



By **Dr. Victoria Northcott**, Vice-principal  
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## RECOUNTING THE DOGS AT ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Students and staff at St. Francis of Assisi School in Innisfil are involved in programs offered by Canine Opportunity People Empowerment (C.O.P.E.) service dogs. The initial involvement with the dogs and their handlers was through the literacy program. This year it has expanded to include a student in the school having a C.O.P.E. dog for half of the school day.

Vice-principal Victoria Northcott and Principal Agnes Bolcso of St. Francis of Assisi School met with the founder of C.O.P.E. Jane Boake, from Nantyr Shores High School to initiate the program and prepare everyone for their community involvement with the C.O.P.E. dogs. The students and staff at both schools are benefiting in many ways by their involvement in this unique experience.

The C.O.P.E. dogs are service dogs who work with people throughout their stages of growth. At St. Francis of Assisi school, the dogs help with the development of our students' oral reading skills. The high school students train the dogs and become the handlers. This experience helps increase their self-confidence, develops great empathy for others and contributes to the local Innisfil community. Research studies support findings of C.O.P.E. dogs improving students' self-esteem, independence and social acceptance.

Each week the dogs come to the school accompanied by their handlers. The furry friends wait with their handlers until the student readers approach them. After shaking a paw to say hello, students prepare a reading blanket for the three of them. For the next half hour, everyone enjoys learning in a unique and motivating way.

Looking down at the trios each week, handler, student and dog, we often witness moving moments: a child's head resting on the belly of a dog; a normally clenched fist softened; thoughtful oral exchanges amongst adults, dog handlers and students. One week a student begged to change her book because it was inappropriate reading material. The students focus their attention to their dog and their reading rather than focusing on any anxiety they feel about reading. The first year with the C.O.P.E. dogs was a very positive experience for all involved.



The experience provided many children with the opportunity for touch and nurturing, and motivated the students' reading.





Teacher, Jane Boake demonstrating to primary students how Ben can help her put on a jacket.

In the fall of 2008, we arranged for a C.O.P.E. dog to be at St. Francis of Assisi for one of our students who has a physical disability. The community, the family and the school raised money for the C.O.P.E. dog to be trained and assigned to her. The dog presently spends half days at school. To prepare for this Jane Boake came to the school with Ben (our student's C.O.P.E. dog) so the class could meet him and begin to understand his role for their classmate. Following this, we held assemblies for the other 520 students in our school to hear what the dog's role would be on a daily basis.

In each assembly Jane demonstrated what Ben might be seen doing or asked to do during the day. She had Ben retrieve a coat, assist with putting the coat on, flick on a light switch, help provide balance and nudge someone to help them refocus.

The students clapped and cheered loudly each time Ben performed a task. The young girl who has Ben with her each morning sat there watching him perform tasks that she would learn to ask of him. She now has daily opportunities, with the help of the C.O.P.E. dog's handler, to learn how to make requests of the dog that will enable her to develop independence. For this student and many others like her a C.O.P.E. dog relieves anxiety, provides comfort, reinforces learning and fosters safety and acceptance. This experience also enhances and provides many children and adults opportunities to smile together, learn together and help people forget their pain and limitations. They are focused outwardly on the dog and on making connections.

Staff and students often recount how the dogs have changed the environment of the school in a very wonderful way in just over one year.

Justin, a Grade 3 student wrote in his recount,

*The teacher showed us how the C.O.P.E. dog helps other people. The teacher showed us how the dog helps pick up things and turns on a light. The rules in our school are no petting the dog when he has his blue coat on. If Ben has his no cape on he is off the job and then you can ask to pet the dog. . . . At the end the whole school could pet the dogs.*

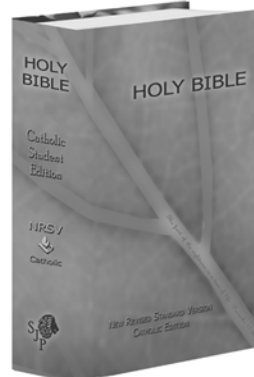
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