

Seattle's Renée Cachuela is working on getting her pup, Finn, certified as a therapy dog. The second-year special education teacher is using Finn as part of her class repertoire to build her students' concentration and learning.

# Finn has a gentle way with kids

*Seattle's Renée Cachuela uses animal therapy to spark student learning*



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It's hard to tell what will happen on a given day in Renée Cachuela's room.

There may be inappropriate outbursts, uncooperation, and other disruptions in Room 102 at Seattle's McClure Middle School. There may be times when a student needs to cool off and there may be moments where a student's behavior has improved such that he or she can return to a regular class.

But one thing has remained constant in the room for the past year for Cachuela and her students: a Jack Russell terrier named Finnegan, or "Finn" for short, as part of the lesson plan.

The 17-month-old pup is a teaching tool the second-year special education teacher is using for students with emotional behavioral disorders. Modeled after a TV segment she saw on animal-assisted therapy in juvenile detention centers, Cachuela decided to adapt a similar program for her school.

"I want to stay away from the traditional things — obviously it doesn't work for them — but that's not always easy," Cachuela says. "I usually have music playing in the background."

Cachuela and instructional assistant Kari Carter work with students in grades 6-8 with emotional behavioral disorders. Depending

on their behavior and circumstances, students are in the self-contained room at different times of the day.

"Last year when I had a regular group of students, the kids had chores and we worked a lot with the dog," Cachuela says. "They each had a day to take the puppy out for a walk and take responsibility for the puppy care."

Most days, Finn roams freely while students work, allowing him to become an integral part of the class.

Students earn minutes with the dog by staying on task in class, following directions and completing various other activities. In addition to independent work, they work on a number of activities related to pet care, such as budgeting the cost of owning a dog, creating an owner's manual, and researching the anatomical differences between dogs and other animals.

Finn also is a writing prompt when students come across writer's block and the subject of comparisons and growth charts. He will be the springboard for students to study laws about owning dogs, and the recipient of a dog house that students will build.

"It's a privilege and we have to get good points before we can play with him," eighth-grader Michael Lundquist says. "It's nice to have animals in class."

## A calming factor

Her goal is to provide an alternative way for students to increase concentration and motivation for learning, while building critical thinking and life skills, Cachuela



*Michael Lundquist, an eighth-grader at Seattle's McClure Middle School, says getting time to play with Finn is a privilege he's willing to work toward daily.*

says. Eventually, the idea is to build a program that is highly motivating for all students at McClure — and possibly elsewhere in the district.

Cachuela and Finn's efforts haven't gone unnoticed.

Last spring, the NEA Foundation awarded Cachuela and instructional assistant Kari Carter a grant for the innovative idea. Her

Seattle local also gave Cachuela a grant that she has used to help pay for classes, veterinary costs and for Finn's license. By May, Finn will be certified as a therapy dog.

Big plans — perhaps dog years away — are in the works for the pooch and students.

"When I get him certified, I would like to get an evaluator to come in and have the students quasi-certified as handlers so they

can take the dog to the kindergarten classes or other classrooms and do therapy," Cachuela says. For now, "we'll just build on the program."

The program is so new that Cachuela doesn't know yet how to measure its effectiveness.

"If he weren't here, would their behaviors be worse? It's hard to say."

Anecdotally, people become more active and responsive when

working with animals. And there are, says Cachuela, "times that are magical" between Finn and even the most troubled student.

"Some of my more aggressive kids, whenever they are around Finn, you'd see their sweet side," she says. "Their sweet voice comes out and they talk to him."

"Every time there's a reaction to Finn, it has been positive."