

THE PLYMOUTH COUNTY COMFORT DOGS PROGRAM

2025-2026 PROGRESS REPORT



EVALUATION TEAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Plymouth County Comfort Dogs Program (PCCDP) is administered by the Plymouth County District Attorney's Office and is funded by the Department of Justice Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program Grant (COSSUP)¹. The PCCDP aims to reduce the impact of illicit opioids, stimulants, and other substances on youth and families in county communities by providing services in schools and local communities through officer-comfort dog teams (CDT). The following report documents the evaluation of the PCCDP during the second year (2025-2026) of the three-year COSSUP grant cycle. Specifically, this evaluation focused on understanding progress toward improving relationships between youth, community members, and police officers, and building academic and socio-emotional protective factors in youth. A sample of 816 students, parents, and school personnel was drawn from four communities served by the PCCDP, and a sample of 343 community members was drawn from an additional eight communities. The research team used a mixed methodology that included surveys, focus groups, and interviews to gather data. Results suggest the PCCDP services were effective in improving relationships between students, community members, and police officers, building socio-emotional and academic protective factors, and training handlers to lead drug diversion groups. For example, the PCCDP:

1. Supported relationships between students, community members, and officers.

- 95% of students agreed that they feel safe with the officer.
- 78% of students were more likely to talk to an officer with a comfort dog present.
- 96% of community members agreed that the CDT fostered positive relationships with officers.

2. Positively influenced school and community climate:

- 85% of students agreed that the CDT helped students feel safe in school.
- 90% of students agreed that the CDT created a welcoming atmosphere.
- 90% of community members agreed that the CDTs made the community more welcoming.

3. Enhanced emotion regulation:

- 65% of students agreed that the CDT had a calming effect on them.
- Over 80% of students agreed that the CDT made them feel happy and relaxed.
- Over 95% of community members agreed that the CDTs helped people feel calmer during stressful, emergency situations, or during police interactions.

4. Increased student focus and attention in the classroom

- 58% of students agreed that they paid better attention in the classroom after a CDT visit.
- Over 70% of students, parents, and school personnel agreed that the CDT presence made learning more fun.

5. Fostered student motivation to attend and stay in school:

- Over 55% of students, parents, and school personnel agreed that the CDT motivated students to attend school.
- Over 65% of each group agreed that the CDT helped students stay in class
- Over 80% of each group agreed that students looked forward to seeing the CDT in their school.

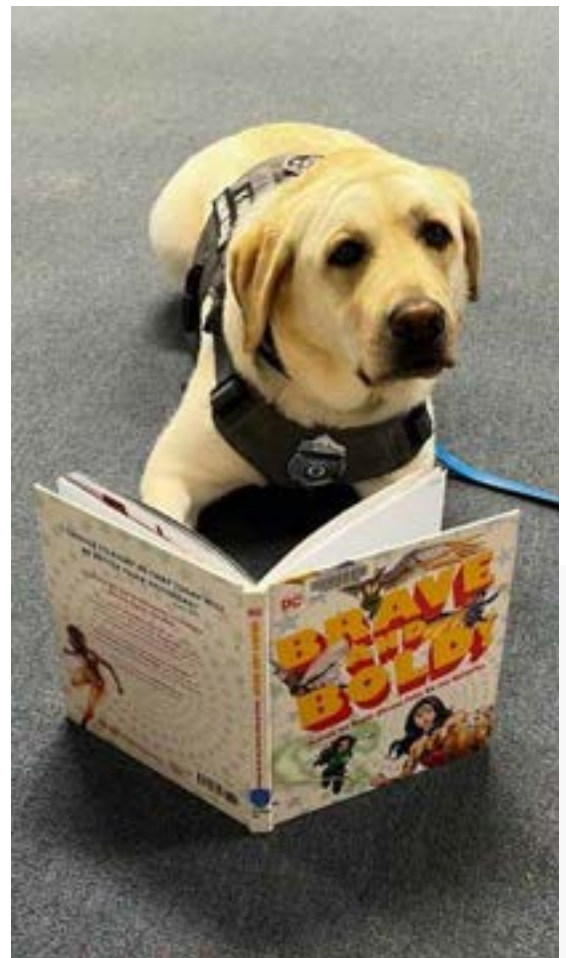
Results indicate that the PCCDP has made significant strides in achieving its overarching goal to reduce the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), illicit opioids, stimulants, and other substances on youth and families in Plymouth County. It has done this by supporting students' development of important protective factors needed to mitigate ACEs-related outcomes. For example, fostering positive officer/student & community member relationships provides students with adults to whom they can turn. Further, safe, supportive community and learning environments help youth develop important academic and emotional coping skills. These protective factors can counterbalance risk factors and prevent negative outcomes, such as substance misuse. An additional finding is that by building and strengthening relationships between students, community members, and officers, the PCCDP helped improve the image of community policing by demonstrating that an officer's enforcement-related duties also include socio-emotional prevention efforts.

In the report that follows, you will find a review of the program goals with specific attention to those central to meeting the objectives of the COSSUP grant. We will outline the activities we have undertaken to meet our responsibilities as evaluators and provide information on the methods and data collection process. We will follow with a detailed presentation of the results, discuss the implications of the results, and offer next steps for year three of the grant.

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1. THIS PROJECT WAS SUPPORTED BY GRANT NO. 15PBJA-24-GG-04484-COAP AWARDED BY THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE, OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS IN THIS DOCUMENT ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE OFFICIAL POSITION OR POLICIES OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

MISSION & SERVICES PROVIDED

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 who require this service within the Plymouth County community.

Handler-comfort dog teams provide services to individuals and groups in schools by greeting students at morning drop-offs, walking hallways, visiting classrooms, running groups, and calming students who experience emotional upset. In their communities, CDTs visit local community agencies and attend community events, while also serving on a regional crisis response team.

EVALUATION GOALS

Evaluate effectiveness of the PCCDP to:

- Build protective factors (e.g., academic and socio-emotional skills) in youth.
- Improve relationships between students and community members and police officers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Does the PCCDP:

- Support positive student and community member relationships with officers?
- Influence school and community climate?
- Enhance emotion regulation?
- Increase student focus and attention?
- Increase student motivation to attend school?

METHODS

- Sample: Students (n=592); Parents (n=170); School Personnel (n=54) Community Members (343)

RESULTS

SUMMARY

IMPROVES RELATIONSHIPS WITH OFFICERS

ENHANCES EMOTION REGULATION

POSITIVELY INFLUENCES CLIMATE

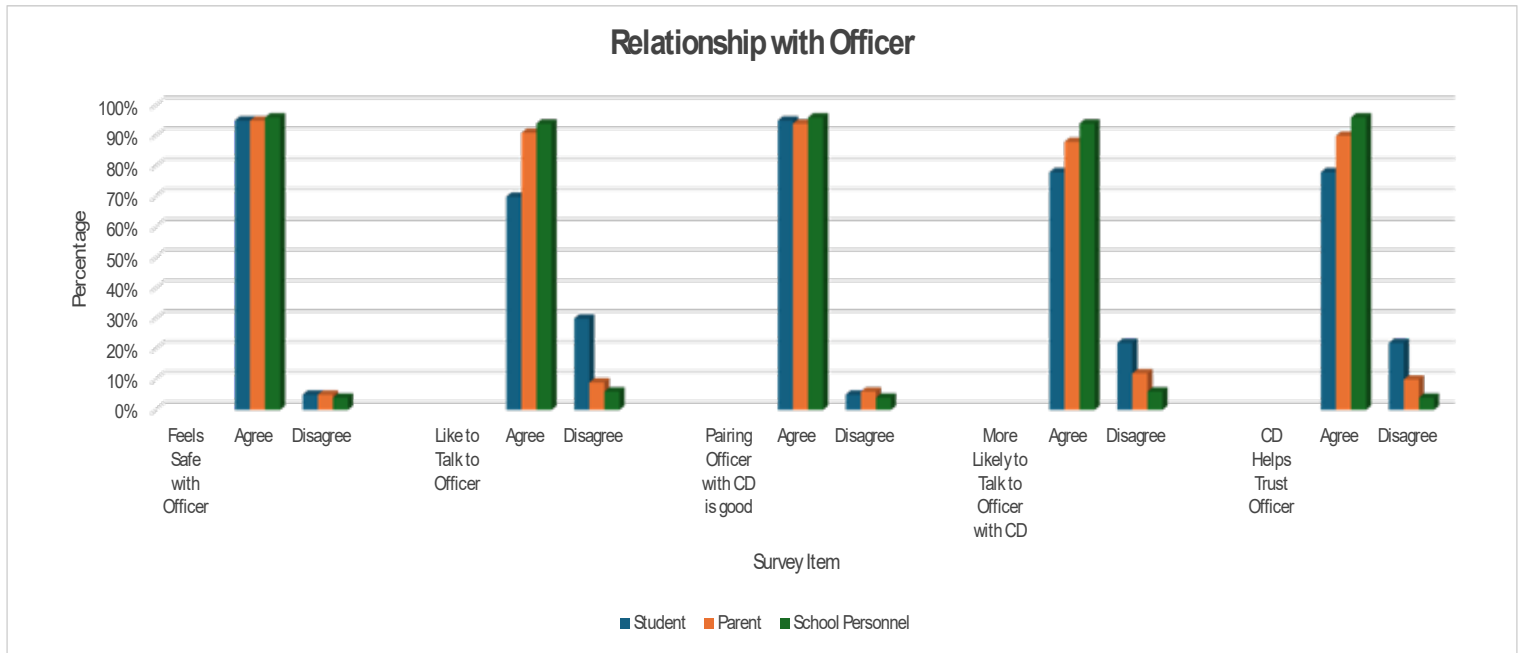
IMPROVES STUDENT FOCUS & ATTENTION

IMPROVES MOTIVATION TO ATTEND SCHOOL



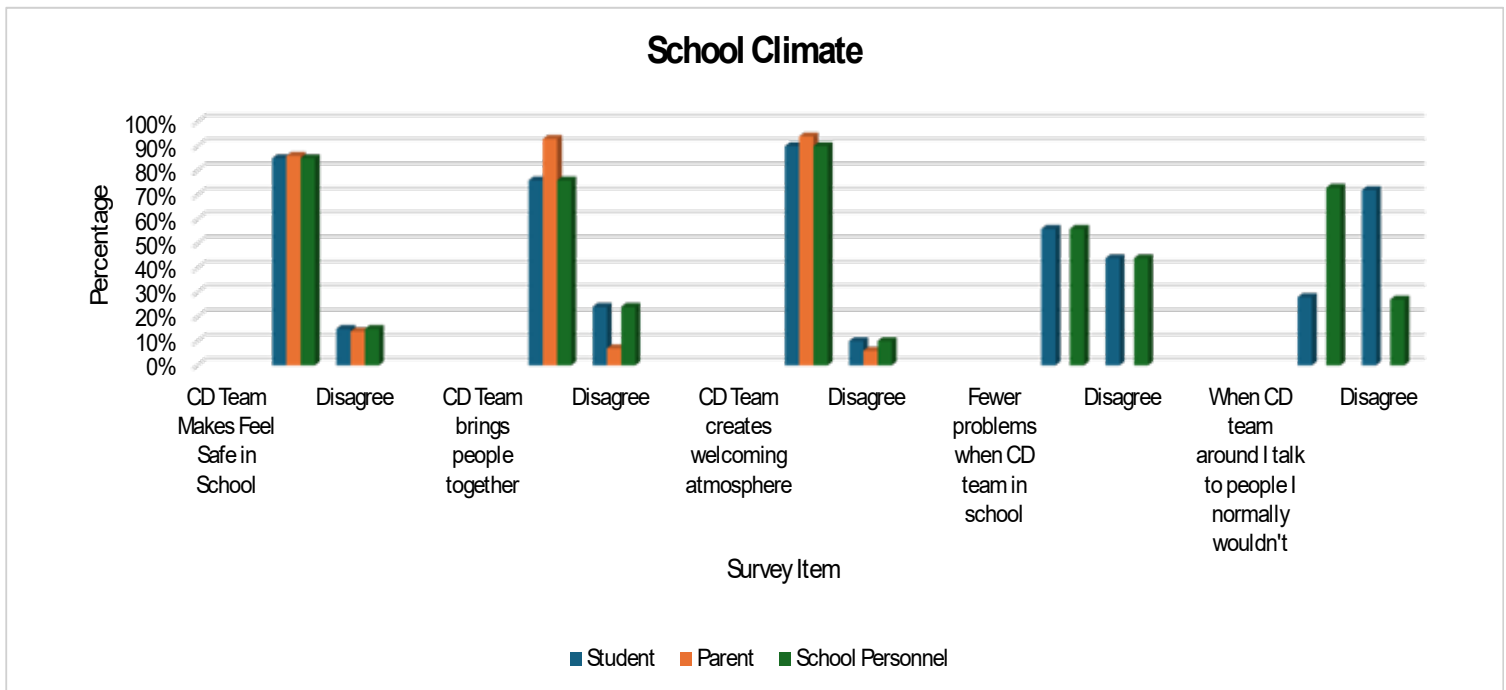
RESULTS OF THE SCHOOL SURVEY

Table 1.



As depicted in Table 1, over 95% of students, parents, and school personnel agreed that the PCCDP supports the development of relationships between students and officers in that students report feeling safe with officers. Regression testing indicates that key factors in this sense of safety are that students like to talk to officers and think that pairing dogs with the officers is a good idea.

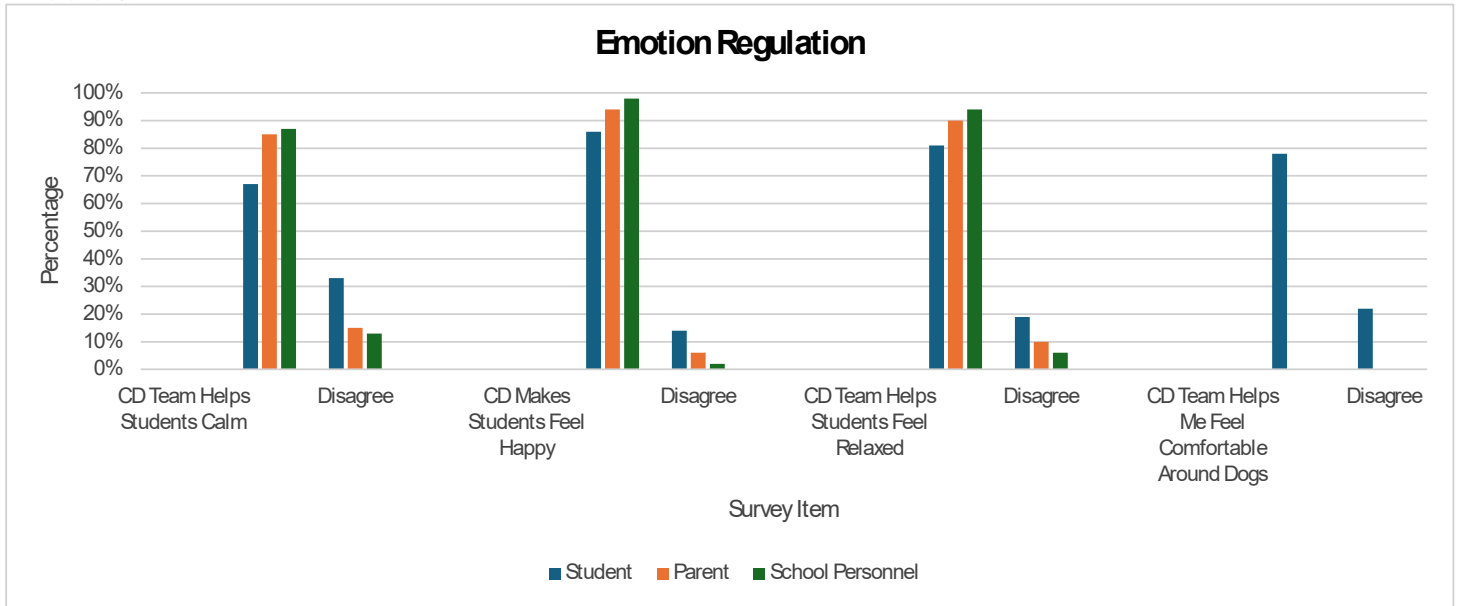
Table 2.



As depicted in Table 2, over 85% of students, parents, and school personnel agreed that the PCCDP improves school climate. Specifically, regression testing indicates that the CDTs make students feel safe in school by creating a welcoming environment and bringing people together.

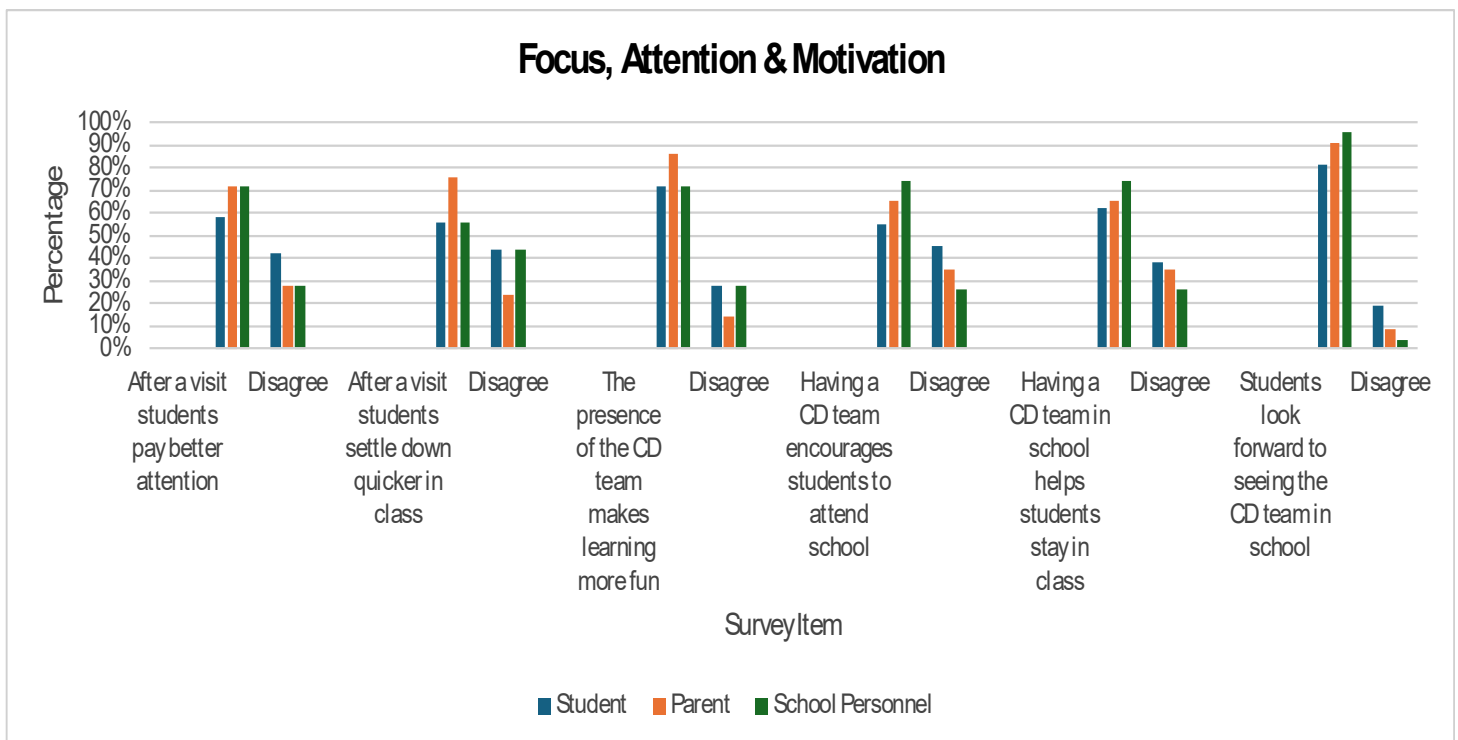
RESULTS OF THE SCHOOL SURVEY

Table 3.



As depicted in table 3, students, parents, and school personnel agreed that the CDTs helped students calm when upset. Regression testing indicates that the CDTs ability to help students feel relaxed was central to the team's ability to help students calm.

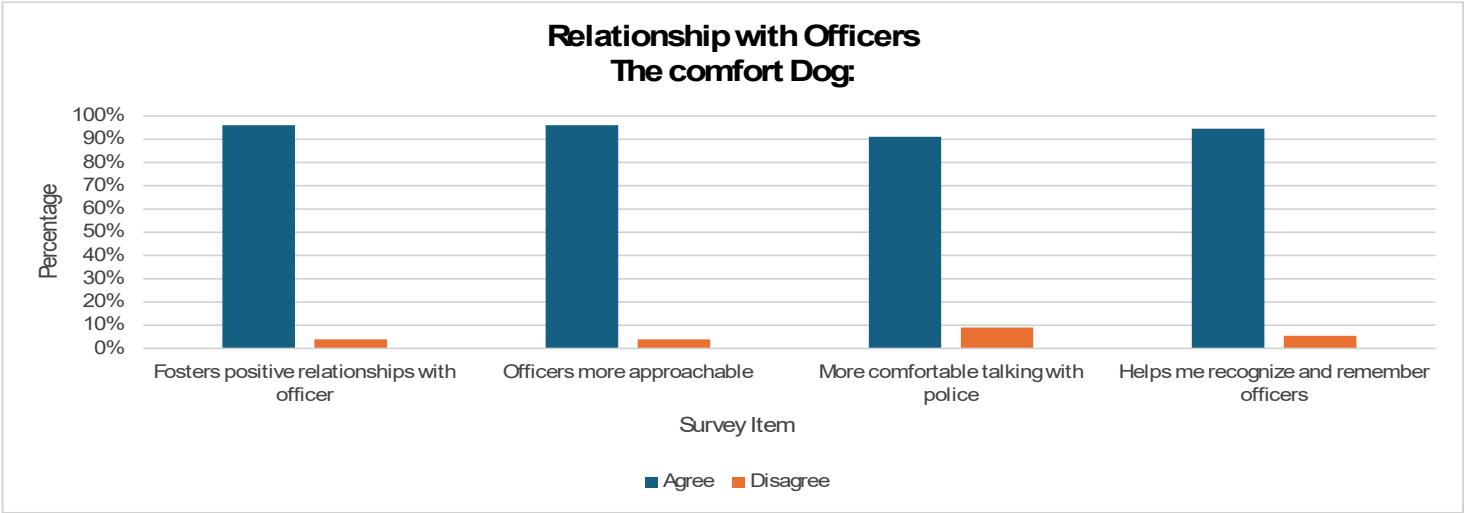
Table 4.



As depicted in table 4, students, parents, and school personnel agreed that after a visit by the CDTs, students paid better attention. Regression testing indicates that key factors to this were the team's ability to help the class settle down and to make learning more fun. In addition, all participants agreed that the CDTs motivate students to attend school and stay in class.

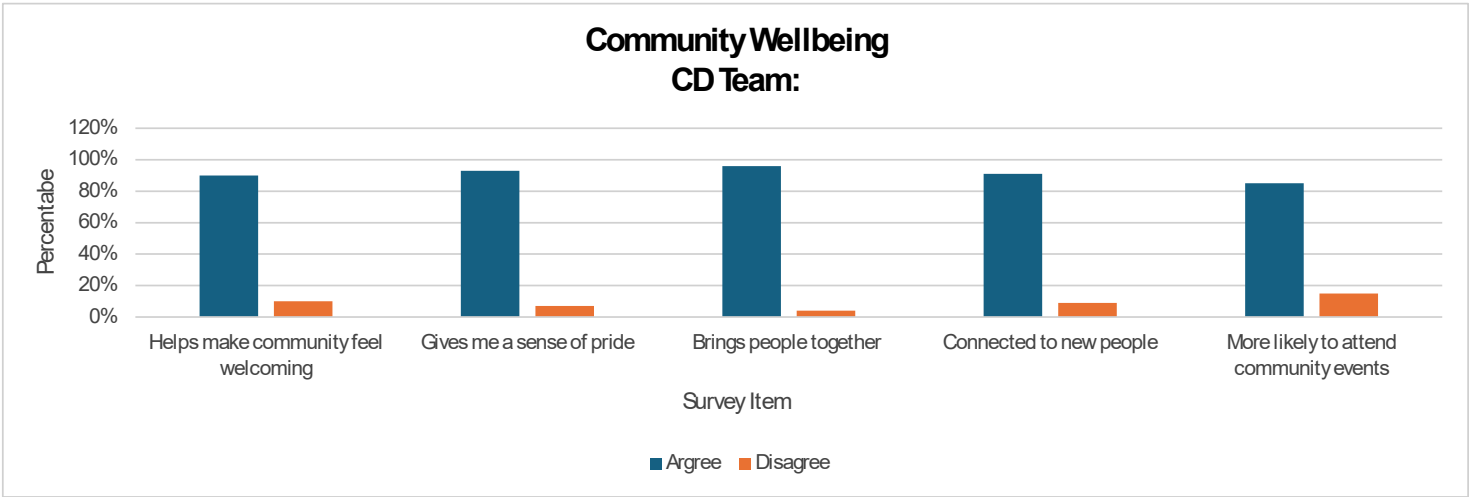
RESULTS OF THE COMMUNITY SURVEY

Table 5.



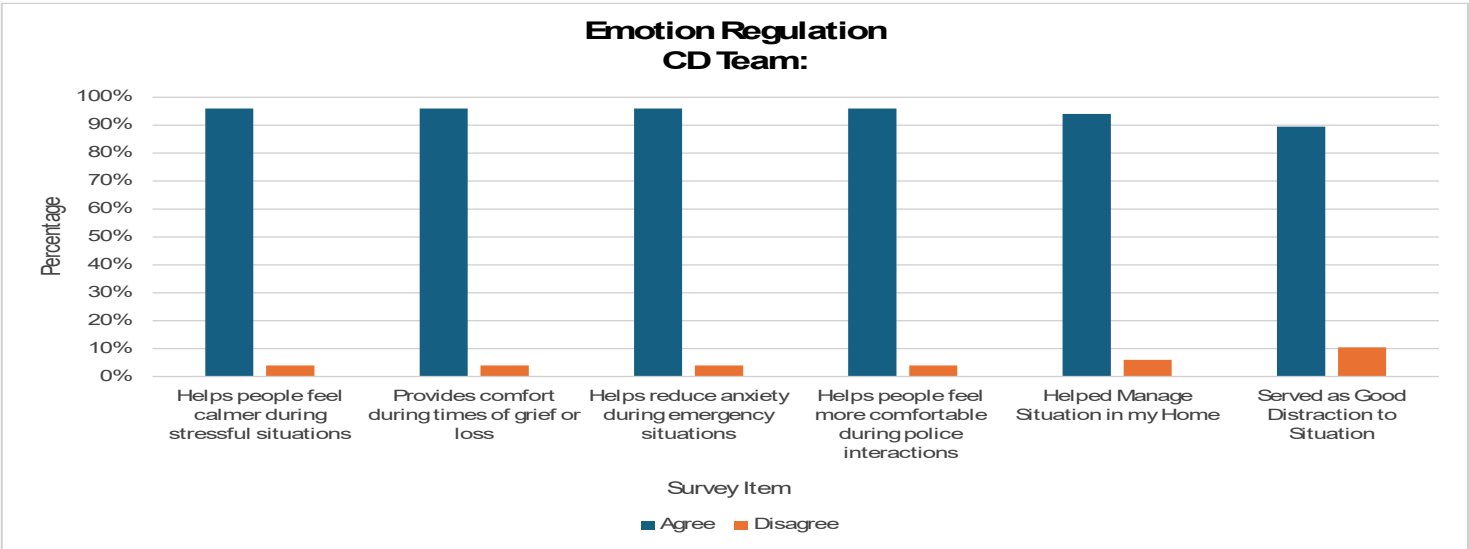
As depicted by the Table 5, over 95% of community members agreed that the CDTs helped foster positive relationships with police where they recognized them and felt comfortable talking to them.

Table 6.



As depicted in Table 6, over 85% of community members agreed that the CDTs make the community more welcoming, brought people together, and fostered community pride.

Table 7.



As depicted in Table 7, over 95% of community members agreed that the CDTs helped people manage emotions during times of stress, police interactions, and emergency situations.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

PARENT AND SCHOOL PERSONNEL FEEDBACK

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OFFICERS

Several participants commented on the perception of feelings of safety being fostered with the CDT, such as “It makes having a police officer at school less scary for the children” (Survey, 2026). This was corroborated by another participant who stated, “to see the officer at school as a safe person, and someone that can be trusted, that’s probably the most important part” (FG1: S1, 2026). Parents and school personnel identified the experience of safety, but also the importance of these relationships. One participant shared:

“I think that really does set a very beautiful and strong foundation for a way that our kids can feel comfortable around all sorts of public resources, whether it’s firemen, whether it’s, you know, EMT, anything. I mean, they feel that security and sense of safety.” (FG2: S3, 2026)



SCHOOL CLIMATE

Numerous participants shared that the PCCDP created a positive environment for students and staff. One survey response said, “It creates a welcoming and supportive environment where kids feel safe and at ease” (Survey, 2026).

Another claimed the school’s culture itself was positively changed by the CDT’s presence. “[Comfort Dog] and Officer [name]’s presence has become an important element in the most positive aspects of [school name]’s culture. The school community would not be the same without them!” (Survey, 2026). While the CDTs created a “warming” space, it can also create a calm one. “[Officer’s] calm and supportive presence with [Comfort Dog] makes the school a gentler and calmer atmosphere for all of the children learning there. We love them!” (Survey, 2026). The school climate has been enhanced in ways that influence learning and provide a calm, safe space for students and personnel to be productive within the school setting.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

EMOTION REGULATION

The CDT supported the school community in regulating their emotion as illustrated below:

“We’ve also had a shelter in place on previous occasions in which there was either a medical situation or a behavioral situation, in which parts of the building had to be closed down. And right after we were released, [Dog] and Officer [Name] were here in order to provide that almost like that exhale, both for staff and students, and you could just see the worries wash away “(FG2: S4, 2026).

The CDT provided emotional regulation not only to the larger school community but also to individual students who are struggling. One parent recalled her daughter’s reflection:

“[Dog] comes in to hug me when I’m really, really angry. When I’m sad, I think of her. When I’m mad, [Dog] comes and helps me calm. She’s the best calm dog down ever. When I have a day, she turns it into a not-bad day, a good day” (FG2: S4 2026).



FOCUS, ATTENTION, AND MOTIVATION

Participants described the importance of the CDT as a way for students to have a break from the pressure of the school environment. “I think for a 10-year-old to just be a 10-year-old for a second, have that decompression, and to then be able to go back and refocus on schoolwork and the things she needs to do” (FG2: S2, 2026).

Focus and attention may depend on the more prominent themes of emotional regulation and school climate, which provide a space where students can focus. For example, one participant claimed that the presence of the CDT provided a safe environment in which, “For some students, this makes a significant difference in their ability to get through the school day and succeed both academically and emotionally” (Survey, 2026).

In addition, the CDT became a positive part of the school experience. One parent described, “My child enjoys seeing the team every morning when she gets off the bus. It is part of her morning routine to say hi” (Survey, 2026). The CDT has become not only part of the school’s community, but a reason for children to feel motivated to come to school. For example, the CDT is also used by some parents as an incentive for their children to attend school, “... like [Dog] wants to see you, it would be great for him to see you this morning” (FG3: S1 2026). In addition to motivating them to attend school, one parent mentioned the positive influence the PCCDP has on the transition between schools, claiming the CDT “helped with transition into Kindergarten” (Survey, 2026).



IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OFFICERS

Results indicated that the PCCDP influenced the development of positive relationships between youth, community members, and police officers and that the dog was central to this success. The relationships being cultivated are crucial to feelings of safety with officers as a “safe person” but also shift perceptions of officers, and SROs in particular, from disciplinary figures to accessible resources for students and community members. 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. Likewise, community members report a shift toward viewing officers as approachable and having positive relationships with officers. Through their work, PCCDP challenges the negative associations some people have with law enforcement and shifts the narrative in a positive direction.

SCHOOL & COMMUNITY CLIMATE

Another protective factor supported by the PCCDP is their positive influence on school and community climates. In schools, the sense of safety and belonging expressed by students is central to a trauma-informed approach, as it creates a safe 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 sense of community pride expressed by community members supports youth because when individuals feel more emotionally connected to those around them, they tend to engage in behaviors that elicit approval and further foster strong relationships (Hirschi, 2017). Using CDTs to create a safe, welcoming environment that fosters relationships is an innovative community policing tool that can positively influence youth development (Brelsford et al., 2017; Dietz et al., 2012; Webster, 2022).

EMOTION REGULATION

Results demonstrated the CDTs' ability to enhance student and community member emotion regulation skills. Students and community members agreed that interaction with the officer-comfort dog teams helped individuals de-escalate quickly, remain calm, improve their mood, and manage emergency situations. Prior research indicates that the addition of a dog during an intervention supports effective coping by calming the nervous system, eliciting positive emotions, and connecting youth with 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 one's 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 true 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

COORDINATE SERVICE DELIVERY WITH SCHOOLS

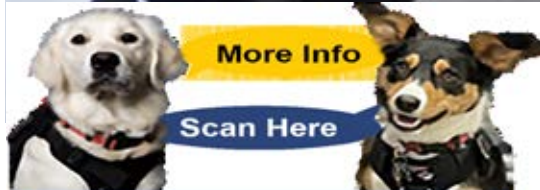
SHOWCASE RESULTS ACROSS THE COUNTY

EXPAND SAMPLE TO 10 SCHOOL DISTRICTS

CONTINUED DATA COLLECTION AND EVALUATION



THANK YOU!



*References available upon request

<https://plymouthda.com/the-plymouth-county-comfort-dog-program/>

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