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dogs in schools



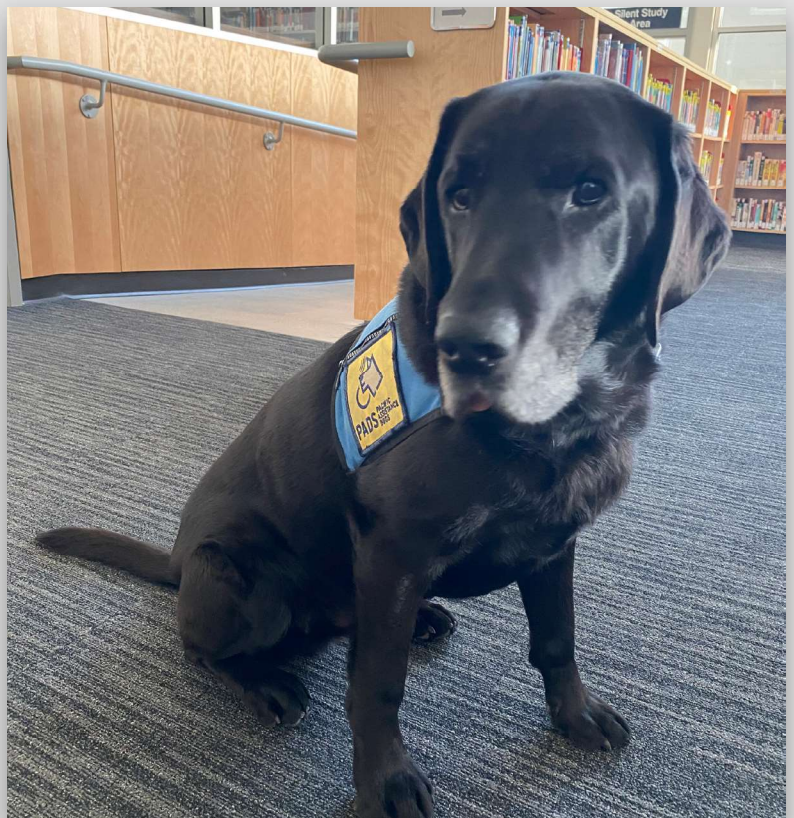
by
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In 2014, I was working as a Principal at Riverside Secondary School in Coquitlam. Our school community had experienced the loss of four students and a staff member in a very short period of time. I could feel the community struggling with this grief as they tried to make sense of these tragedies. There was a shifting energy in the building that hovered over us like a cloud. Supporting staff, students, and parents while grieving myself was challenging, and I could feel the weight of this on my shoulders. I was exhausted, physically and emotionally.

Later that school year, I was attending a workshop and met a counsellor who had a PADS service dog. As a person who loves dogs, I couldn't help but make my way over to ask questions about her canine partner. She allowed me to spend some time with her service dog. For that brief moment, I could feel my energy shift to calmness, and I was grateful for the way this dog allowed me into his space. I went home that evening and realized that a PADS dog would be a great asset for our school, particularly in light of what our community had been enduring.

Soon after, I applied to PADS for an Accredited Facilities Dog (AFD). In October 2015, I was partnered up with Liege, a black Labrador Retriever. Liege and I worked together for three years at Riverside, and another three-and-a-half years at Centennial Secondary, before he retired. PADS dogs typically work until they are about nine or ten years old, and Liege was nine-and-a-half.

AFDs like Liege are used for service in places such as schools, victim services, and counseling clinics. Some may see them as therapy dogs, but they are so much more than that. In my role as a Principal, Liege helped me in supporting grieving staff and students, providing playtime for students to decompress after an emotionally heavy psychology class, de-escalating students, comforting students (and occasionally staff) experiencing personal or socio-emotional challenges, helping students overcome their fear of dogs, greeting students at the start of their day, reducing anxiety before a test or during a class, and escorting students with diverse abilities out of the building during fire drills.



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Having Liege as a canine partner helped facilitate greater and deeper relationships with students. He reminded me about the importance of my role in making students and staff the priority. He forced me to step out of my office much more, and be around the people that I was called to serve. My interactions in the community were no longer a simple nod or smile as we passed in the hallways. Students would frequently stop to pet Liege or give him a hug, and that would open the door for a longer conversation about their day, their family, or other aspects of their life. Students started to seek out Liege in my office, and would often share some of the struggles they were experiencing. Liege helped us create a more open culture in the school where students felt safe to talk about issues around the building, and he often relaxed students so that they would open up about themselves.

When Liege retired in 2022, I felt the void of not having him in the building. I missed having a partner, and students missed having their furry companion at school. I soon applied for another PADS service dog and was partnered up with Benji, a Golden Retriever.

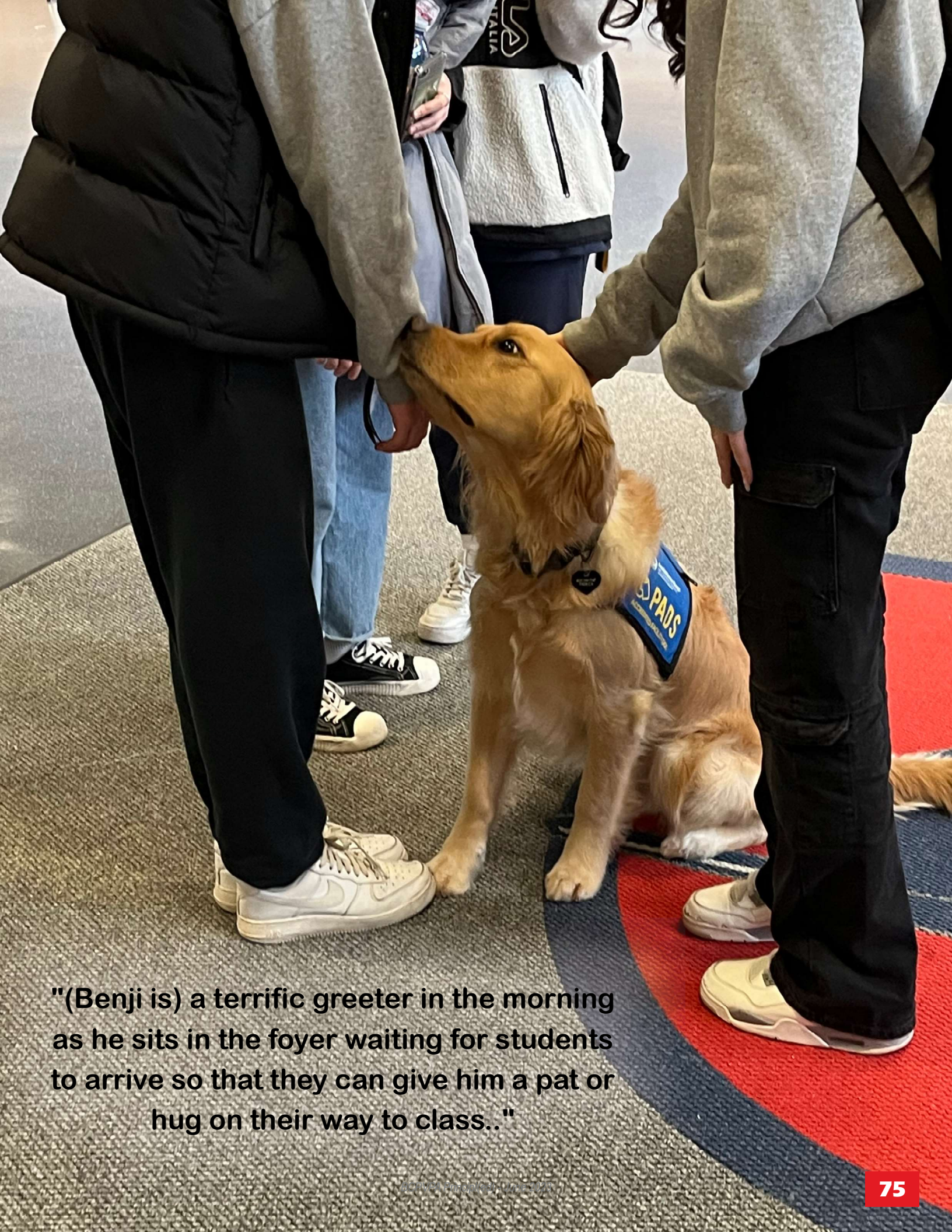
Benji started working at Centennial on January 16, 2023. He loves people and enjoys greeting students in the hallways and classrooms. He easily handles the energy of a large school, the noisiness of a gym, and busy hallways. He has his regular routines, including his morning greet with the office staff, daily training practice, and lunch time supervision. He's a terrific greeter in the morning as he sits in the foyer waiting for students to arrive so that they can give him a pat or hug on their way to class. He brings smiles to their faces better than any staff member in this building. He's patient, gentle, and nonjudgmental. He can be playful one minute and shift to a calm, working dog the next. He has quickly made his connections, and his impact on our students has been palpable.

Sometimes it's difficult to know the impact we have on children. Sometimes they thank us, or return after they graduate to tell us about how we made a difference in their lives. I didn't really understand the full impact that a service dog may have on students until I saw Liege working with a student who often came to school dysregulated. This young man loved dogs and he especially loved Liege; they saw each other every school day. The student started to realize that he felt better having Liege around when he was at school, and he asked to have Liege beside him in class when he was feeling anxious and overwhelmed. He began to recognize that Liege could help him feel settled so that he was able to continue learning and make it through his classes without getting into any conflict or having any outbursts. Over time, this boy started to experience more success in his classes. His confidence increased, as did his sense of belonging. When Liege was with him, so was a crowd of other students, and this made him feel more connected to his peers. When this young man graduated, he wrote Liege a letter, and talked about how Liege saved his life and helped him get through school. He was proud to graduate, to find a love in composing music, and to have a friend in Liege: the only friend who accepted him for who he was, never rejected him, and never judged him. This is the power of having a service dog in school.

I'm incredibly grateful to work with a canine partner at school. Benji and I continue to grow together, learning new ways of interacting with students, and continuing our work to build a safe, healthy, and inclusive community.



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