

The new pup in class

Service dog gets chance at school

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Students at Horizon High School got a new classmate this week, but no matter how cute she is, there is no petting the pup in the purple backpack. She's on duty.

Meet Elizabeth, an 8-month-old yellow Labrador retriever being trained as a service dog by certified puppy-raiser Andrea Cohen, a junior at the northeast Phoenix high school.

After months of controversy and national attention, Principal Anthony Capuano reversed his decision to ban the service dog in training from the high school. Capuano allowed Elizabeth to attend classes with Cohen on a two-week trial basis. Elizabeth started attending classes Thursday. During morning announcements Capuano told students to ignore the dog. However some students did try to pet her.

"It didn't occur to them that they're not supposed to," Cohen said. "It didn't connect that she's service dog in training and she's working."

Capuano said he still had concerns for the health and safety of students. "If they can prove me wrong, more power to them," he said.

Cohen, 17, decided to volunteer for the Scottsdale-based non-profit Power Paws Assistance Dogs last fall. She needs at least eight hours of community service for her membership to National Honor Society but she is doing much more. Her commitment to raise Elizabeth is for 18 months.

Cohen wrote a letter to Capuano in October asking for permission to take Elizabeth to school. Capuano denied the request without meeting the teen or the dog.

In a letter, he cited allergies, hygiene, safety and "distraction to the educational process," as reasons to ban the dog from the campus at 5601 E. Greenway Road.

Cohen's grandfather, Marvin Cohen, a lawyer, got involved and for the past few months they've appealed to Capuano and the Paradise Valley Unified School District governing board to allow the dog on campus.

"I don't want to inconvenience anyone, I want to give Elizabeth the best training experience," said Cohen, who plans to study veterinary science in college. "I'm teaching students and teachers how to deal with a service dog, how to expect service dogs to act."

Service dogs assist physically disabled people by retrieving out-of-reach objects, pulling wheelchairs, opening doors, turning on light switches and many other tasks.

Robyn Abels, co-founder of Power Paws, said there are numerous service dogs in training attending classes with students and teachers at several schools across state. Abels believes the dogs should be allowed in school because once they graduate training not only does federal law guarantee the dog's right to attend school, but the dog may be given to a disabled student.

"We place a good portion of our dogs with children," Abels said. "The likelihood of Elizabeth going to a school is high."

Abels believes Elizabeth to be a calm and mature dog and Cohen to be an exceptional trainer. "I have complete faith in both of them," she said.

Cohen attends several training classes a month with Elizabeth. She will teach the dog 90 different commands, including how to get a credit card off a counter and press elevator buttons. The pooch has already mastered pulling a rope attached to the refrigerator door handle.

Elizabeth goes everywhere with Cohen, including grocery stores, movie theaters, restaurants and to Hebrew classes at the Ina Levine Jewish Community Campus in Scottsdale. She's visited Disneyland in California three times and traveled to Walt Disney World in Florida.

"She even rode the Ferris wheel at California Adventure," Cohen said.

In reconsidering his decision, Capuano sent 1,200 letters about Elizabeth to parents. He got 16 replies, eight in support and eight with concerns, mostly about allergies and the dog being a distraction. The Cohens mitigated the issues and everyone agreed on a two-week trial.

"If any issues arise we'll come back and address them, if not we'll continue on," Capuano said. "I don't anticipate anything happening."

Cohen encourages anyone who has concerns to talk to her. She plans to take the least congested routes between classes and will alter her routine if anyone is allergic to, or fears dogs. Cohen also offered to move her desk in class if anyone is concerned about the dog lying at her feet.