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Therapy dog aids interest in reading

Pooch's duty is to listen to students and relieve their anxiety

BY LORI HIGGINS
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Every so often, Sydney Kowalski hesitated before pronouncing a word as she read aloud from the book "Chasing Yesterday." But her companion didn't care. He just lay in front of her in the library at Maltby Intermediate School in Brighton, listening as another classmate stroked his soft black fur.



Sydney Kowalski, 11, practices reading aloud to Caesar. "He doesn't interrupt you when you say something wrong," Sydney said. (REGINA H. BOONE/DETROIT FREE PRESS)

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Her companion is Caesar, a trained reading therapy dog who joined the staff at Maltby this school year. Caesar, an 18-month-old black Labrador retriever, is part greeter, part counselor and part reading coach.

"He doesn't interrupt you. Caesar just sits there and listens," said 11-year-old Sydney.

And that's important, the staff said. Some kids have reading anxiety, and having someone who will listen without judging -- or correcting -- is important. And many kids, they say, are naturally drawn to dogs.

It's not unusual for schools to have pets, nor is it unusual for reading therapy dogs to visit schools. But Caesar is believed to be the first of his kind in Michigan -- a therapy dog working full-time in a school.

To Karen Storey, a special education teacher at Maltby who worked to secure \$8,000 in donations to purchase and train Caesar, it makes sense. She pointed to research that she said shows kids' reading improves when they read to dogs.

"This is just good for kids," said Storey, who brought the idea to school officials two years ago. "If it can benefit kids, I'm all about it."

Caesar was trained by For Better Independence Assistance Dogs, a nonprofit based in Leslie, south of Lansing, that trains canines to work across the state in various service capacities. Training a dog to work

full-time in a school "is a whole new endeavor," said cofounder Lori Grigg. And Caesar has become a bona fide staff member. He greets students in the morning, helps deliver snacks, holds office hours in the library in which kids read to him, accompanies Storey when she works in classrooms, and is there when Maltby counselor Cindy Adams counsels students.

Allergies were a consideration, and Caesar is prevented from going into classrooms where students are allergic to dogs.



A version of this story appears on page 6A of the Friday, Oct. 2, 2009, print edition of the Detroit Free Press.

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That doesn't include sixth-grader Christina Anthony. She said she's teased sometimes because she has vitiligo, a disease that affects pigmentation of the skin. Caesar makes it all better.

"I always have Caesar to talk to. Just having him here is always a comfort. He just makes me feel better."

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