

CANYON COURIER

‘He’s just the dog’

West Jeff Middle School loving life with Archie the therapy dog

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Four hundred and forty.

By counselor Dan Keane’s count, that’s how many times West Jefferson Middle School students pet Archie, the new therapy dog, during the course of one school day.

Though Archie, a 5-year-old golden retriever, hasn’t been part of the West Jeff family for long, he fits right in.

“If West Jeff Middle School’s ... one big home, he’s just the dog,” Keane said.



Keane was hired this year, and he and Archie are a package deal.

“I’ve seen the value of what a therapy dog can provide for kids that are struggling and just having a rough go, especially kids with anxiety,” he said.

“He had quite a calming effect on kids in various different situations,” Keane added. “And adults, too. That’s one thing I’ve noticed, especially being in the school district, is I think staff get just as much benefit from the therapy dogs as the kids do.”

According to Paws for People, a nonprofit organization that provides therapeutic animal visits to any person who could benefit, therapy dogs can have significant benefits, including many that are mental health related. Among other things, the organization says a therapy dog can:

- Lift spirits and lessen depression.
- Decrease feelings of isolation and alienation.
- Encourage communication.
- Provide comfort.
- Decrease anxiety.

Marianne Bitterly, a seventh-grade language arts teacher, has witnessed this firsthand. She said her students are obsessed with the fluffy pup, and he works wonders on anyone feeling anxious.

“I’ve seen slow motion runs to him. They flock to him,” Bitterly said.

When Keane brings Archie for a visit in Bitterly's classroom, the students light up.

"Did you see everyone when he walked in? It's 'The Land Before Time: The Great Migration,'" 12-year-old Adam Wilton joked.

"He's a living stuffed animal," Taneli Alahuhta, 12, said.

"So fluffy," Gabriel Dodd, 12, added.

And Bitterly is certainly not immune to the Archie effect, either.

"I even go visit Archie when I'm feeling overwhelmed," she said, laughing.

Overall, a therapy dog has been a great morale boost for students, teachers and administration. When Principal Kim Halingstad was asked about the benefit of having a school therapy dog, she quickly lowered her voice.

"I don't want him to hear it. He'll get a big head," she quipped.

"I think he has a calming effect on a lot of our kids. It's just something that they all look forward to," Halingstad said.

If the 440 pats aren't enough to prove how much West Jeff students love Archie, Keane is already developing his next experiment. He plans to count how many times students say Archie's name in a day.

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