

Media Release

The Hon Gayle Tierney MP
Minister for Skills and TAFE
Minister for Water
Acting Minister for Education



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FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS TO BRING SMILES TO VICTORIAN STUDENTS

Wellbeing animals will soon play an even bigger role in classrooms – bringing comfort, calm and crucial mental health support – thanks to the Allan Labor Government.

Acting Minister for Education Gayle Tierney today announced 116 schools that will receive grants to support animal-assisted wellbeing and engagement programs, sharing in over \$2.7 million of funding.

Wellbeing animals have shown strong success in classrooms across Victoria – helping children to build confidence, feel comforted in the classroom and be more engaged in their educational journey.

Animal-assisted wellbeing and engagement programs are designed to support schools to deliver structured programs to improve students' wellbeing and engagement with the support of a professionally trained animal handler, psychologists, counsellors or social workers.

Other animal-assisted activities can be delivered by teaching staff with the help of animals to support student wellbeing and engagement, such as students reading to dogs.

Lots of schools are implementing canine-assisted therapy, with a growing number introducing equine-assisted therapy. Some schools also have small animals onsite, including chickens and guinea pigs, that are used to enhance learning and strengthen student wellbeing and engagement.

At Epsom Primary School, children have access to an animal-assisted wellbeing and engagement program thanks to a round two grant. Chickens, guinea pigs and three ponies are now housed at the school. Students grow sustainable food for the animals and help care for them, with the ponies providing equine-assisted therapy. Currently, Year 6 students are working with members of the local Men's Shed to build a village for the school's guineapigs designed by Prep students.

Providers for canine-assisted programs include Dogs Connect, Canine Comprehension, Lead the Way and Paws in Schools. Through these programs, trained dogs and their handlers visit schools to provide tailored support to students.

The *Victorian Budget 2023/24* invested \$4.8 million over three calendar years to help more Victorian government schools integrate animal-assisted wellbeing and engagement programs into their school communities, prioritising services for students with disability and additional needs.

Quotes attributable to Acting Minister for Education Gayle Tierney

"School can feel overwhelming for students at times, and these wellbeing and engagement animals help them feel grounded, supported and ready to learn."

"Our schools have a vital role to play in boosting the wellbeing of all our students, and this program will no doubt help them feel happy, engaged and present in the classroom."