

news flash



AN EMPTY Corner

New law keeps beloved canine "assistant" out of developmentally disable class

There's something missing in Michelle Flory's Hilton Head Elementary School classroom. Pictures and colorful drawings hang on the walls, toys litter the floor and the smiles of the children remain, but an empty corner reminds Flory and her students that a special friend is gone. That friend is Kaycee, a two-year-old yellow Labrador retriever who helped Flory's developmentally disabled students. Despite Kaycee's success with the children, she won't be coming back. A new rule issued by the Beaufort County School District has officially banned furry friends from county schools due to health, safety and liability concerns. Under the rule, the only animals allowed are fish, frogs, hermit crabs, butterflies and nonpoisonous insects.

As an early childhood special education teacher, Flory sees children with speech and language problems, autism and other disabilities struggle with everything from simply coming in to the classroom to vocalizing a specific need. Kaycee's presence, surprisingly, helped some of the children overcome physical and mental obstacles.

"Kaycee created a comfort level for them," Flory said. "I never knew

how much (Kaycee) would affect class." Kaycee comes from a line of working animals trained to go into hospitals, nursing homes and classrooms. From greeting students at the door to alerting teachers if a child needed one of them, Kaycee's role in was that of a comfort companion. Flory said Kaycee gave the children something to relate to and offered a source of motivation to complete assignments.

"The children were able to regulate themselves with the help of the dog," Flory said. Children were prompted to finish assignments in a timely manner so they could play with Kaycee. Others spent time with the dog, then were able to return to work and concentrate more effectively, Flory said. Kaycee was also able to regulate herself. Her crate in a corner of the classroom was a place she could nap or simply take a break. Flory worries about Kaycee not being allowed in the classroom. Part of the benefit for the students, she said, was being able to touch and interact with the dog. Butterflies and fish don't offer the same kind of stimulation, Flory said. "For small children and my (group of children), she brought a tremendous amount of joy," Flory said. — Mary McAuliffe

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