Teacher Survey Reveals Impact of Classroom Pets

Survey produced by the Pets in the Classroom grant program shows the impact classroom pets are having – from increased pet ownership to behavioral and school performance improvements.

ABINGDON, MD (June 21, 2021) – A new survey conducted by the Pets in the Classroom grant program shows that classroom pets are impacting students in a variety of ways – from behavioral and school performance improvements to creating a better understanding of proper pet care to expanding pet ownership. Pets in the Classroom, which provides funding to teachers to purchase and maintain classroom pets, surveyed teachers who received funding through the program in the past two years. With 2,935 teachers throughout the United States and Canada responding, the survey provided valuable insight into the multitude of ways that students are benefiting from interacting with pets in an educational setting.

According to the survey, 99 percent of respondents said that having a pet in the classroom has been a positive experience, and over 90 percent would be extremely likely to recommend the Pets in the Classroom program. The results also indicated that classroom pets provide benefits to students in a multitude of areas. The data, coupled with the comments that teachers (over 1,100) shared through the survey, offer insight into the differences that classroom pets are making:

Attendance: Eighty percent of teachers saw an improvement in attendance due to their classroom pet. One teacher shared, “I have a student that has a hard time getting to school. This student loves to feed our class pet. We made a deal that if the student gets to school on time, they get to feed the pet. It has helped tremendously with attendance for this student."

Decreased anxiety: Nearly 95 percent of teachers saw a decrease in anxiety among students. A teacher remarked, “I got an aquarium with my grant, and it is something that has aided me greatly this year especially. I had a lot of students with anxiety due to the COVID circumstances this year. If the kiddos ever felt overwhelmed or anxious, I would send them to the table where they could look at the fish tank for a while. Something about the water and watching the little fish move around calmed nearly every kid that went over there. They would spend 5-10 minutes just calming down and when they came back, they were good to go! I call it Fish Tank Magic!"

Empathy/compassion: Nearly 98 percent of teachers saw an increase in empathy and compassion, thanks to a classroom pet. “One particular student suffers from PTSD related to trauma in their early childhood. This student found empathy and compassion difficult, and would often become violent when stressed...I had this student come to my room and help me clean our pet’s tank. When the student was given the chance to hold Odo [leopard gecko] while I cleaned the tank, this student was so gentle and compassionate. We discussed how to care for Odo and ensure his needs are met. This student has since asked about Odo many times and has begun to be less
prone to violence. He is also showing empathy to fellow students, especially younger students in the school,” stated one teacher.

Test/academic performance: Nearly 78 percent of teachers saw an improvement in test/academic performance. One teacher stated, “One of my Autistic kids went to Sasha’s cage every single day and talked to her. As a reward for staying on task, he got to hold her. His attention increased greatly and so did his academics. His parents ended up buying him the same pet to have at home.”

Responsibility: Nearly 98 percent of teachers saw an increase in student responsibility: “Having a pet has caused students to really have a sense of responsibility. When coming into the classroom, no one wanted to clean her cage or deal with the dirty work. After seeing how fun she could be, they now do it twice a week and I don’t even beg them to do it. They just do it without me asking.”

Self-esteem: Almost 93 percent of teachers surveyed saw an improvement in self-esteem in students. One teacher commented, “Our classroom pet, Sweet Pea, a guinea pig, loves to be read to. She patiently listens (as she munches snacks) to struggling readers. Sweet Pea increases the students’ desire to read and greatly improves their self-esteem.”

Increased social skills: Ninety-six percent of teachers saw an increase in social skills: “A student with autism would practice his social skills by talking to our class fish. It helped with his self-confidence and anxiety.”

Student engagement: Ninety-eight percent of teachers saw an increase in student engagement. One teacher said, “Even though my class was virtual the whole year, I taught out of my classroom and the class pets had to make it on camera at least once a day before we could move on to learning. The pets are what brought some students to class every day, and the connection with the pets helped us to grow as a classroom family—even through a Zoom screen!”

Decrease in necessary student disciplinary measures: Of the teachers surveyed, 89 percent saw a decrease in necessary student disciplinary measures: “I teach students with disabilities. One of mine, a boy with autism, was exhibiting some attention-seeking behaviors in the classroom and bothering other students. I had taken my fish back home due to COVID, but when I brought them back, oh the difference it made! My student sat next to the aquarium, would greet the fish by name every day, and sit there quietly while doing his work! The transformation was amazing.”

The survey yielded some impressive statistics, but it’s the heartwarming comments shared by teachers about how pets are transforming their students’ lives that truly show the impact of the program — from children who were able to overcome crippling anxiety upon returning to school, to those whose anger and behavioral issues subsided after a classroom pet helped them learn empathy, to those who needed extra emotional support and encouragement during remote learning. Especially this year, many of the comments focused on the social and emotional benefits of pets. As one teacher stated, “In a year where the social and emotional development of my pre-K students was at the forefront, having our new sweet guinea pig was such a wonderful way for our kids to connect with each other. Having this shared focus — caring for our pet — has brought so many smiles, discussion, and compassion to my students.”

In addition to the ways that classroom pets are benefiting students in the school setting, the survey indicated that classroom pets are also impacting students’ understanding of pet care. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said that their students had a better understanding of how to care for their classroom pet. Additionally, 95 percent of teachers had students express an interest in owning their own pet as a result of having one in the classroom, with nearly 60 percent of teachers having said one or more students had gotten a pet at home as a result of having a classroom pet. The survey results confirm it: classroom pets are creating more responsible and knowledgeable present and future pet owners. As one teacher stated: “I have some students that have not
ever had a pet. They have been able to gain responsibility with taking care of our hermit crabs. They also are getting their own hermit crabs at their homes.”

The Pets in the Classroom grant program was established by the Pet Care Trust with the knowledge that classroom pets can be a valuable teaching tool that many teachers do not have access to because of a lack of funding. During the 2020-21 school year, 12,401 Pets in the Classroom grants were awarded, bringing the total number of grants to over 183,597 grants since the program’s inception in 2011, meaning an estimated 7.3 million children have experienced the joys and benefits of pet care through the grant program. As we anticipate continued challenges heading into a new school year, the Pets in the Classroom grant program is ready to help by providing funding for classroom pets to pre-K – 9th grade teachers across the U.S. and Canada beginning August 1.

Learn more about the Pets in the Classroom grant program by visiting www.PetsintheClassroom.org.