



SCHENECTADY

Dogs ease students' reading worries

'Tail Wagging Tutors' program pairs kids with canines

BY MICHAEL GOOT *Gazette Reporter*

Sasha the golden retriever lay sleeping at the feet of 8-year-old third-grader Austin Obertello as he read a magazine article about turtles.

Sasha did not make a sound as Austin explained how mother turtles lay eggs, cover them with sand and then come back about seven weeks later when they begin to hatch.

"It's pretty fun to read to the dogs," he said, adding that he hoped he would get a dog or kitten for Christmas so he could continue reading at home.

Sasha's handler, Cheryl Wrzochalski of South Colonie, said she loves to see the reading progress of children. "I take great pleasure in seeing them improve," she said.

The scene was all part of the "Tail Wagging Tutors" at Elmer Avenue Elementary School, which is aimed at helping second-, third- and fourth-graders gain confidence in reading. The program started in March. Dogs from Therapy Dogs International and their handlers meet with the children for 30 minutes per grade level on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"Some of the kids are in the program because they are very shy about reading out loud in class," said reading teacher Debra Percenti. "Some of the kids are afraid to read out loud to an adult or family member. They feel very comfortable reading to the dogs."

Percenti explained that students read books that are either at their reading level or below. Percenti said they read material they have already read once. The purpose is to build fluency.

There are 35 students participating in the program, and there is a waiting list. Percenti said she usually tries to match the dog and handler's personality to the child.

Children like being around the dogs. When she was starting the program, she worried that the students would be so preoccupied that they would goof around with the dog and forget about reading. However, that has not been the case at all.

"It's serious business," she said.

The dog handlers also seem to enjoy being around the children. Mary Grace Von Calio brought her Italian greyhound Rex to be part of the program.

"I feel it's very beneficial to the children," she said. "They get an extra chance to be able to practice their reading skills." The canines enjoy it as well. "The dogs love to be able to sit near the children. They fall asleep with the sound of the human voice," she said. Second-grader Angela Persaud, 7, was reading a story named "Dance Mouse Dance" as Rex listened. "It's like she's telling them a bedtime story," Von Calio said. Seven-year-old Caitlin Coons, also a second-grader, was reading to Pat Reilly's mini-ki dog named Oliver. "I like reading to Oliver because Oliver is cute and he's nice," she said. Caitlin said she finds she is getting practice with the words and her parents help her, too. Reilly said she enjoys helping the children. "I just love to see the smiles on the kids' faces." Percenti has been around dogs all her life and often brings her own therapy dog Rita into the school. The program just started out with remedial reading. Then, it expanded to children who are extremely shy. Some of them just don't like to read or do

not make the time to read. After being in the program, they enjoy it.

"They will say, 'Hey Ms. Percenti. I read to my cat last night,' " she said. "That's a miracle. These are generally kids that are not reading. My job is to get them out there reading and happy."

In addition, children also learn how to act around a dog and responsible pet ownership, Percenti said. The dog handlers also share their experiences. Some dogs are trained to do search and rescue and others have taken part in competitions. Percenti said she also has students write thank-you letters and birthday cards to the dogs. That gets them practice in writing.



MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER Kacey Cummiskey, a second-grader at Elmer Avenue School, reads to "Guiness," part of the Tail Wagging Tutors program.