

## C.A.R.E. To Read

Canine Assisted Reading Education [C.A.R.E. To Read] was developed by Dr. Barbara Murray and piloted within seven Brevard County Elementary Schools during the spring of 2002. The program, which utilizes registered therapy dogs to motivate children, became so successful, it now serves twenty-six schools in three Florida counties and Wyoming. It receives no outside funding and all volunteers pay their own expenses.

C.A.R.E To Read targets elementary students reading below grade level but who are not receiving other instructional support such as Title I or Exceptional Student Education. A Registered Therapy Dog Team is assigned to mentor the elementary student utilizing one-on-one instruction and Principles of Guided Reading. The structured curriculum is based upon educational behavioral objectives, best teaching practices and “*Petagogy*,” a method of instructional delivery and communication developed by C.A.R.E. and Principles of Guide Reading, (Fountas, 1996.) The program, which is aligned with the Florida State Standards, received recognition in a speech by Governor Jeb Bush during the fall of 2003 while presenting merit dollars to Cambridge Elementary School of Brevard County.

Each volunteer annually participates in a one-day workshop by Dr. Murray, an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Central Florida. In that workshop participants receive a handbook with all of their materials and continuing instruction concerning the manner and procedures in which they will work with each student. Dr. Murray has coined this technique “*Petagogy*.” Students to receive services are nominated by the school and supply written parental permission for their participation. The volunteers and their Registered Therapy Dogs work with each student bi-weekly and keep a record of each student’s progress.

Literacy has been the focal point of American education for more than 40 years. Beginning with early intervention programs such as *Reading is Fundamental* and *Head Start*, the current emphasis on accountability strives that “no child is left behind.” While a plethora of reading programs delivered to students within the public schools and numerous staff development activities for improving instruction are in place, many students elect not to become engaged in school lessons and are still “falling through the cracks.”

According to Newmann (1992), an engaged student is one who is intrinsically motivated and desires to please the teacher and to earn a good grade. Such child understands the importance of learning, albeit from a child’s perspective, and works beyond factual information to apply information to real-life situations. It has been found that students who lack motivation toward school and learning, become enthusiastic when assigned a Registered Therapy Dog Team, (Murray, 2002).

Researchers support that reading goes beyond the mere mechanics of reading skills such as phonemic awareness. Chapmann and Tunmer (1995) and Prochnow (1998) support the relationship between self-concept and reading performance and that self-concept is the foundation for young children learning to read. Taylor and Williams (2000) reported the relationship of reading success to other school behaviors. Students unable to read are more likely to fail in school and engage in misconduct. Willows supports that low reading ability and success rate lead to a pattern of behavior known as “learned helplessness.” Further, students who avoid reading do not become skilled readers. Data collected from the Canine Assisted Reading

Education (C.A.R.E. To Read) students suggest improved self concept as a strength of the C.A.R.E. program. Normal delivery methods of reading such as unrehearsed reading, repeated reading and group reading activity often add to the student's feeling of helplessness. One-on-one instruction has proven to be most effective in terms of student achievement, although it is not typically cost effective.

To date twenty four registered therapy dogs and handler teams have provided one-on-one reading support to more than 200 Brevard County elementary students with 97% of the students showing growth in areas related to reading and self esteem. Countless others have been served during group reading times, illness and discipline. Prior to the beginning of this past school year, the fifteen regular therapy dog teams with their handlers served Brevard County Schools with more than 4000 hours of service to help children become more successful in school. These improved behaviors reported by classroom teachers, parents, and mentors include increased confidence, enhanced self esteem, increased reading activity at school and home, better school attendance, and improved personal hygiene. Nonconclusive data suggest that a number of students have improved reading skills and achievement, leading to grade promotion and many students achieving grade level in as few as five Pet Teacher visits.

Dr. Barbara Murray is a faculty member at the University of Central Florida and, like her volunteers, has chosen to "put her money where her mouth is." She singly conceived of and created the C.A.R.E To Read organization. She recruited, organized and trained the volunteers and met with the school board and various administrators of Brevard County Schools to launch the program initially on a trial basis. Dr. Murray individually created and paid copying and collating costs for all of the training materials for the volunteers. In addition, she purchased the distinctive C.A.R.E. To Read shirt for each initial volunteer and even freehand-drew the logo which is embroidered upon each shirt. To date Dr. Murray has presented this program at the Florida Department of Education Inclusion Network State Conference, Fort Lauderdale, July, 2002; the Florida Governors Family Café Conference, Kissimmee, June, 2003; the Florida Association of School Psychologists, Tampa, November, 2003; and for myriad local and state church, social and service groups. In addition to the students being served by her volunteers, she and her two Registered Therapy Dogs currently are serving seven students in three schools as far away from her home as sixty miles.