Using The Cohort Canine Model to Improve School Safety and Security

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Abstract:

Traditional canine programs in schools rely on expensive, highly trained security or therapy dogs, creating models that are costly and difficult to scale, particularly in the public school sector. This paper proposes the Cohort Canine Model (CCM), an alternative to the prevailing high-cost, law-enforcement-centric approach. We assert that while advanced training is effective, a cost-prohibitive requirement for all schools, a more sustainable model can be achieved by leveraging the natural protective instincts and therapeutic value of domesticated dogs. Our proposal centers on integrating young Pitbull-type dogs as classroom pets in lower grades, who then travel with the student cohort through primary and secondary school. By replacing the handler and training costs with *natural bonding* and *cohort loyalty*, we estimate the annual per-canine cost can be dramatically reduced, allowing for widespread adoption. This model shifts the focus from aggressive deterrence to *pervasive psychological security* and rapport-building within the school community.

Review of Status: The Limitation of Existing Models

Current literature primarily documents two approaches to canine integration in schools: the highly specialized police K-9 model and the certified therapy dog model.

C. Grubb, T. W. Burke, and S. S. Owen's (2015) foundational article, "Using Canines to Address School Violence" [1], highlights the early movement, noting that one organization had placed "over 50 canines in more than 25 organizations" since 2011. While this indicates potential, this figure translates to an insufficient density of approximately two canines per organization, suggesting a fundamental *failure to scale*. Furthermore, Grubb et al. point out a primary barrier to entry: the substantial expense. The authors noted that "The cost of purchasing and training a dog can exceed $50,000 over a 2-year period, not including routine expenses, such as food, shelter, and veterinary checkups" [1].

This high-cost structure stems from a model that prioritizes the highly trained police dog, which, as one School Resource Officer (SRO) noted, presents a significant "legal liability because everyone has to know what to do when the handler releases the dog" [20]. This model relies on aggressive tactics and a single handler, resulting in key weaknesses (the Gomer Model):

1. High Cost: Requires professional training, exceeding $50,000 per dog.

2. Limited Access: Students are often restricted from interacting with the dog, limiting therapeutic value.

3. Liability: The necessity of a trained "attack dog" introduces significant legal risk and complex protocols for deployment.

In 2019, M. W. Cybert's master's thesis, *Bring in the Dogs: Using Canines to Improve School Safety and Security* [4], expanded the debate by proposing a framework that explicitly recognized the *therapeutic* and *de-escalation value* of dogs in conjunction with SROs. Cybert's work shifted the focus from the tactical-military applications toward the psychological benefit, noting that SROs with facility dogs saw a massive spike in student engagement and rapport building [4]. However, Cybert's proposed framework still called for formal training—"Unlike therapy dogs, police dogs are costly and must undergo extensive and ongoing training throughout their careers" (p. 61)—thereby maintaining a financial barrier to mass adoption.

Similarly, Emily Walker's 2019 commentary [2] supported the use of trained dogs to boost school morale and security, but likewise failed to challenge the core assumption that professional training is a prerequisite for security and psychological benefits. The limited deployment of programs like the "Skool Dogs" initiative, which had only three dogs in a single county by 2022 [3], serves as further evidence that high-cost models are inherently unsustainable for the 135,000 schools across the United States.

The Cohort Canine Model (CCM): A Proposal for Universal Security

The Cohort Canine Model (CCM) builds upon Cybert's framework by eliminating the requirement for expensive training, focusing instead on natural bonding, cost-efficiency, and decentralization of the security function.

Rationale for Pitbull-Type Dogs

Existing models primarily suggest breeds known for advanced tracking or apprehension (e.g., Belgian Malinois, German Shepherds). We assert that the ideal candidate for the CCM is the Pitbull-type dog for three critical reasons:

1. Availability and Cost: These dogs are highly represented in animal shelters and rescue organizations, making them a cost-effective choice compared to specialized working breeds. Many suitable dogs can be sourced from the "Dog-Pound."

2. Loyalty and Attachment: When properly socialized, Pitbull-type dogs are known for their profound loyalty and protective instincts towards their primary human group (their cohort).

3. Natural Protection: When deeply bonded, the dog's natural protective response to distress—a mechanism Cybert (2019) noted—is sufficient to deter violence without the high liability of an attack-trained canine.

Model Structure

The CCM organizes dogs into two groups across the primary and secondary education spectrum:

Group	Function	Breed/Type	Location	Cost per Canine (Est.)
Group 1 (Cohort)	Therapeutic, Classroom Security, Bonding	Large (e.g., Pitbull-type)	Classroom (on-leash)	$2,000/year
Group 2 (Alert)	Perimeter Warning, Biological Alarm	Small, highly vocal	Fence-line (off-leash)	$2,000/year

Group 1: Classroom Cohort Dogs

A Cohort Dog is a large-breed dog who begins with a class in Kindergarten and travels with that student group to the next grade level each year. This multi-year exposure fosters an deep emotional bond, allowing the dog to naturally fulfill the therapeutic roles Cybert detailed (e.g., de-escalation during crises, combating loneliness and bullying).

- The dog is kept on a non-retractable leash in the classroom. In an emergency, the dog is not "released" by a handler but is permitted to break its leash through sheer force, leveraging its protective instinct.

- The dog is fed and cared for by the students, reinforcing the bond.

- One single male Pitbull is designated for the Principal's Office, serving a higher-level administrative and community-facing therapeutic role.

- Cost of $2,000 per-canine per-year (an estimate covering food, shelter, and routine veterinary care).

Group 2: Perimeter Alert Dogs

These are small, highly vocal dogs (e.g., terriers) that serve as a crucial first layer of defense.

- They are kept off-leash within the full-sealed perimeter fence-line, which is common in many existing schools.

- Their food is placed near the fence line to encourage patrolling behavior.

- Their purpose is solely to act as a biological alarm—their immediate and persistent barking serves to alert the larger Group 1 dogs and human staff to an external threat. This deployment carries minimal legal liability due to their size and function.

Cost and Scalability

Under the CCM, a school of 20 classrooms could require approximately 20 canines (10 large/cohort, 10 small/alert), totaling an estimated annual cost of $40,000 per school.

- Total Cost Projection: $40,000 per school × 135,000 schools in the U.S. = $5.4 Billion per year.

While substantial, this cost is competitive with existing security expenditures for SROs, metal detectors, and high-tech surveillance systems, while providing a proven therapeutic benefit and a tangible layer of security that trained dog programs have failed to deliver at scale.

Methodology and Risk Mitigation

The successful implementation of the Cohort Canine Model requires a commitment to community partnership to mitigate key risks, particularly concerning cost and liability.

Cost Reduction Factors:

The $2,000 per-canine cost can be further reduced through community sourcing:

- Home Stay Program: Students and teachers are encouraged to volunteer to take dogs home after school and on weekends, significantly reducing school-incurred shelter and supervision costs.

- Owned Dog Integration: Students and teachers with suitable, well-socialized dogs are encouraged to bring them to school, provided they integrate successfully with the in-school canines.

- Overnight Guarding: Dogs not adopted for home-stay can be equipped with secure, small dog-doors in each classroom and guard the school at night.

Addressing Liability Concerns:

The primary criticism of any school dog program is liability. While the CCM eliminates the specific risk of a professionally trained attack dog, general risk remains. To professionalize the proposal, a risk mitigation strategy is necessary:

1. Shared Responsibility: Require all participating parents/guardians to sign comprehensive waivers acknowledging the inherent risks of interaction, establishing a framework of *shared liability* between the school and the community.

2. Vaccination Mandate: All dogs, both Cohort and Alert, must have verifiable veterinary records proving up-to-date vaccinations and health screenings.

3. Behavioral Gatekeeping: The school retains the right to refuse or remove any animal that exhibits aggression toward students or staff, regardless of prior bonding. The rule for owned dogs to only attend if they "get along with the in-school-dogs" is a pragmatic gatekeeping measure.

Conclusion

The existing school canine debate is stalled by reliance on a single, financially unsustainable model that prioritizes expense and centralized control (the Gomer Model). By leveraging the existing natural bond between humans and dogs, sourcing readily available breeds (Pitbull-type dogs), and utilizing a decentralized, cohort-based structure, the Cohort Canine Model offers a disruptive and scalable solution. Time and future research are essential factors for determining the value of these programs [1], and the CCM provides a novel, low-cost hypothesis for that necessary research, enabling all 135,000 US schools to afford a comprehensive and compassionate layer of security.

References

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