

Research Report – Preliminary Results

*Implementation of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog Program in Simcoe County  
District School Board: A Pilot Study*

Submitted to:

The Simcoe District County School Board  
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## **Executive Summary**

In 2015-16, two Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) secondary schools offered the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog Program to student users of Student Success and Guidance services. An evaluation of this program, conducted in partnership by Georgian College and researchers from the SCDSB, showed the following results:

1. Students and staff liked the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program.
2. Staff and students expressed that the dogs were helpful in several ways, including creating a welcoming environment and increasing student use of the services that the dogs supported, improving communication between students and staff, reducing student anxiety, reducing student problem behaviour, helped improve focus and ability to get work done in Student Success, helped to teach responsibility, and was effective in deescalating conflictual interactions between students and staff, among others.
3. Challenges to the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program were also identified, including student and staff dog allergies, student and staff dog fears, and dog hygiene- and behaviour-related issues. Staff also reported that they had to devote a considerable amount of time to complete the required program training.

Given that the results of this evaluation suggest that the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program has promise for improving student wellbeing in SCDSB secondary schools, recommended next steps for the SCDSB are as follows:

1. Work with Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog staff and SCDSB staff and stakeholders (e.g., students, parents) to identify solutions to the challenges encountered during the pilot period.
2. Conduct an outcomes evaluation of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program to determine its impacts on students' school experience, personal wellbeing, academic achievement, and anxiety and stress. In order to derive robust and generalizable results, such an outcomes evaluation would require a larger cohort of student participants across multiple school sites.
3. Consider and/or test the comparative effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program relative to other animal-assisted or non-animal, evidence-based wellness programs.

## **Background**

The purpose of this report is to document the implementation and impact of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program in two Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) secondary schools, Nottawasaga Pines Secondary School and Midland Secondary School.

Researchers from Georgian College and the SCDSB collaborated on a qualitative and quantitative account of the implementation of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program to determine whether the program should be offered at other SCDSB schools in the future, and if so, how it can be implemented efficiently and effectively. The SCDSB aims to offer evidence-informed programming whenever possible, and an empirical evaluation of the Ambassador Dog program was commissioned in support of this aim.

Sweet Charity is a registered charity (#82238 5035 RR0001) that exists to train dogs to help people who need them ([www.sweetcharity.ca](http://www.sweetcharity.ca)). The Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program, as conceived for Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) secondary schools, consisted of a volunteer SCDSB staff member and his/her dog being placed in either the guidance office (school 1) or the student success office (school 2) so that students who used these services can interact with the dogs while visiting the services. Dogs were also intended to interact with students informally elsewhere throughout the school.

Participating staff and their dogs were required to complete a Sweet Charity-designed and administered training course, so that the dog and handler could interact safely with students at the school. Training consisted of delivery of a six-hour canine ambassador training program based on modifications of international standards prepared by Sweet Charity Medical Assistance Dogs. In this training the trainer assessed the suitability of the dog within the first session of the training and then provided the Sweet Charity dog cape and leash for use in the program.

After training, the volunteer staff member brought the dog to work for a maximum of two days per week throughout the project period (spring semester, February 1 to June 30, 2016). The Sweet Charity trainer visited each site twice during the program and engaged in ongoing communication with the site team.

## **Methods**

Participants who informed this research were as follows:

- Sweet Charity staff involved in project training and implementation activities (n=2);
- SCDSB senior administrative staff overseeing the program (n=1);
- SCDSB staff dog handlers (n=2);

- Additional SCDSB staff at the schools hosting the Ambassador dogs (n=1); and
- A convenience sample of students using the Ambassador dog-supported services (n=15).

Parents of students who had contact with the Ambassador Dogs were invited to participate in the evaluation but none agreed to take part.

Project data came from the following four sources:

1. A literature review and environmental scan of animal-assisted wellness interventions appropriate for use in secondary schools;
2. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders before and after the program;
3. Focus groups with additional stakeholders at the end of the pilot program;
4. A brief (5-item), anonymous, paper-and-pencil survey of students who used the services in which the Sweet Charity dogs were embedded, on days when the dogs were present ('dog days') and absent ('non-dog days'); and

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed; transcripts were analyzed for themes.

## Results

### *Literature Review*

Georgian College students, library staff, and faculty conducted a comprehensive review of research on animal-supported wellness programs. Results of the literature search show that the literature is vast and supports the use of animal-assisted therapy in a variety of contexts including school, hospital, private and community settings. In addition the literature clearly delineates animal-assisted therapeutic approaches versus guide dogs or service dog approaches.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured stakeholder interviews, before and after the program, were guided by the questions in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Stakeholder interview questions.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Pre</b>	<b>Post</b>
1. Tell us about how the sweet charity ambassador dog program was conceived?	<b>X</b>	
2. Tell us about your (PRE: anticipated) experiences implementing the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog Program in your school	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>

3. In your opinion, describe how the program impacted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students attending guidance/student success at your school?</li> <li>• The student success/guidance staff at your school?</li> <li>• The students outside of guidance/student success at your school?</li> <li>• The staff outside of guidance/student success at your school?</li> </ul>		<b>X</b>
4. Tell us about the (PRE: anticipated, POST: observed) benefits of the program	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
5. Tell us about THE (PRE: anticipated, POST: observed) challenges of the program	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
6. Talk about other aspects of the program that you think we should know about?		<b>X</b>
7. Describe what would help make the program better if it were run in your school again?		<b>X</b>

Overall, Sweet Charity staff were in-favor of the Ambassador Dog program and were eager to participate in the pilot program and research. Similarly, SCDSB senior administrators were well-versed in the program, its history and its parameters; they were also in-favor of implementing the program in SCDSB schools.

Both dog handlers were also champions of the program: One of the dog handlers that was interviewed was instrumental in bringing animal assisted therapy to the school in previous years. In addition, the handler was knowledgeable in the literature about animal assisted therapy.

All stakeholders interviewed described a variety of positive impacts of the program. For example, interviewees reported that the dogs:

- Facilitated students coming to and using the dog-supported services by creating a welcoming environment in schools’ Student Success and Guidance offices.
- Made students feel more comfortable and less anxious, and that the dogs helped students talk openly with the handlers about feelings, thoughts and ideas.
- Helped defuse situations that could become volatile, such as helping a student deescalate after a conflict at home or school.
- Helped the student deal with emotional issues such as a death in family, stress or peer conflict.

The dog handlers also described the positive impact that the dogs had outside of their designated areas in the schools. For instance, they reported that Ambassador dogs:

- Were used to help moderate behaviours and conflict in “high energy” areas such as smoking areas, and that the dogs “take the attention away from

negative behaviours or adversarial situation and opens up a conversation or learning opportunity”.

- Had a “positive impact on deescalating escalating behaviours of students who are on the autism spectrum and who sometime become agitated”.

In general, both handlers noted that the dogs positively impacted their school experiences whether they were situated in their designated locations or elsewhere in the school.

Stakeholders also described challenges related to the Ambassador Dog program, and the dogs themselves.

Dog-specific challenges, likely to be inherent in any dog-assisted program included:

- Student and staff allergies to dogs or fears of dogs;
- Occasional “bad dog” behaviours, including tipping over water and food bowls and possibility of urination and defecation accidents in the school;

Program-specific challenges included:

- Integrating the dog into the school community when the dog and handler are stationed in a busy or high tension environment;
- Creating transparency about the dog program to ensure that everyone knows about the program and it’s parameters;
- Balancing the time required by handlers to complete their training and their dogs’ training, with the need to have well-trained staff and dogs in schools; and
- Ensuring a systematic way to identify dogs and handlers that have the appropriate temperament to implement the program effectively as too many dogs and aggressive or hyperactive dogs can be problematic.

Focus groups were also conducted with staff and students that were involved in the Ambassador Dog program. The questions that formed the focus groups are in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Student and staff focus group questions.

<p>Tell us about your experiences with the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog Program at your school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What did you see or hear or take part in?</li><li>• Do you know Tess or Emma (the dogs)?</li><li>• How do you remember them?</li><li>• Tell me about a time you spent with them/saw them or heard about them.</li><li>• How did you hear about the dog being here?</li><li>• Anything else you want us to know about your experiences?</li></ul>
<p>In your opinion, describe how the program impacted attending guidance or student success at your school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did you feel about going to guidance or student success with the dog present?</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did anyone go because the dog was here?</li> <li>• Did you notice anything about the dogs presence that influenced their interest in visiting these areas?</li> <li>• Tell me about a time that you were with a dog.</li> <li>• Tell me about a time that you someone with the dog.</li> <li>• Anything else you what us to know about how the program impacted attending guidance or student success?</li> </ul>
<p>In your opinion, describe how the program impacted student success/guidance staff at your school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did anyone see the staff with their dogs?</li> <li>• Tell me about what you saw when these teacher brought their dogs</li> <li>• Anything else you what us to know how the program impacted student success/guidance staff?</li> </ul>
<p>In your opinion, describe how the program impacted the students outside of guidance/student success at your school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe if you heard students talking about the dogs at other times outside of their interaction like at home, or at lunch, in the halls, with friends or in class.</li> <li>• Tell me about seeing the dogs around the school during the day. What did you see, tell me about these interactions?</li> <li>• With parents and staff, talk about what they were told by the kids, or noticed.</li> <li>• Anything else you what us to know about how the program impacted the students outside of guidance/student success?</li> </ul>
<p>Tell us about the benefits of the program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you see that was good about having the dogs here?</li> <li>• What did you notice about student success or guidance areas with the dogs here?</li> <li>• Did anyone have personal experience that was positive? Tell me about it!</li> <li>• Name something positive you noticed about the students or yourself as part of an interaction with the dogs in SS/G or on the school grounds.</li> <li>• Anything else you what us to know about the benefits of the program?</li> </ul>
<p>In your opinion, describe how the program impacted the staff outside of guidance/student success at your school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me working in the school with this dogs present.</li> <li>• Tell me about a time you hears staff or others talking about the program.</li> <li>• Tell me about seeing staff with the dogs.</li> <li>• Anything else you what us to know about how the program impacted the staff outside of guidance/student success at your school?</li> </ul>
<p>Tell us about any challenges related to the program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was there anything negative about the program or having the dogs here?</li> <li>• Tell me about any concerns you have with the dogs being at your school.</li> <li>• Anyone have a bad experience with the dogs, or see one?</li> <li>• Anything else you what us to know about any challenges related to the program?</li> </ul>
<p>Ideas to make the program better</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any ideas to help improve the program that ran at your school?</li> </ul>

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Any supports or resources that could make it better?</li><li>• Anything that could be done directly to improve the program?</li><li>• Anything else you want us to know to make the program better?</li></ul> |
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A summary of the themes that emerged from the staff and student focus groups is as follows:

- Overall, students and staff reported that the Ambassador dogs helped create a positive student experience at school, including creating a positive atmosphere, and improved student mood and wellbeing.
- Students and a staff at both schools expressed that the dogs helped to reduce student anxiety, stress and anger.
- Students reported that they observed the dogs being enjoyed in the halls and elsewhere in the school outside of Student Success and Guidance.
- Students reported that the dogs brought a sense of security, safety and a feeling of home - students indicated they go to the student service area because of the dog. They also indicated that they would visit Student Success for comfort and the dog helped them feel more comfortable.
- Students reported that the dogs helped improve their focus and ability to get work done in Student Success, and that the dogs helped to teach them responsibility.

Students and staff also expressed challenges related to the program, including:

- Students competing or arguing to get access to the dog;
- Hygiene-related issues, including dog bathroom 'accidents' and dishes on floor;
- Student allergies; and
- Students fears of dogs.

Students and staff offered the following suggestions for improving the Ambassador Dog program:

- Have more dogs in each school, but not too many dogs to avoid the program becoming chaotic;
- Have dogs at school more frequently (e.g., "More than 1 day a week.")
- Allow students more time with the dogs.
- Allow students the opportunity to be alone with dogs, including taking them for walks.
  - In the words of one student, "You just get that one on one time and just being around the dog, it's just being around the dog and being able to fool around with it and get your mind off things."



*Student Survey*

A brief (5-item), anonymous and voluntary paper-and-pencil survey of students using the services in which the Sweet Charity dogs was embedded on both ‘dog days’ and ‘non-dog days’ to be fielded for one week, three times (beginning, middle, end) during the pilot period. Survey were made available to students at the time of their departure of the service. The survey questions are in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Student survey questions.

Question	Response Options
How satisfied are you with your experience at Student Success/Guidance today?	Very satisfied .... Definitely not satisfied
How likely are you to recommend Student Success/Guidance to a friend?	Very satisfied ... Definitely not satisfied
What did you like most about your visit to Student Success/Guidance today?	Open-ended

Students completed 100 total surveys. These included n=68 surveys from dog days and n=31 surveys from non-dog days, and 82 total surveys from Midland Secondary School and 18 total surveys from Nottawasaga Pines Secondary School. Statistical analysis<sup>1</sup> did not reveal any difference between student ratings of Guidance/Student Success services on dog and non-dog days. Nonetheless, we note that more than twice (16% vs. 7%) the number of students described their Guidance/Student Success experience as “mentally de-stressing” on dog vs. non-dog days, respectively.

**Conclusions**

The results of this pilot program suggest that the Sweet Charity Ambassador Program had a positive impact on the staff and students involved. In particular, students and staff reported that the dogs helped create a welcoming and warm environment in the service areas that they were located, and that they also helped improve student wellbeing through reducing stress, anxiety and conflict. The dogs may have also helped fortify student-staff relationships, by enabling students to ‘open-up’ when talking with staff in the presence of their dogs. At the same time, challenges related to the program were identified, including student and staff fears of dogs and dog allergies, concerns related to dog-related hygiene-issues and the time associated with training staff and their dogs to support students safety and effectively.

If the SCDSB chooses to continue with the Sweet Charity Ambassador program in the future, we recommend the following next steps:

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<sup>1</sup> Mann-Whitney U test

1. Generate solutions to the program-related challenges identified in this evaluation of the pilot project.
2. Conduct an outcomes evaluation of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program to determine its impacts on students' school experience, personal wellbeing, academic achievement, and anxiety and stress. In order to derive robust and generalizable results, such an outcomes evaluation would require a larger cohort of student participants across multiple school sites.
3. Consider and/or test the comparative effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the Sweet Charity Ambassador Dog program relative to other animal-assisted or non-animal, evidence-based wellness programs.