



# School Therapy Dog Initiative Policy - 2026

## PURPOSE

The aim of the school therapy dog initiative is to improve wellbeing and engagement across the school with the assistance of a school therapy dog. The initiative will continue to be expanded upon in 2026. The objectives are to improve engagement and connection with school and to support the emotional wellbeing of students, staff and parents.

## SCOPE

This initiative is in place to directly support staff and student wellbeing. This policy governs successful implementation of the initiative. Empirical evidence has shown that therapy dogs can enhance children's psychological development, improve social skills, and increase self-esteem. Dogs can also teach responsibility, compassion, and respect for other living things. Dogs in the classroom can be used to calm fears, relieve anxiety, and compliment the THRIVE actions.

This policy covers all aspects of having a dog in a school environment; careful management abiding by this policy ensures there is a very low risk of harm to students, staff, visitors and the dog.

## DEFINITIONS

- **Therapy dog:** a dog that has been suitably trained to provide animal-assisted wellbeing initiatives under the control of his/her handler/s.
- **Handler:** a nominated volunteer/s in the school who is/are responsible and in control of a therapy dog while on school grounds and when facilitating the animal wellbeing initiative.

## CONTEXT

Research has demonstrated that therapy dogs in the school setting can not only make a measurable difference in terms of gaining skills such as reading enhancement, but also in contributing critically to emotional and relational development. School counsellors are finding that the presence of a therapy dog decreases anxiety and enables students to work through issues such as anger management, bullying tendencies and other psycho/social problems. The introduction of a non-threatening therapy dog can serve as a catalytic vehicle for forming adaptive and satisfactory social interactions. Guided activities and group discussions help teach students how to handle interpersonal conflicts and develop constructive responses.

## POLICY

Bella is a purebred golden retriever. Bella and her primary handlers (Mrs Hamilton (owner/handler 1) and Ms Haddow (handler 2) have been trained by Lead the Way to undertake the therapy dog initiative at Langwarrin Park Primary School. Therapy dogs can help refocus students who may be feeling upset or anxious for a variety of reasons. The handlers are members of "The Dog Squad" (Frankston Family Life), which is a network initiative. They meet at a nominated school each term to discuss.

Bella has been thoroughly temperament tested and exposed to a range of experiences such as animals, wheelchairs, ramps, traffic, schools (both familiar and unfamiliar) and other dogs. Throughout the testing she has shown very low arousal, suggesting a highly appropriate temperament for work as a Therapy Dog.

### Daily management

#### Activities and visitors:

- Activities that the dog may be involved in include sitting in their safe space watching classes, sitting with handler/s and allowing Dog to be patted, wandering around classrooms when class and dog show clear evidence of appropriate expected behaviours, walking through internal building off lead (with handler beside them) to lead classes to other rooms, walking around school grounds with a handler for patting, core element of lunchtime program/storytelling.
- Visitors to school will be informed of the dog at the school reception, explaining the dog's role and requirements.

#### The Dog:

- will be based in the senior art room, a Principal's Office, staff room or in the front office and will have a designated safe space
- will have time in the art room, yard and some classrooms –always with a designated handler
- will only be at school if she is well
- will be always kept on lead whilst on outside duty at school
- will always be under the supervision of trained handlers or delegate
- will be up to date with all vaccinations, worming and grooming
- will not be taken off the site, unless with the Primary Handler/s
- will have a safe area in the art room and a principal's office (designated zones) and
- will wear training vest/THRIVE bandana to ensure she is recognised as a therapy support dog.

### Student expectations

#### Students:

- will be educated in appropriate behaviour around the dog and develop increased responsibility with handling and managing the dog
- will never have sole responsibility for the dog or be left unsupervised around the dog
- will be reminded of appropriate behaviours around the dog with each contact
- will learn to recognise the dog's body language and how to react
- will always be reminded to respect the dog and always remain calm around her
- will be gentle and not make sudden movements or attempts to physically contact the dog

- will not stare into the dog's eyes and be given knowledge as to why not
- will request permission before touching the dog
- will keep their face away from the dog
- will always approach the dog in a calm, slow manner and not touch the dog until it is sitting and calm
- will not disturb the dog while off duty in the safe zone/crate
- will never feed the dog
- will continue beneficial learning into the dog's development
- will ensure that no more than 3 students will approach the dog at once and.
- demonstrate collaboration of the dog's role with the whole school community, including; staff, parents, students, family members.

### **Health and Safety**

- All persons should always wash their hands/sanitise after handling the dog.
- Any dog excrement to be cleaned and disposed of appropriately by handlers.
- Only Assistance Dogs (e.g. Seeing Eye, Hearing, etc) allowed on school premises unless other arrangements made with the school Principal.
- Contact with Bella is optional and any students, staff or school visitors who are allergic to dogs do not have to have contact with Bella.
- The handler/s will ensure that the dog does not pose a health and safety risk to any student, employee, or other person at school and that the dog is brought to school only when properly groomed, bathed, free of illness or injury and of the temperament appropriate for working with the school community.
- In the event the school is made aware that the dog triggers a student's health condition (for example, allergies or asthma), the school will notify the student's parent/carer(s) and ensure appropriate steps are implemented to minimise health risks.
- Staff, students and visitors are requested to notify the school of any health or safety concerns about the dog. We are committed to consulting with students and parent(s)/carer(s) in relation to any such health or safety concerns so that appropriate arrangements can be made on a case-by-case basis.

### **If the dog is hurt or injured (accident or by student), the dog:**

- will be removed by a handler calmly from the situation, if required
- will be moved to her safe area
- will be taken to the Vet by one of the handlers, if required and, Parents will be informed if the harm was caused by a student and our student Behaviour Management Policy will be followed.

### **Incident protocols**

- parents to be notified immediately
- seek medical attention if required
- inform relevant staff
- a full investigation from Principal and handler/s.

## Resolution of personalities protocol

- A safe comfort buffer zone perimeter will be provided between the dog and the other party of 3 metres.

## Therapy dog protocols

1. The therapy dog and the handlers will be trained.
2. The handlers will be the people always working with the dog and the children.
3. The dog will have signage (a vest or a THRIVE bandana to indicate that it is working).
4. The school community will be notified that the therapy dog is coming on site, including the class schedule.
5. The dog will have a safe space in both the senior art room (with handler 1) and the principal's office (with handler 2)
6. The dog has been familiarised with the school setting when students were not on site. The dog will have had training about safe spaces, enter/exit doors, food/water provision and toileting procedures/areas. The dog has specified toileting areas where students do not play (e.g. garden areas)
7. The students will be familiarised with appropriate behaviour and protocols before the dog comes on site. This will be done at the beginning of each year and revisited at regular intervals throughout the year. This will include the dog's safe area, how to meet and greet, acceptable noise levels within the room and tones/commands the handlers may use.
8. All interaction and degree of contact will be voluntary.
9. The supervision of the dog is always high.
10. All parents/guardians must provide informed consent for their child/ren to interact with a visiting therapy dog. This means that they understand both the *benefits* and the *risks* associated with their involvement. This will be in the form of an opt out consent form. (opt out is only acceptable where the team is a permanent and ongoing presence within a known setting (e.g. school) and the presence of the animal is an accepted part of being involved with that setting.)

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- Lead the Way : <https://leadtheway.com.au/>
- School Therapy Dogs <http://www.schooltherapydogs.org/>
- Dogs in the classroom <http://www.creativeteachingsite.com/dogs/dogs.html>

## REVIEW CYCLE

Policy last reviewed	February 2026
Consultation	Education and Policy Subcommittee 16 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2026
Approved by	Principal
Next scheduled review date	February 2027

## APPENDIX A: PARENTS BRINGING DOGS ON SITE

- i) Section 14 of the Companion Animals Act (1998) **prohibits dogs on schools grounds** except where the principal gives permission. Apart from working dogs, dogs must be kept on a leash in school grounds. Any dog that has been declared dangerous under section 33 of the Companion Animals Act must not be allowed on school grounds.

## APPENDIX B: PARENTS BRINGING THERAPY DOGS ON SITE

- ii) In line with section 7(4) and 29 of the *Domestic Animals Act* 1994 the parent must always have the dog under control. The parent must meet with the principals to determine they can fit in with OHS requirements and update the schools risk management plan to accordingly. The SCHOOL Therapy Dog has priority at the school, so consideration must be given to the SCHOOL Therapy Dog. The parents will need to work with the principals to determine their duty of care towards students/staff and visitors on the campus. A document must be written up to outline all of this, including expectations, agreed boundaries, dropping off/picking up times and communication with the school community.

## APPENDIX C: THERAPISTS BRINGING THERAPY DOGS ON SITE

- iii) An Allied Therapist would need to put their request in writing to the principal outlining the reason they would like to have their Therapist Dog onsite.
- iv) It is the principal's discretion to allow Allied Therapists to have Therapy Dogs on site for their sessions.
- v) In accordance with school expectations, the Therapy Dog would have to have successfully completed Dog Obedience training, and the handler would have completed a certified Dog Handler's course.
- vi) The school Therapy Dog has priority at the school. The Therapists dog would have to be compatible with the school Therapy Dog. Agreement would need to be gained as to areas of the school they were in, and if they were in the same area at any point.
- vii) A risk assessment would need to be completed and agreed upon by all involved parties
- viii) Parental permission for the dog to be in sessions would need to be obtained. A plan would need to be created for students where the dog was not permitted in the session.