

Animals – Wellbeing and Engagement

Policy

This policy sets out requirements for the use of animals in Victorian government schools, as part of the delivery of a variety of animal-assisted wellbeing and engagement programs, including school support animals and animal-assisted therapy.

This policy does not cover school pets or animals used for teaching purposes. Refer to:

- the [Teaching with Animals policy](#) for information on teaching with animals
- the School Policy Templates Portal for information and an optional template school policy on [Dogs at School](#) (staff login required).

Summary

- All staff must take reasonable steps to reduce foreseeable risks of harm to students when using wellbeing and engagement animals in schools.
- Schools must ensure that 2 staff members are designated responsibility for the care, safety and wellbeing of the wellbeing and engagement animal whilst at school and outside of school hours (including on the weekends and school holidays). In the case of a dog, this will include its trained animal handler. Where appropriate, the wellbeing and engagement animal must be trained by a suitably qualified person before working with students. Refer to the [Guidance tab](#) for specific guidance on wellbeing and engagement dogs.
- Schools must instruct students on how to interact appropriately with wellbeing and engagement animals, including when they are eating, sleeping and toileting.
- Schools must ensure the welfare of school-owned wellbeing and engagement animals by providing appropriate food, water, rest and hygiene, and making sure the animal is treated humanely.
- Schools must refer to the guidance chapters on the guidance tab to understand and meet the requirements for having a wellbeing and engagement animal, including requirements relating to procurement, costs and insurance.
- Schools that are considering starting an animal-assisted wellbeing and engagement program may be eligible for an animal-assisted programs grant. Refer to [Animal-Assisted Programs: Grant Guidelines](#) for more information.

Details

Animal-assisted programs in schools include:

- school support animals – where an animal is trained to work in a school under the care of a trained handler to engage in goal-directed, structured programs to support student wellbeing and engagement

- animal-assisted therapy – where an animal is used by a psychologist, counsellor or social worker in delivering their professional services to help support the psychological needs of students, for example, equine-assisted therapy or canine-assisted therapy. Animals trained to work alongside qualified health professionals are referred to as therapy animals
- animal-assisted activities – where students participate in activities involving animals for the purposes of student support or environment enrichment, for example, programs where students read to dogs. Activities may involve the engagement of an external organisation.

School pets

School pets are not covered by this policy.

A school pet is any animal kept on school premises or under the control of a school staff member.

Keeping of school pets does not require a licence or Victorian School Animal Ethics Committee approval provided the pet is not used to:

- teach part of the curriculum in science
- engage in structured, goal-directed programs to promote student engagement and wellbeing.

Refer to [Teaching with Animals](#) for more information.

Schools may also choose to implement a local school policy on dogs being on school premises. Refer to the School Policy Templates Portal for information and an optional template school policy on [Dogs at School](#) (staff login required).

Assistance animals

The use of assistance animals is protected under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth).

Assistance animals are defined under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) as animals accredited or trained to assist a person with a disability to alleviate the effect of their disability, and to meet the appropriate levels of hygiene and behaviour which are appropriate for an animal in a public place.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth), the Disability Standard for Education 2005 (Cth) and the Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic), schools must make reasonable adjustments for students with a disability to participate in their education on the same basis as their peers. In some circumstances, allowing a student to bring an assistance animal to school may be an appropriate reasonable adjustment. Requests for assistance animals in schools must therefore be considered separately from the above examples.

If a student wishes to bring an assistance animal to school, parents/carers make a request to the principal to seek permission. The principal can lawfully ask a person to produce evidence that an animal:

- is trained specifically to assist a person in alleviating the effects of a disability (for example, guide dogs)
- meets standards of hygiene and behaviour appropriate for a school environment.

Principals must consider a request by a parent/carer for a student with a disability to attend school with an assistance animal on a case-by-case basis.

Definitions

Animal

Any live non-human vertebrate (that is, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals including domestic animals, purpose-bred animals, livestock, wildlife).

Animal handler

The person responsible and in control of an animal while on school grounds. If the animal is school-owned, these responsibilities extend to the care and welfare of the animal at all times.

Assistance animal

Animals that are specially trained to perform tasks or functions to help a person with a disability alleviate the effects of the disability, for example, a guide dog.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) provides the following definition of an assistance animal as a dog or other animal that:

- a. is accredited under a State or Territory law to assist a person with a disability to alleviate the effects of disability; or
- b. is accredited by an animal training organisation prescribed in the regulations; or
- c. is trained to assist a person with a disability to alleviate the effect of the disability and meets standards of hygiene and behaviour that are appropriate for an animal in a public place.

School pet

A school pet is any animal kept on the school premises or under the control of a school staff member that is not used in a teaching activity in science and not used in a structured, goal-directed program to promote student engagement and wellbeing. For example, a pet lizard in the classroom only used for display.

School support animal

Animals that are used to support student wellbeing and engagement. These animals provide comfort and emotional support to a range of students. They do not have the legal status of an assistance animal. Where the animal is a dog, it has been appropriately trained as a school support animal by a suitably qualified person and is under the care of its animal handler while at school.

Other terms also used include **emotional support animal** and **therapy animal**. See below for a specific definition of therapy animal.

Therapy animal

Animals that work alongside an allied health handler in a therapeutic setting. For example, an animal that is used by a psychologist, counsellor or social worker in delivering their professional services (for example, canine-assisted therapy or equine-assisted therapy) to help to support the psychological needs of students.

Wellbeing and engagement animal

References in this policy to wellbeing and engagement animals also cover school support animals and therapy animals.

Animals used to support student wellbeing and engagement in a structured and goal-directed manner. These animals do not have the legal status of an assistance animal.

Related policies

- [Child Safe Standards](#)
- [Duty of Care](#)
- [Mental Health Fund and Menu](#)
- [Risk Management – Schools](#)
- [Students with Disability](#)
- [Teaching with Animals](#)
- [Working with Children Checks and other Suitability Checks for School Volunteers and Visitors](#)

Relevant legislation

- [Domestic Animals Act 1994 \(Vic\)](#)
- [Ministerial Order 1359 – Implementing the Child Safe Standards – Managing the risk of child abuse in schools \(PDF\)](#)
- [Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 \(Vic\)](#)
- [Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulations 2019 \(Vic\)](#)
- [Victorian codes of practice for animal welfare](#)