

Read Fur Fun

Mission Viejo Elementary School, Cherry Creek School District

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The goal of the Read Fur Fun program at Mission Viejo Elementary School in the Cherry Creek School District was to give students a chance to practice reading in a safe, supportive environment alongside a calm, friendly service dog. Reading to a dog can help children feel more relaxed and confident, since dogs are non-judgmental and naturally comforting. With a parent present during each session, the program also encouraged meaningful family time centered around reading. Overall, the aim was to create a positive and joyful experience with books, helping kids see reading as something fun and worth looking forward to. In addition to hosting the service dogs, staff were able to incorporate robotic companion pets that were received as part of a grant. This allowed the children to always have a 'pet' with them while reading.



Mission Viejo's School Librarian partnered with Canine Partners of the Rockies (CPOTR), a local service dog organization that trains service dogs to be placed with disabled Coloradans, to facilitate the practice. Sessions were intentionally small, as this was the first time running the program, and the goal was to ensure a calm, manageable environment. Each session included three service dogs, and each family was able to take turns reading with them. Attendance ranged from three to eight families per session; one parent typically brings one or two children. Each session also included two to three dog handlers, the executive director of CPOTR, and School Librarian.

The School Librarian evaluated the initiative by observing interaction between families and the service dogs, as well as gathering verbal feedback at the end of each session. There were plenty of smiles and giggles, along with focused, extended periods of reading aloud. The families expressed their appreciation with comments like, "This was so great," and "Thank you so much for arranging this." Three families chose to participate more than once, and one parent was so inspired by the experience that she purchased a robotic companion pet for her son to use at home - she later shared that he reads to it every day.

The greatest challenge was getting the word out about the program. The registration link and program details were included in a monthly newsletter to families, which tends to have a lot of information. Read Fur Fun may have gotten lost in the shuffle, as attendance was lower than expected. Next school year, the plan is to explore ways to promote the program more prominently or separately to ensure it reaches more families.

Advice to anyone who plans to implement this program is to begin small. Find a local service dog organization with a passion for community service. Advertise the program through flyers, announcements, and bulletin boards with program information.