

**Dogs Help Broward County Pupils Read
*Wags & Tales Program Launched***



A student in the Wags & Tales program reads to a pet therapy dog in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Students at three Broward County Public Schools in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., are learning that dogs not only make good pets, but can also help them improve their reading and language arts skills in a unique program developed by the Humane Society of Broward County and the school system.

The Wags & Tales Program enables children between the ages of 5-12 years old to read a book to a pet therapy dog. The intent of the program is to make reading fun and boost the child's confidence in reading out loud.

According to Marni Bellavia, education partnership coordinator for the Humane Society of Broward County, it can be intimidating for children who are experiencing reading problems to read out loud in the classroom in front of their peers. "Reading to dogs is a very nonjudgmental, non-threatening forum," said Bellavia. "It's very relaxing and the dogs help the kids feel comfortable reading."

Reading specialists at the schools determine which students are going to participate in the Wags & Tales Program, which had its kickoff on October 1.

Six volunteers and their dogs make weekly visits to the three participating schools.

Program officials would like to expand the program to more schools and are

actively recruiting volunteers.

Before participating in the program, dogs and volunteers must attend an orientation and a two-hour pre-requisite pet therapy-training course. The dogs must be one year or older, interested in people, non-aggressive in all situations, well-behaved, adhere to basic commands and be able to maintain a down stay position for long periods of time.

The Broward County school program is an expansion of the Wags & Tales Reading Program developed by the Humane Society of Broward County and the Broward County Libraries, where pet therapy dogs make monthly visits to nine libraries.