an Assistance Dog vest, a gentle leader harness (NOT a muzzle), and be on a leash. As students and the dog are comfortable with each other, she may walk around the classroom, under her handler’s close supervision.

Q: Where will the dog relieve him/herself?

A: We will designate a far corner of grass behind Nixon, away from the playground and curb matter.

Q: How often will the dog be at school?

A: Approximately once a week.

Q: Is it ok to feed the dog or bring in dog treats for him/her?

A: No, thank you. The dog may not eat table food or dog treats.

Q: How will the assistance dog be used in the school, and will my child be able to experience the use of her?

A: The Assistance Dog is specifically trained to work with children and adults in a variety of ways. She will be used to support a child through emotional and social thinking experiences. She may be used as a reward or motivator for students who demonstrate appropriate social/emotional and academic behaviors. In addition, she may also be used when a student is feeling stressed, anxious, or struggling emotionally. We would hope that students are able to experience the dog in some way, if they would like.

Q: Will the Assistance Dog ever show aggressive behavior towards others?

A: The Assistance Dog has gone through extensive training led by the staff at Pets and People. Her training was specifically tailored to include behaving safely in a school and other public settings, as well as remain calm around large crowds, noise, and escalated behaviors. Additionally, the dog will not be put in a situation that would be considered unsafe for students or her.

Training includes learning many commands that will be used in different situations, and part of their ongoing training will include continued exposure to a variety of places and situations, in order to maintain proper canine behavior. The dog/trainer partnership is extremely important in order to make sure that everyone's needs are met in the most safe and positive manner possible.