

WORCESTER

Faculty-owned assistance dogs bring pawsitivity to Worcester schools



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From left, South High sophomores Arthur Campos Teixeira Muniz and Jayden Long and 9th grader Ivan Maisonet take a break from guym to give belly rubs to accomodating comfort dog, Buster. Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette

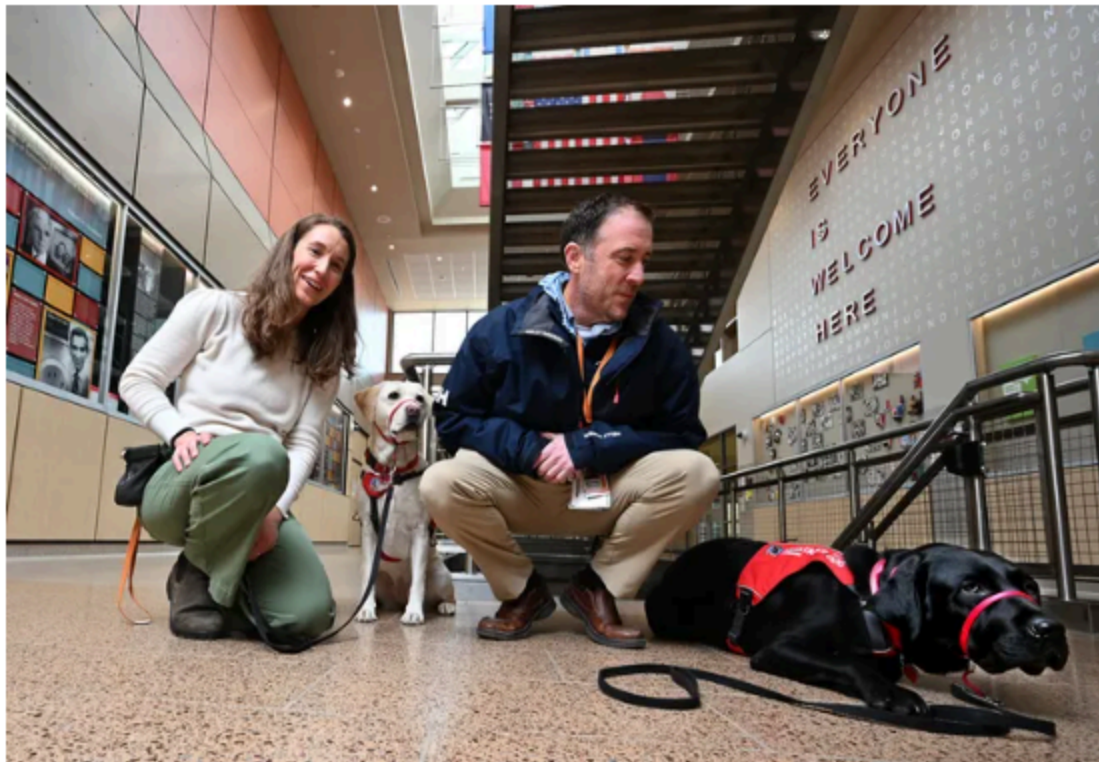
(This story was updated because an earlier version included an inaccuracy.)

WORCESTER - Inside Worcester Public Schools, four-legged friends are waiting for students and staff who may be having a hard time in school that day.

Over the two years, South High Community School and Doherty Memorial High School have had some new staff members. They may not have master's degrees, and they may sometimes eat their lunch off the floor, but they have emerged as valuable members of the school community.

"Buster has been so great. He is easy to work with and can understand quickly what a student may need," Doherty Assistant Principal Ed Whalen said.

Whalen is the handler for Buster, a black Labrador retriever. Wherever Whalen goes during this work throughout the building, Buster closely follows behind in case he is needed.



Comfort dog owners Kristin Ford and her dog, Honey, and Ed Whalen and his dog, Buster, hang out at South Community High School. *Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette*

"He is a constant presence with me throughout the day, helping students by bringing a smile to everyone's faces," Whalen said. "I work closely with our school adjustment counselors helping students regulate their emotions, providing a calm presence and reliving anxiety and stress and the relationship he forms with students is very helpful."

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Whalen said that Buster is open to everyone, although he sees some students, such as students with disabilities, more than others. At command, Buster can sit near a student, put his face on the lap of a student or even climb on top of a seated student if needed, providing a level of personal touch and connection with a student who may be struggling to regulate themselves for school.

"There is a lot of different things he can do, but most of the time it is just the smile he can bring by letting someone pat him," Whalen said.

Buster was awarded as part of a grant from the Worcester County District Attorney's Office. Buster made his debut at Doherty in February, but he wasn't the first Assistance dog in Worcester schools.

That honor belongs to Honey, a yellow Lab who has been the partner to special education teacher Kristin Ford since January 2024. Ford received Honey through a grant from the [365 Z Foundation](#), a local nonprofit focused on promoting acts of kindness in the city, started by Ford's mother in memory of her brother, Zack.

"We were originally supposed to get a dog back before the pandemic, and that kind of delayed things for a while, and then we officially got Honey in 2024," Ford said. "Honey is amazing, she is such a great listener and has had so many great interactions at the school."

Since Ford is a special ed instructor, Honey spends most of her day working with students who may be facing challenges regulating themselves in a school setting. She visits students who are in general education classes, and also supports students who are having some one-on-one time as part of their individual education plan.

"Honey does most of her work by just sitting near people and letting them pat her," Ford said. "She does have some interactions where some students are cautious approaching her, and they are very careful with her, but they always end up liking her."

The dogs were trained through [NEADS](#) in Princeton. Founded in 1976, the non-profit has trained nearly 2,000 dog teams in its history.

NEADS breeds, raises, trains and matches the animals with clients such as veterans with PTSD, those who are deaf or have physical disabilities and need assistance with independence, and children who have been diagnosed with autism. The organization also places Assistance dogs with professionals in organizations like schools and courthouses and trained Whalen and Ford on how to work with the dogs.

"It was fascinating and a great experience. They have a beautiful facility filled with great people and they really help you really understand the importance and significance that these dogs can provide in other people's lives," Whalen said. "People ask me if I was training the dog, but really the dog was trained, they were training me on how to work with him."

When they are not at school, Honey and Buster go home with Ford and Whalen respectively to their families.

"She's a little different at home," Ford said of Honey. "In school when she walks around she has this little pep in her step where you can tell she is working, at home she is more of a regular pet. She likes to lie around in the living room and follow the sun on the carpet."

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CORRECTION

In a story that ran in the Telegram & Gazette in March 23, assistance dogs used in Worcester public schools were incorrectly identified as comfort dogs.

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