



**MERCER ISLAND
HIGH SCHOOL**

Donated by the Class of 2018
and Senior Service Project

FUN WITH FINLEY

How One School Manages Stress with a Furry Friend

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety,
Engaging Communities*

One afternoon last summer a staff member, Andrea Confalone, a 32-year veteran special education teacher at Mercer Island High School, came to see me about the possibility of having a therapy dog at school to help students combat academic and social stress. She noticed a trend of frequent absences with students who struggled with emotional anxiety on a consistent basis. One student missed three months because of anxiety; he would only attend if accompanied by his Labrador retriever. She wondered if having an animal in the classroom could increase the attendance of any students suffering from various types of anxiety?

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Like many high school students in the country, Mercer Island High students feel the pressures of performing well in school in order to be considered for the colleges of their choice. Students are over-scheduled and many haven’t yet developed the grit and skills to know how to handle and balance their school academics, social lives, and

family lives. Stress, as it relates to the students’ well-being, is the number one concern of many principals and their staff.

Our school had a policy for service animals, but not one for therapy animals. Andrea and our special education administrative intern researched and wrote a policy for therapy dogs. Andrea adopted Finley, a 10-week-old golden retriever. Finley has been in obedience training for a year and has been preparing for this important role. He has already earned his Canine Good Citizen Certificate and Level 3 Obedience. During the summer months, he visited hospitals alongside a certified therapy animal.

Finley lives in Room 311. Every day, Finley not only comforts the students attending their classes, but also students and staff who wish for a little comfort during their day. The size of Ms. Confalone’s room makes it conducive for visitors because they can enter and exit with minimal interruptions to classroom instruction or group work. An iPad with a Google form records student and staff visits and sits on top of Finley’s crate.

During his first year, Finley had over 500 recorded visits from students who were not in Ms. Confalone’s class. Many just sit quietly by his crate and talk to him or give him a treat or two, all under the careful supervision of Ms. Confalone and her staff. All students and staff report feeling much better

and less anxious about their day after spending a little time with Finley. There are some students who visit Finley almost daily. Ms. Confalone notices more smiles after a visit with the puppy.

We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from our students and parents about Finley’s presence at school and how he helps our students. One young woman who suffers from extreme anxiety wrote an email to me about Finley’s importance in her life. She is able to cope a bit better after she makes a quick visit to room 311. A parent commented on her two

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sons coming home to tell her about the therapy dog program and how it helps them deal with their daily stress of school. These are just two of many compliments received since starting this program at Mercer Island High School.

Since many people have allergies to dogs, we're always asked how we manage that. Finley does not roam the school. When a classroom requests a visit before presentations or a test, the roster is closely monitored for student allergies; if one or more is present, he does not visit that classroom. In addition, when students visit from other classrooms they are encouraged to wash their hands and use lint rollers after their visits. Ms. Confalone has also purchased a vacuum cleaner to vacuum up pet dander daily. It takes a bit of planning, but the observed results are worth it.

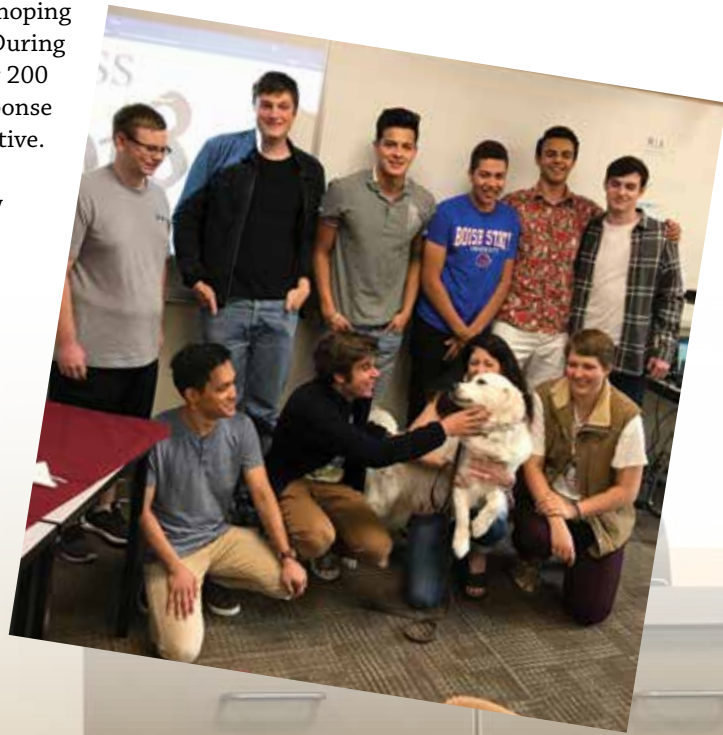
When researching whether we should start this program at Mercer Island High School, I read some recent articles of how colleges are helping their students manage and regulate their stress. After reviewing this data, I asked Ms. Confalone to arrange for a small group of therapy dogs to come to Mercer Island High School. We contacted College Dogs

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(<http://www.collegedogs.org>) to invite certified therapy dogs during our finals week. We were lucky enough to have 10 therapy dogs. Each came with individual handlers and spent 1.5 hours in our Common's Conference Center.

When our superintendent came to our school to watch, she could not even get in the door because of the long line of students hoping to see the therapy dogs. During that hour and a half, over 200 students visited. The response was overwhelmingly positive. While we don't have any quantitative data to show — grade comparisons for example—the qualitative data we collected was amazing. Every single one of the students who visited the therapy dogs reported they felt relief from stress about finals exams/projects. Students requested the dogs return during midterms next fall.

findings, we plan to increase the visibility and use of the therapy dogs to help students regulate stress in the year to come. The staff, the students, and Finley are looking forward to another positive year! You can find Finley on Instagram @finleythetherapydog. He has close to 2,500 followers now. ■



Because of these

