



27 February 2023

Dear students and carers

**Re: School Support Dog**

The College Counselling Team is excited to inform you of the plan to introduce a **School Support Dog** into the college 1-2 days per week on a trial basis, as an innovative adjunct to the Counselling and Pastoral Care Program.

**What is a School Support Dog?**

A School Support Dog is a dog that has been specifically trained and accredited to provide Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) within the school context. Accredited School Support Dogs are rigorously evaluated in terms of suitability to Support Dog roles. The temperament of our chosen dog has been assessed by Therapy Dogs NSW and found to be reliably non-aggressive, highly adaptable and interacts easily with children and adults alike.

**Why introduce a School Support Dog?**

Research has shown many benefits to therapy dogs in school settings and it is becoming increasingly common for schools in NSW to implement a school-support dog program to support students' well-being, promote a sense of belonging in school, reduce stress and anxiety, and even facilitate learning.

School support dogs have been found to reduce physiological symptoms of stress through lowering cortisol levels, increasing positive emotions, promoting engagement in learning activities and positive attitudes towards learning, reducing negative behaviours like task avoidance, as well as encouraging prosocial behaviours and acting as a 'social catalyst' to facilitate social interactions with others.

Research into the effects of support dogs in schools is showing a range of benefits including;

- Increase in school attendance
- Decreases in learner anxiety behaviours resulting in improved learning outcomes
- Positive changes towards learning and improved motivation
- Enhanced relationships with peers and teachers due to experiencing trust and unconditional positive regard from a school support dog
- Improvements in staff morale and well-being
- Development of empathy and interpersonal skills of students
- Improvements with student literacy development

### **How will it work at SPX?**

Meet Kobie- 18-month-old- Labrador retriever x English Spaniel, owned by College Counsellor, Joe McCarthy. Kobie will attend the College each Monday and will be housed in the Counselling area. Students will need signed carer consent to interact with Kobie. Kobie may also visit classrooms/ other groups where this is pre-arranged.



It is hoped that Kobie will play a role in;

- more successfully assisting neurodivergent students with emotion regulation e.g., students with diagnosed ASD, ADD, and/ or anxiety.
- effectively supporting students where there is a history of trauma where talking therapy can present challenges
- working in small groups with students where learning difficulties have prevented connection and academic success to enhance self-confidence
- working in small groups with students who would benefit from social skills training
- assisting within classrooms where appropriate and approved as a learning tool to promote well-being, connection, positive association with school and positive behaviour.

### **Absenteeism/ school refusal tool**

As well, a school support dog may be utilised as a 'reward system' for encouraging school attendance. SPX like many schools in NSW has seen a rise in absenteeism and school refusal post COVID. The use of a school support dog may be a helpful tool in encouraging attendance and rewarding improved behaviour.

### **What if I have concerns?**

We are aware that not everyone likes dogs, and some students may have extreme fears or allergies. An allergy register will be compiled as with any other allergy and documented through the student office. Any student can 'opt out' through confidential written request.

Other strategies to be implemented to reduce any risks associated with having a support dog on campus;

- Only accredited handler will be able to work with Kobie.
- Kobie to be on lead at all times.
- Kobie to be kept in counselling area.
- Signage will be displayed at the student office and noticeboard to indicate when School Support Dog is working at the College with a picture of the dog and clear instruction on how to interact with him.

We look forward to introducing you to Kobie at our next P&F meeting on the 6 March.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Ronchetti". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael Ronchetti  
**Principal**