

Feasibility of Implementing Therapy Dog Programs at Thousand Oaks High School

AP Research

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### **Abstract**

Thousand Oaks High School students were surveyed and Conejo Valley Unified School District employees were interviewed to determine the best course of action for implementing an animal assisted therapy program at Thousand Oaks High School. A study of existing literature reveals that stress exists in high school, and therapy dogs can work to alleviate stress. Previous cases of therapy dogs applied to high schools have shown to be successful in alleviating stress, but not much study has been conducted in this field. A gap is then defined to detail the process of implementing a therapy dog program at a high school so that future high schools can see a model for them to implement therapy dog programs of their own. One hundred sixty-five students were surveyed to gauge demand, allergies, and timing, and interviews were conducted to determine feasibility and legal procedures. The survey and interviews after analysis display a feasible route to creating a therapy dog program. Future researched is planned next year to carry out these steps.

## 1. Introduction

According to a study conducted by Johannes Odendaal in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research, the benefits of therapy dogs range on a vast physiological scale, improving the physical welfare of involved participants (Odendaal 2000). Also, a study by Mary Renck Jalongo in the Early Childhood Education Journal states that therapy dogs have been shown to affect, “academic abilities, and emotional well-being as well as reduction of stress, anxiety, and loneliness” (Jalongo et al. 2004; Pet Partners 2015). While the effectiveness of therapy dogs in improving the lives of people under mental or physical stress is well documented, few high schoolers get to experience these benefits. Colleges and elementary schools have historically extensively used therapy dogs to their advantage to positively impact students, while only a select few high schools have had interactions with therapy dogs.

Given this information, it is apparent that if programs were implemented into high schools which hosted therapy dogs, the physiological and mental well being of high school students across America could be significantly improved. The school I attend, Thousand Oaks High School, has no history of interaction with therapy dogs. This high school is a part of the Conejo Valley Unified School District (CVUSD). Thousand Oaks High School has no existing policy on implementing therapy dog programs. In this paper I will discuss the feasibility of implementing a program at this specific high school in this specific district, CVUSD.

## Literature Review

To build my literature review I accessed the college board's version of EBSCOhost and I accessed CSUCI's (California State University, Channel Islands) version of EBSCOhost. I narrowed my search to peer reviewed articles only, and further narrowed down the search to full text. I began my initial searches with the keywords "animal assisted therapy" "stress" and "happiness" in different combinations. After this, to further build my literature reviews I began finding articles which concerned college students and stress, so i searched terms such as "college students" "stress" and "dog therapy" in different combinations.

After continual reading of existing research papers, I contacted UCLA's (University of California, Los Angeles) health and wellness center and discovered their PAC program (People and Animal Connection). This program had a few peer reviewed articles regarding animal assisted therapy and its benefits. Following this I looked through different University of California schools to see their existing research hosted in their wellness centers regarding animal assisted therapy, and read through many articles detailing the use and benefits of animal assisted therapy.

Animal assisted therapy is widely used throughout various aspects of our culture today. Many colleges and universities across America have implemented animal assisted therapy programs into parts of campus life for the end goal of reducing stress and anxiety in students. According to a study conducted by Jean Kirnan, Steven Siminerio, and Zachary Wong, interaction with a trained therapy dog can boost "academic abilities, and emotional well-being

as well as [reduce] stress, anxiety, and loneliness” (Kirnan 2016). Furthermore, several high schools in America have also implemented a few aspects of animal assisted therapy programs. However, this number is small. Only a select few high schools have a policy in place allowing animal therapy events on campus.

Many colleges and universities that have implemented animal assisted therapy aspects into their campus life have done so because of the tremendous amount of supporting data for the physiological and psychological benefits of programs in use. According to the *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, a journal which discusses the significant issues in the area of college student mental health, “animals can be a major source of comfort and support with various populations.” (Daltry 2015). Due to the wide range of people that animal therapy can affect, colleges and universities are happy to implement therapy dog programs. Additionally, collective research has shown that animal assisted therapy on college campuses has “significantly improved scores for depression and quality of life” (Daltry 2015). This vital change in college campus atmosphere has greatly impacted campuses. Because of the dramatic changes therapy dogs bring to colleges and universities, over the past decade many campuses which previously had no history of using therapy dogs created policy to bring them onto their campus. This recent surge in the amount of universities and colleges actively using therapy dogs, a few high schools have looked into implementing these programs as well.

High schools have not made nearly the same amount of progress colleges have made in implementing therapy dog programs among their population. Despite a detailed search for

information on high school therapy dog use, I was only able to find a hand full of high schools with documented application of therapy dogs online. One example of existing use of a therapy dogs in a high school setting is Castlewood High School's use of therapy dog Sherman. Sherman was, according to the news article, able to provide students with a relaxing presence which improved their days on the campus (Bailey, 2016). Even though this article was not peer reviewed, it keeps in line with other already established principles of the use and effectiveness of therapy dogs and their ability to impact students.

Therapy dogs, to be certified, require intensive training. The certified therapy dogs the counseling center uses have had to go through, "extensive training and pass temperament and behavioral tests." The therapy dogs used by the student union have to be tested on whether or not they can follow the commands given to them, if they are capable to work around other dogs, people, and equipment or machinery. "Given that the events take place in a noisy and busy student union, the counseling center has wanted to ensure that the dogs were comfortable and able to behave appropriately in this setting." (Daltry 2015). It is extremely important to ensure that therapy dogs are comfortable in their setting so that it can be ensured nothing will go wrong.

## **2. New Direction**

Collective research has shown that animal assisted therapy on college campuses has "significantly improved scores for depression and quality of life" (Barker 2017). This vital

change in college campus atmosphere has greatly impacted campuses. With this clear impact that animal assisted therapy has left on college campuses, a new direction is outlined in this field. If animal assisted therapy could be implemented in high school campuses in addition to college campuses, the physiological and psychological health of students on high school campuses could be dramatically changed. In 2017, the national center for education recorded 15.1 million enrolled high school students. That is 15.1 million students who could be receiving the benefits of therapy dogs that are currently not.

My research applies directly to the feasibility of implementing animal assisted therapy into the Thousand Oaks High School campus. Not much research has been conducted on animal assisted therapy events in high schools. In the circumstances where animal assisted therapy has been implemented into high schools, there are few documents of peer reviewed data. Most documentation online is news articles or statements from high schools on their websites. My research will differ from existing cases of therapy dogs on high schools, because I am focusing on the specific high school: Thousand Oaks High School in the Conejo Valley Unified School District (CVUSD).

By discussing the policy of the school district and the requirements create a therapy dog program at Thousand Oaks High School, I will be moving my research in a new direction away from others. My discussion on policy and communication with the school district will allow information to be added to the field so that future high schools will be able to observe how to most easily work with their district as well to implement therapy dog programs on their high

school campuses. Additionally, animal therapy organizations that I have been in contact with such as UCLA's People and Animal Connection (PAC) organization and Love on a Leash will be able to use my findings if they choose to interact with high schools in the future.

### **3. Methods**

This study used two approaches to discussing the feasibility of implementing a therapy dog program on the campus of Thousand Oaks High School. This research was conducted at Thousand Oaks High School, and the Conejo Valley Unified School District office. In addition I communicated with University of California, Los Angeles PAC program director and coordinator, and the University of California, San Diego "The Zone" director. The first part was discussing the topic and interviewing several key people such as the Assistant Principal of Instruction and the Assistant Principal of Activities at Thousand Oaks High School. Another aspect of my research was to survey the population of Thousand Oaks High School in order to gather data on three things in particular: the demand among the population for a program, the percentage of students who had allergies, and desired timing for such a program.

The first part of my research, discussing the topic of introducing a therapy dog program into Thousand Oaks High School, was conducted by exchanging emails and real life interviews with the following people: Thousand Oaks High School Assistant Principal of Instruction, Danielle Oliveri, Thousand Oaks High School Assistant Principal of Activities, Kristi Hronek,



University of California, Los Angeles People and Animal Connection (PAC program) director, Erin Rice, UCLA PAC program coordinator, Kunal Wahi, Love on a Leash UCSD (University of California, San Diego) program coordinator Andra Lew, and UCSD (University of California, San Diego) “The Zone” coordinator Zarah Rubio.

Finally, the I distributed a survey among the population of Thousand Oaks High School regarding the student reaction to the possibility of bringing therapy dogs onto campus. Before distributing my survey, I passed out parent consent forms due to the fact that my survey participants were minors. After receiving back the parent consent responses I distributed the survey among my population. It was a short survey consisting of the following questions: “Are you a student at Thousand Oaks High School?”(answer yes or no), “What Grade are you in?” (9/10/11/12), “If there was a therapy dog event on campus, would you take part and engage in the activity?” (answer yes or no), “Are you allergic to dogs/certain breeds of dogs?” (answer yes or no), “If there was a dog therapy event at school aimed at lowering stress in students, would you attend the event?” (answer yes or no), “If the event were to be held in the MPR, what would be your preferred time to attend?” (Before School/ During Lunch/ After School).

### **Limitations in Methods**

The survey in my study was distributed to 165 students at Thousand Oaks High School. A population of 2,585 students could leave something to be desired in terms of a sample size of

165. The statistical significance of the results could be more meaningful if the study had a larger representative sample. Given this, the results were analyzed given a margin of error.

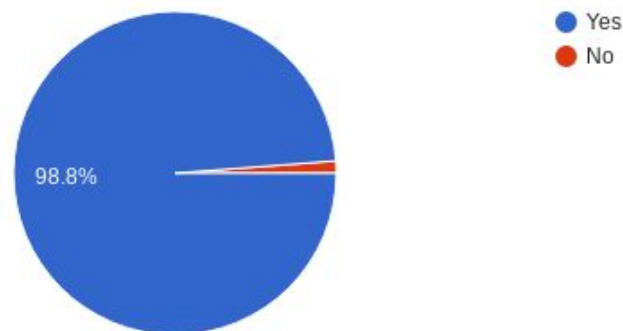
#### 4. Findings and Analysis

##### Survey

The survey was intended to grasp the following information: demand, audience, allergies, and timing. The survey distributed to students at Thousand Oaks High School rendered 165 responses.

##### Are you a student at Thousand Oaks High School?

165 responses

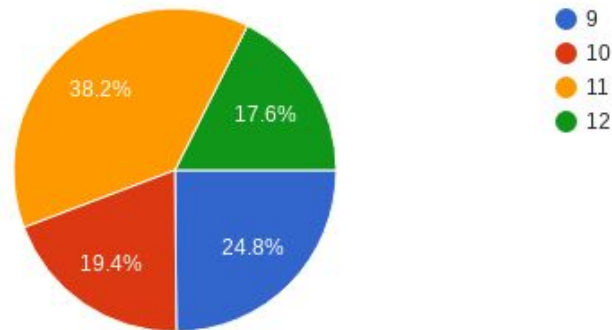


Out of the 165 students surveyed, 163 students stated that they currently attended Thousand Oaks High School. The two responses of people who did not attend Thousand Oaks High School were discarded. These occurrences may have been due to the sharing of the survey link from outside of the classrooms among student's friends. The two responses that were not from students may have occurred due to the survey being taken by people such as parents or siblings when the parent consent forms were taken home.

The next question on the survey was, “what grade are you in?”

### What Grade are you in?

165 responses

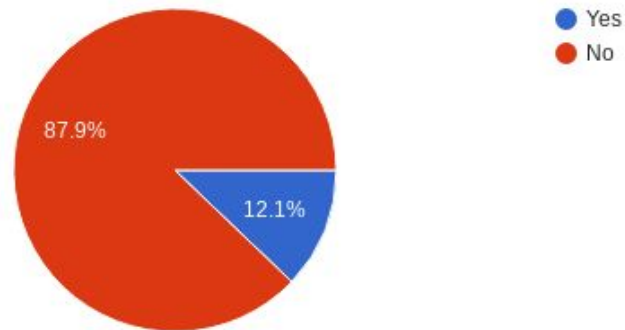


Out of the responses, 24.8% stated that they were in ninth grade, 19.4% stated that they were in tenth grade, 38.2% stated that they were in eleventh grade, and 17.6% stated that they were in twelfth grade. The margin of error for ninth graders is 24.8% plus or minus 6.589445342%, the margin of error for tenth graders is 19.4% plus or minus 6.033682942%, the margin of error for eleventh graders is 38.2% plus or minus 7.413785528%, and the margin of error for twelfth graders is 17.6% plus or minus 5.810774727%. The data in excess of eleventh graders may be that since the survey was optional, eleventh graders may have been more motivated to take the survey since I am in eleventh grade and they may have known me personally. The intent of this question was to ensure that every grade at the school was represented, given that there could be differing opinions based on age.

The next question was to find the percentage of students among the sample size that were allergic to dogs/certain breeds of dogs.

### Are you allergic to dogs/certain breeds of dogs?

165 responses

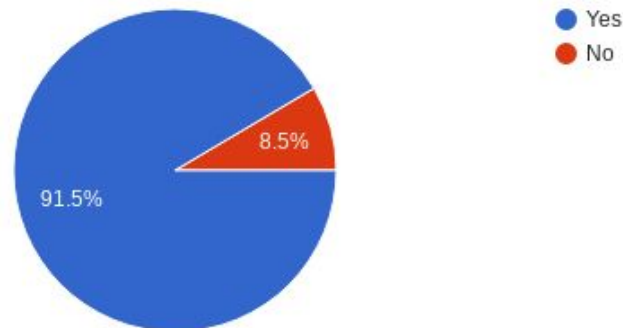


Out of the 165 responses, 87.9% stated that they were not allergic to dogs/certain breeds of dogs, and 12.1% stated that they were allergic to dogs/certain breeds of dogs. The margin of error for the people who stated that they were not allergic to dogs is 87.9% plus or minus 4.976238901%. In a larger context, this question is important to see on a scale why precautions would be needed against allergies. Allergies will be discussed later in the paper in the analysis of interviews.

The next question was, "If there was a dog therapy event at school aimed at lowering stress in students, would you attend the event?"

### If there was a dog therapy event at school aimed at lowering stress in students, would you attend the event?

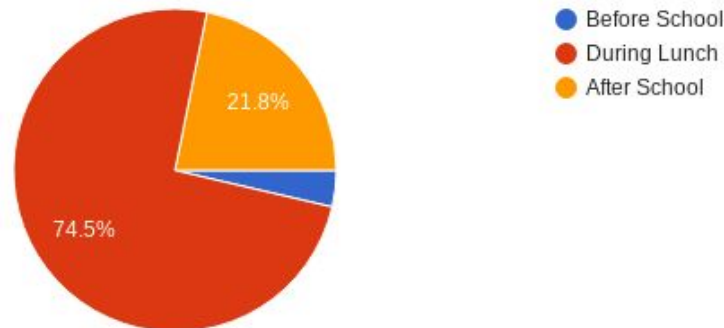
165 responses



When asked if there was a dog therapy event at school aimed at lowering stress in students, 91.5% stated that they would attend the event, while 8.5% stated that they would not attend the event. The margin of error for the 91.5% of people who stated “yes” is 91.5% plus or minus 4.255338465%. These numbers indicate that an overwhelming majority of students would be interested in attending an event if it were to be put on. Given this information, there is enough demand to warrant that enough publicity through the school’s bulletin and announcement system will bring students to an event.

### If the event were to be held in the MPR, what would be your preferred time to attend?

165 responses



Regarding timing, when asked what their preferred time to attend the event if it was held in the multi purpose room (MPR) on our campus, 74.5% stated that they would prefer to attend the event during lunch, 21.8% stated that they would attend the event after school, and a small number of people, 3.6%, stated that they would like to attend the event before school. Since the number of students preferring to attend at lunch is 74.5% while after school is only 21.8%, it seems most convenient to only do an event during lunch.

### Interviews

Interview with Danielle Oliveri, Assistant Principal of Instruction.

I interviewed Ms. Oliveri as one of the first steps in my research. When I sat down with her, she inquired about some of the procedures of my proposed study. She then stated that it was not her job to deal with such events. She said that it was a school district field, and that I

would need to go through the principle of our school in order to contact them. She directed me to some existing board policy and administrative regulation on animal therapy and allergies, and helped me set up an interview with the principle of our school, or rather interim principal of our school, Anna Merriman.

Interview with Anna Merriman, Interim Principal at Thousand Oaks High School.

Anna Merriman was the Assistant Superintendent at Moorpark Unified School District for 6 years from 2005-2011. I interviewed Mrs. Merriman due to her knowledge of the steps I would need to take in the district policy area. Her first concern was that the program would need to have a large backing of insurance in case something goes awry. I learned however from my discussions with UCLA's PAC coordinator, Erin Rice, that their programs come with millions of dollars in insurance in case of any problems. Also, she stated that paperwork for everyone attending the event would have to be filed in weeks event. She then stated that the procedure was not in terms of policy, for policy was for long term events, but a procedure for the superintendent of the school district to approve. She stated that we would have to write a one time procedure of events for him to sign off on if we wanted to create a one time event. If the event were to be executed successfully, then they could consider creating some sort of policy. She then talked about requirements that would need to met for the organization with the dogs and the dogs themselves. Then she went on about students and allergies, and how we would need to ensure that no student's allergies were affected. This would be done via a quarantine room for the dogs. She suggested using our school's multipurpose room.

Interview with Erin Rice, Coordinator of People and Animal Connection Department at UCLA

My interview with Erin Rice was short, but it was one of my most valuable interviews.

In this interview she answered several of the questions posed by Ms. Merriman. She stated that her program had millions of dollars in insurance for in case of disaster, and she also laid out some requirements that would have to be set for her dogs. She also stated some of the procedure used at UCLA when they have their de-stressing sessions, and suggested I use that if I were to create a program. She said that they usually limit time people can have to interact with their dogs. To do this they have one entrance to a room where people cross their name off a list and get to pet the dogs. After six minutes, the person's time is up and new people get to rotate into the room. Depending on how crowded each day is, they will sometimes let students get back into line.

Implementing a therapy dog program at Thousand Oaks High School requires covering many steps and precautions, but in the end it is not too hard of a goal. In my survey it was established that there is an existing demand. In order to initialize the process, a request has to be written to the superintendent of the district. Additionally, a certified therapy dog group such as Love on a Leash or UCLA's PAC program must be designated to bring the dogs. If the event was approved, a designated room would have to be set aside for the date, and paperwork would have to be distributed and filled out by any students wishing to attend in advance. The students would line up to get into the room, and each would be allowed six minutes to interact



with the dogs. In this way, our program would be modeled after UCLA's in order to ensure the best results.

### **5. Conclusion and Future Direction**

High school can be extremely daunting and burdensome. Studies conducted by differing journals show that stress can have numerous negative effects on students' physiological and psychological health. While elementary and college students often have the luxury of interacting with therapy dogs, high school students mostly do not get this opportunity. Since studies also show that therapy dogs offer so many benefits to mental and physiological health, if a therapy dog program was put into place at a high school, many students would profit from these benefits. There is clearly an untapped population here. Research into the steps needed to be taken to implement a therapy dog program specifically at Thousand Oaks High School could not only help the students at this particular high school, but Thousand Oaks could be a model for future schools to use. The research I did led me to the conclusion that closely modelling a program after UCLA's while filling the necessary paperwork and requests to the school district would leave me with the best possible program.

Next year as a part of Thousand Oaks High School's program called the Center for Advanced Studies and Research, the findings in this study will be used to bring therapy dogs onto the campus. UCLA's PAC program will be used in order to make this event happen. I am still in contact with Erin Rice, the coordinator of UCLA's People and Animal Connection program. I plan on using her program to bring dogs onto our school next year.

As I stated earlier in the paper, a successful event may inspire board members to write a policy regulating therapy dog programs in the Conejo Unified School District. If a policy were written, requests would not have to be sent to the superintendent to be approved in order to host a therapy dog event. Students or staff that wanted to put on events would only have to go through the Assistant Principal of Activities. Creation of a policy allows for much shorter waiting times for approval to host events. Creation of a policy would also ensure that therapy dogs could be repeatedly brought onto the campus without implications. Additionally, if a policy were created, future high schools could easily adopt this policy as well without going through the hassle of writing their own entirely from scratch. This could in turn cause more therapy dog programs to be implemented at high schools across America, improving the wellbeing of high school students nationwide.

### **Limitations**

While Thousand Oaks High School is a good model for other middle to upper class high schools, it may not be easy for many high schools to implement programs such as these. Middle to upper class high schools have more resources to put on events, and even though the health benefits of therapy dogs are extensive, some schools may choose to focus on other measures to work towards improving high school student welfare. Additionally, many schools may not have local therapy dog organizations that can provide certified therapy dogs to interact with students. Lastly, given the inherent nature of therapy dog programs having risk of something going wrong, superintendents may choose to not allow therapy dog programs to

take place. Even though certified therapy dogs are normally ensured, this may still happen.

Despite these drawbacks, the benefits of therapy dogs still grant that advocated for therapy dog programs is valid.

### **Future Direction**

Moving forward, if more high schools realized the potential benefits of creating therapy dog programs for high school students, more research could be done in this field in order to create an easy model for schools of all types to follow. This paper displays that therapy dog programs at high schools can be created by the work of students. If more students were aware of the opportunity to bring therapy dogs onto their campus, the rate of therapy dog programs being created at high schools could be drastically accelerated. If students are not able to create programs themselves, they should encourage their student government or teachers to advocate for therapy dog programs to be implemented at their schools. Likewise, therapy dog organizations similar to UCLA PAC and Love on a Leash should consider reaching out local high schools to attempt to create events.

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