

i will treat animals with
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Teach *the Children Well*

In the age of hyper-standardized testing and mandated curricula, you can get your foot in the schoolhouse door by showing teachers and administrators how your goals coincide with theirs

BY HEIDI O'BRIEN

Ever tell a teacher you want to talk with her students about the importance of pet identification and get a blank stare in response? If educators were as invested in helping animals as you are, they'd be teaching TNR and S/N along with the ABCs. But don't let an initial lack of interest in humane education discourage you. By learning the needs of the modern classroom, you can still make the grade with school officials who don't necessarily view animal welfare issues as essential subject matter.

It will be well worth the effort. By working with schools, you can reach most of the children in your area, cultivating future responsible pet owners and supporters. Here's a how-to on creating A+ partnerships with local educators.

Study Hall: Learn Your State's Standards

You may have heard the acronyms: If you live in Maryland, it's the MSA. In Texas, it's TAKS. In Michigan, it's the MEAP.

But what do they all mean? And why should you care?

Given all the focus on rigid curricula that prepare students for specific tests, it might seem impossible to introduce humane lessons to the classroom. But you can do double duty by creating plans that also meet the needs of teachers.

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Share and Tell: Find Common Ground

Schools will be more receptive if you keep state standards in mind when creating humane education programs. Here's one example of an education standard that begs for a humane twist:

Texas Science Standards, Kindergarten:

Science concepts. The student knows that living organisms have basic needs. The student is expected to:

- identify basic needs of living organisms;
- give examples of how living organisms depend on each other

Relevant Humane Message:

Companion animals need food, water, shelter, and responsible care.

Lesson Plan:

Teach kids this message—and get them singing and moving—with “Love, Love, Love Your Dog,” a song set to the melody of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” that spells out a dog’s basic needs. Find a step-by-step lesson plan and reproducible song handout in *Critters with Character Lesson Plans, Grades K-2* from Humane Society: Youth. (See “Resources” on page 35.)

Since President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, schools around the country have undergone a major shift in the way they do business. Children in third through eighth grade must now be evaluated with federal reading and math tests bearing names like the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. Under the law, administrators must show “adequate yearly progress” in moving students toward proficiency in major subjects. The result is more pressure on teachers and principals and less time for subject matter not aligned with government-mandated standards.

Because the law imposes serious penalties for failure to meet these benchmarks of academic achievement—including loss of funding and school closure—adherence to standards is now driving public education more than ever as teachers prepare students to pass tests.

Given all the focus on rigid curricula that prepare students for specific tests, it might seem impossible to introduce humane lessons to the classroom. But you can do double duty by creating plans that also meet the needs of teachers. Start by reading up on the standards for your area’s schools; a wealth of background information is available at the websites of schools, school districts, and state education departments. Then use those standards to create lessons or activities that impart one of your messages. (See “Share and Tell” for an example.)

Since national standards form the basis of state standards and are usually similar, consider using ready-made materials produced by national groups like Humane Society: Youth; many are already aligned with federal standards.

Teacher’s Pet: Make Their Priorities Yours

After you’ve done your homework on state standards, it’s time to meet the parents—and the teachers. Most parent-teacher associations welcome the participation of local organizations, so show up and ask questions: What are their needs? Can humane education help meet those needs? What areas are targeted for improvement? Consider making preliminary contact with principals and administrators to find out how your organization might be able to help.

When framing your programs as beneficial to schools, you might approach teachers and school officials by saying, “I’d like to speak with you about how our humane education program can help you meet your science education standards.” Always be willing to compromise. Since you can’t assume educators will care about your priorities, you need to show them you care about theirs. Impress teachers

by demonstrating a mutual need and addressing the following overlapping priorities:

Teaching kindness and responsibility. With “character education” mandated in 14 states and encouraged in 15 others, it’s hard to find a school not teaching virtues such as respect, kindness, and responsibility. In the latest survey of teachers who use Humane Society: Youth’s *KIND News* classroom newspaper, 93 percent reported character education as part of their schools’ curriculum. That’s good news for animal people: Of all the topics covered by teachers today, character education is the best fit for humane lessons.

The language in Connecticut’s “Aspects of Character” standard for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade demonstrates the point: “Students will ... assume responsibility for their behavior, think before they act, consider the possible consequences on all people affected by their actions, and assume responsibility for those actions.” To incorporate a humane message into this standard in an interactive way, one Humane Society: Youth lesson plan for third- and fourth-graders calls for having students race to find homes for their kittens and puppies. At the end of the game, the class realizes there aren’t enough homes for every animal in need. Titled “Househunters,” the step-by-step exercise is outlined in *Critters with Character Lesson Plans* (see “Resources” on page 35.).

Preventing dog bites and promoting respect. If you’re an animal care and control professional or volunteer, teachers, school nurses, and administrators may look to you for bite prevention education, which addresses a major children’s health issue while also helping to meet state standards. Texas includes the following health education standards for students in kindergarten through second grade:

“*Health behaviors.* The student demonstrates decision-making skills for making health-promoting decisions. The student is expected to:

- demonstrate how to seek the help of parents/guardians and other trusted adults in making decisions and solving problems.

Personal/interpersonal skills. The student comprehends the skills necessary for building and maintaining healthy relationships. The student is expected to:

- identify and use refusal skills to avoid unsafe behavior situations and then tell an adult if he/she is threatened.”

The skills described can obviously help kids avoid risky situations with other human beings. But if reading these statements also makes you think of teaching respect for wildlife and avoidance of dangerous interactions with animals, you’re getting the hang of finding the silver lining in education standards.



HUMANE SOCIETY: YOUTH



GETTY IMAGES

Once your program is established, have fun. Humane education is one of the most upbeat and proactive facets of animal sheltering work. Don't miss opportunities to get students involved. Whether you need to kick-start a new project or want to seek a fresh perspective on an old issue, harness the energy and enthusiasm of young people. And hang the adorable drawings and thank-you notes with pride!

Drumming up good PR. Like you, principals seek publicity for their schools and are tasked with building a strong reputation for their programs; trained in public relations, they look for ways to accentuate the positive. Along with competitive test scores and good student behavior, innovative academic programs and successful community partnerships with organizations like yours top the list of their favorite selling points.

Hands-on school projects that benefit your agency—such as “wish list” collections and awards (think “most humane student/teacher”)—allow a school to shine in the media. You can help publicize a school's achievement by inviting reporters to observe activities or attend an award ceremony, or by issuing joint press releases with the cooperating school.

Encouraging community service. The numbers are clear: School community service programs are here to stay. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 83 percent of high schools, 71 percent of middle schools, and 49 percent of elementary schools were taking part in community service activities in 1999. That same year, 46 percent of high schools, 38 percent of middle schools, and 25 percent of elementary schools participated in “service learning,” the term for community service programs with an academic component.

In a 2004 survey of schools, the Search Institute estimated that 66 percent of all public schools involve

students in community service projects and 28 percent engage students in service learning; the survey also found that high schools are most likely to offer service-based programs.

How can you provide community service opportunities that benefit both the students and your organization? Find schools in your area with service programs, learn how they work, and offer your agency as a resource. You can pitch volunteer jobs that don't necessarily involve direct animal care: Students can raise money (teens can be especially effective in this area), develop public awareness campaigns, work on websites, and write for newsletters, among other duties.

For an extensive list of ideas by subject area, visit the Resource Center at humanesociety.org/youth. There you can also learn about the Mission: Humane program, peruse websites for kids and teens, and read up on step-by-step projects, educational materials, and rewards for students and youth clubs.

School Schedules: Time Your Visits Well

When you present your plan for a humane education program, start with teachers you know or have worked with in the past. You can also contact principals about offering your programs to an entire school. Keep in mind that principals are constantly barraged with special requests from outside groups. Don't give up when trying to set up a phone call or meeting. Avoid notoriously hectic or stressful times such as the beginning of the school day and dismissal time. Just after school lets out for the day is a good time to try reaching school staff.

Develop an outline of what you want to propose, including specific lessons and materials, and be brief. To establish your credibility and help ensure that teachers and administrators will be receptive, make it clear that what you have to offer is aligned with standards.

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Heidi O'Brien is the director of outreach for Humane Society: Youth, formerly the National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE).

Resources

Learn more about these programs and request materials at humanesociety.org/youth:

- **Mission: Humane**—This new program gets kids and teens involved in animal protection and offers step-by-step projects that include rewards, ID cards, action guides, and other resources suitable for youth clubs. Provide the free starter kits to schools with animal clubs, or use one to launch your own youth club.
- **KIND News**—The most widely used humane education resource, this monthly classroom newspaper is aligned with National Education Standards and is used by teachers as a character education tool.
- **Critters with Character**—Ready-made lesson plans aligned with National Education Standards for kindergarten through sixth grade, these books are available through the online catalog.

Want to learn more about concepts and trends in humane education and about partnering with schools? Are you interested in becoming a Certified Humane Education Specialist (CHES)? Find out about current offerings at HumaneSocietyU.org.

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