



# PLYMOUTH COUNTY COMFORT DOGS PROGRAM

## 2024-2025 PROGRESS REPORT



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### EVALUATION TEAM

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During this first year of the three-year Comprehensive Opiate, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) grant cycle, the research team evaluated the services provided by the Plymouth County Comfort Dogs Program (PCCDP) in four school districts: East Bridgewater, Plymouth, Wareham, and Whitman Hanson. As agreed upon by the PCCDP team, the foci were on evaluating progress toward improving relationships between community members and police officers, building academic and socio-emotional protective factors in youth, and training handlers to lead substance use prevention/diversion groups, as these goals align with the first, second, and fourth grant objectives. We measured the effectiveness of services provided, including two interventions, and collected data from students, parents, and school personnel.

PCCDP services were delivered in school settings and included officer-comfort dog teams greeting students at morning drop-offs, walking hallways, visiting classrooms, and providing individual support to children experiencing emotional upset. Additionally, two interventions were conducted. The first involved officer-comfort dog teams visiting classrooms for ten minutes, twice per week, to assess if their presence improved focus and attention. The second involved measuring students' mood before and after an intervention by the officer-comfort dog team designed to help dysregulated students calm down. Finally, we surveyed students, parents, and school personnel on their perceptions of how the PCCDP influenced relationships with officers, school climate, student emotion regulation, focus and attention in the classroom, and motivation to attend and stay in school.

Results suggest the PCCDP services were effective in improving relationships between students and police officers at their school, building socio-emotional and academic protective factors, and training handlers to lead drug diversion groups. For example, the PCCDP:

- **Improved relationships between students and school resource officers (SRO):** Students who knew their SRO-Comfort Dog Team were 7x more likely to agree they feel safe with the SRO and 12x more likely to talk to the SRO.
- **Positively influenced school climate:** Students who knew their SRO-Comfort Dog Team were 3.5 times more likely to say the SRO-Comfort Dog Team made them feel safe at school, and 3.15x more likely to agree that the team helped everyone get along.
- **Enhanced student emotional regulation:** Students who knew their SRO-Comfort Dog Team were 3.26x more likely to agree that the SRO-Comfort Dog Team made them feel relaxed and calm, and 4x more likely to agree that the team made them happy.

AND

- When the SRO-Comfort Dog Teams were called upon to help students manage emotional dysregulation, **66.5% of youth moved from a state of feeling anxious, sad, or angry before the intervention to feeling happy/calm/relaxed/focused after the intervention**

- **Improved student focus and attention** in the classroom; Students who knew their SRO-Comfort Dog Team were 1.5x more likely to agree that the SRO-Comfort Dog Team helped them focus in class, and 2x more likely to agree that learning is more fun with the team in school.

AND

- Through classroom interventions, we found that the SRO-Comfort Dog Teams had a **positive effect on the temperature of the classroom, time to get focused on the task, and time maintaining focus on the task.**

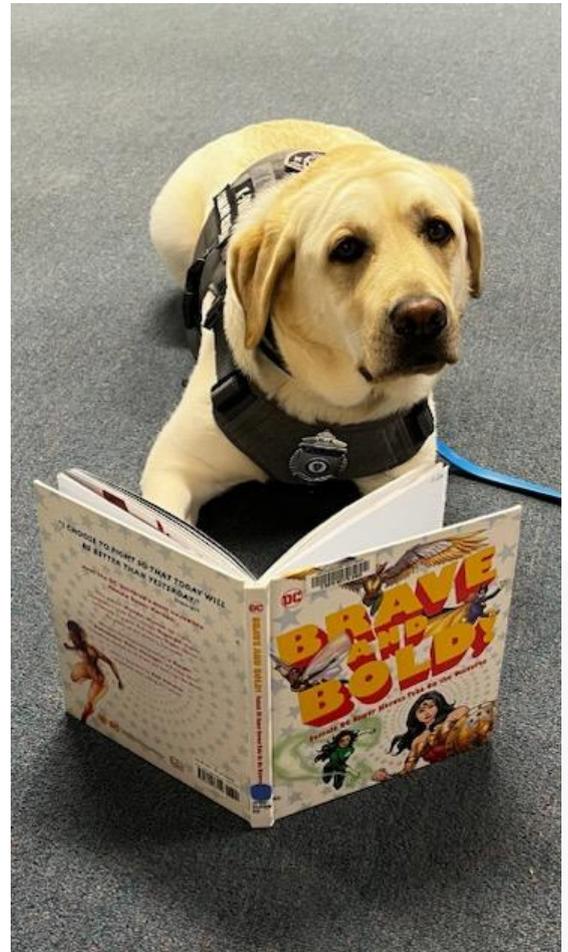
Students, parents, and school personnel were uniform in their positive perceptions of the PCCDP. School personnel recognized the influence the teams have in creating a positive and welcoming school climate, and parents stated that they felt better knowing the officer-comfort dog teams were in their schools. Students, parents, and school personnel alike recognized that the handler-comfort dog teams' combined effects produced a calming and positive learning environment that supports student engagement with academic material.

These outcomes play an essential role in meeting the PCCDP's mission to support the well-being of children in the county who've experienced adverse childhood events (ACEs) and trauma. The PCCDP created a safe, supportive learning environment for students where students can develop the protective factors needed to mitigate negative ACEs-related outcomes, such as at-risk behaviors and substance misuse. By building and strengthening relationships between students and officers, the program also helped improve the image of community policing and expanded the role of school resource officers beyond enforcement-related duties to include socio-emotional prevention efforts.

In this report, you will find a review of the program goals with specific attention to those central to meeting the objectives of the Comprehensive Opioid Stimulant and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) grant. We will outline the activities we've taken thus far in meeting our responsibilities as evaluators and provide information on the methods and data collection process. We follow with a presentation of the results and finish with a discussion of those results and the implications for years 2 and 3 of the grant.

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### MISSION & VALUES

The Plymouth County Comfort Dogs Program (PCCDP) aims to provide comfort and emotional support for the well-being of Drug Endangered Children, students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and others that require this service within the Plymouth County community.

Handler-comfort dog teams provide services to individuals and groups in schools, local community agencies, and community events, while also serving as a regional crisis response team.

### EVALUATION GOALS

Evaluate effectiveness of the PCCDP to:

- Building protective factors (e.g., socio-emotional skills, substance use knowledge) in youth.
- Improving relationships between community members and police officers.
- Train handlers to lead substance prevention/diversion groups.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Does the PCCDP:



- Support student relationships with officers?
- Influence School Climate?
- Enhance student emotion regulation?
- Increase student focus & attention?
- Increase student motivation to attend school?

### METHODS



Sample: Students (n=892); Parents (n=243); School Personnel (n=158)

Interventions: Emotion Regulation Visits & Classroom Visits

Data Collection: Surveys, Data logs, Focus Group

Data Analysis: Univariate, Bivariate and Regression Statistical Tests

## RESULTS

### SUMMARY

IMPROVES RELATIONSHIPS WITH OFFICERS

ENHANCES STUDENT EMOTION REGULATION

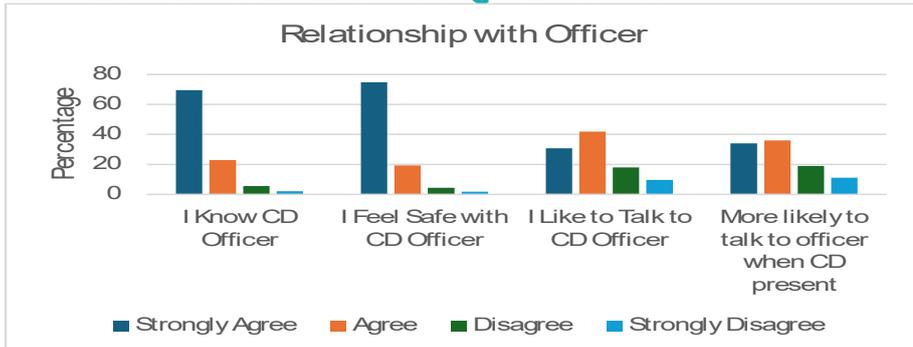
POSITIVELY INFLUENCES SCHOOL CLIMATE

IMPROVES STUDENT FOCUS & ATTENTION

IMPROVES MOTIVATION TO ATTEND SCHOOL



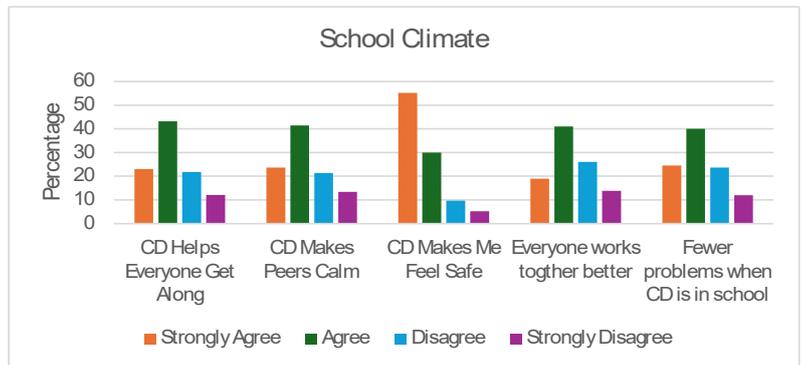
## RESULTS BY RESEARCH QUESTION



Students who knew the officer were:

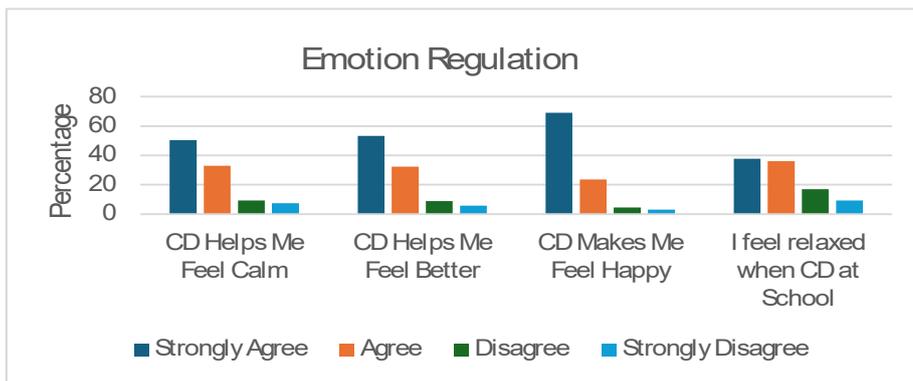
- 7x more likely to agree that they feel safe with officer.
- 12x more likely to agree that they like to talk to the officer.

- Students who knew the officer were:
- 3.15x more likely to agree that the CD team helps everyone get along.
  - 3.5x more likely to agree that the CD team makes me feel safe.
  - 2x more likely to agree that the CD team makes everyone work together better.
  - 2.44x more likely to agree that there are fewer problems when the CD team is in school.

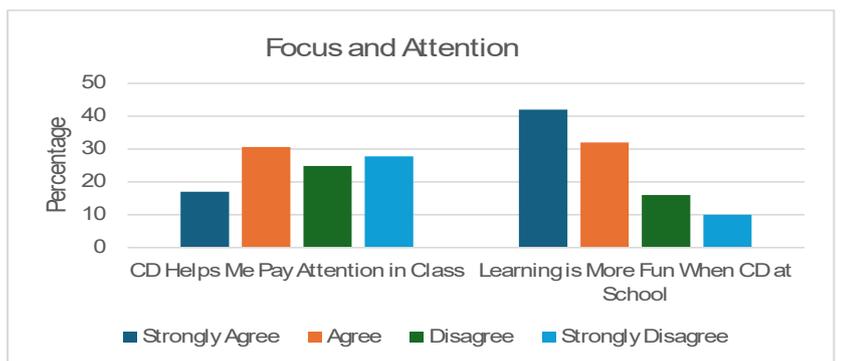


Students who knew the officer were:

- 3.26x more likely to agree that the CD team makes me feel relaxed.
- 3x more likely to agree that the CD team makes them feel calm.
- 3.1x more likely to agree that the CD team makes them feel better.

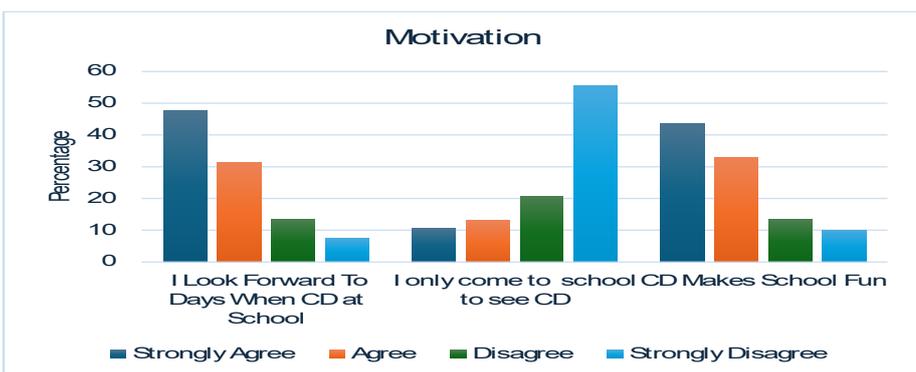


- Students who knew the officer were:
- 1.53x more likely to agree that that CD team helps them focus.
  - 2.2x more likely to agree that learning is more fun when CD team is in school.



Students who knew the officer were:

- 3x more likely to agree that they look forward to seeing the CD team at school.
- 2.7x more likely to agree that the CD teams makes school more fun.
- 2.5x more likely to agree that the only come to school to see the CD team.





## IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS

### Relationships with Officers

Results indicated that the PCCDP influenced the development of positive relationships between youth and police officers and that the dog was central to this success. Interventions aimed at building positive relationships between officers and youth of this age are essential. As these youth mature, so does their independence from parents, leaving them to make decisions on their own. Having trusting relationships with adults outside of the home serving as role models and mentors who provide support and guidance can operate as a protective factor important to reducing risky and delinquent behaviors such as substance misuse (Black et al., 2010; Brown & Shillington, 2017; Rhodes et al., 2005; Sieving et al., 2016).

As an additional consideration, there are contradictory views on the benefits of having school resource officers. It has been noted that SROs often intensified “the use of suspension, expulsion, police referral and the arrest of students” (Sorenson, et al., 2023, p.2). The results of the PCCDP evaluation indicated that the use of officer-comfort dog teams directly leads to a greater experience of school safety and positive, not antagonistic, relationships between SROs and students. Through their work, PCCDP challenges the negative associations some people have with officers’ presence in schools and shifts the narrative in a positive direction. In addition, the work of the officer-comfort dog teams may expand the school resource officer’s traditional enforcement role to one that offers support and prevention-based services to students.

### School Climate

Another protective factor supported by the PCCDP is the existence of a positive school climate. The school connectedness and sense of safety described by students, parents, and school personnel is central to a trauma-informed approach as it creates a holding environment for recovery and growth that may serve to mitigate the negative effects of childhood exposure to adverse life events (Harper & Temkin, 2019; Lensch et al., 2021; Moore & Ramirez, 2015). Moreover, the presence of the comfort dog contributes to the perceived safety due to their ability to reduce a sense of isolation by bringing people together and offering a non-verbal way for individuals to express themselves (Stewart, 2016). Using officer-comfort dog teams to create a safe space supports the acquisition of important protective factors and can influence a student’s developmental trajectory away from negative outcomes [e.g., delinquency and substance misuse (Brelsford et al., 2017; Dietz et al., 2012; Webster, 2022)].

## Emotion Regulation

Results supported the influence of the PCCDP team on enhancing student emotion regulation skills. Students, parents, and school personnel agreed that interaction with the officer-comfort dog teams improved their mood and helped them de-escalate quickly. Prior research documents that the addition of a dog during an intervention supports effective coping by calming the nervous system, eliciting positive emotions, and connecting the youth to those who care (Beetz et al., 2012; Barker et al., 2003; O’Haire, 2013; Wood et al., 2002). Thus, such interaction enhances one’s ability to identify and manage one’s responses in the moment of stress and adds to their repertoire of emotion regulation skills. Developing effective coping methods can protect youth who have experienced ACEs from seeking alternative ways to soothe themselves, such as aggressive behaviors or substance misuse (Bergquist et al., 2024; Pardini et al., 2004).

## Focus, Attention, and Motivation

The results suggested that the PCCDP teams helped increase student focus and attention in the classroom and improved motivation to attend and remain in school. Improving focus and motivation supports the acquisition of knowledge that enhances academic success. Such success is an additional protective factor that can positively influence developmental trajectories. This is especially for students who have a history of adverse childhood experiences, as higher exposures to ACEs predict less engagement with school, lower grades, and repeating grades (Bethell et al, 2014; Bower et al, 2017). Furthermore, decades of research demonstrate the level of education as a strong predictor of income, health, and overall life satisfaction (Carlson & McChesney, 2015; Erickson et al., 2016; Witter et al., 1984).

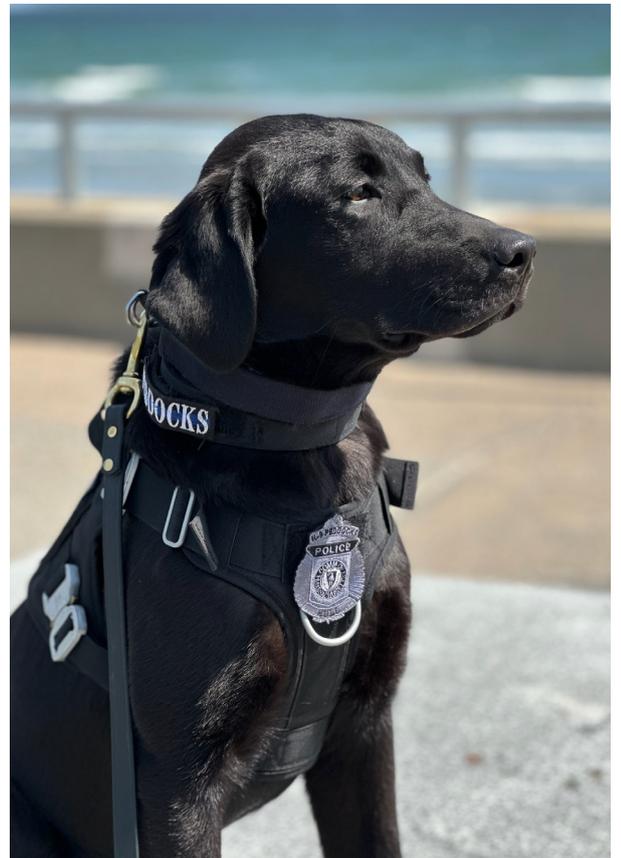
## NEXT STEPS

INCREASE COMMUNICATION WITH SCHOOL PERSONNEL

INCREASE EXPOSURE TO STUDENTS IN 6TH-8TH GRADES

INCREASE EXISTING SERVICE ACROSS SCHOOLS

CONTINUED DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION



# THANK YOU!



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