

Pets in Local Classrooms Teaching Many Kinds of Lessons

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Erin Eberhart says a little guinea pig named Gertie has taught her kindergarten students at Sulpher Springs Elementary in Jonesborough to take an interest in something other than themselves.

Last year, through the Pet Care Trust, Eberhart received a Pets in the Classroom grant, which helped her fund the purchase of Gertie.

“I have a classroom blog where I blog about my experiences in the classroom. I follow several other bloggers, too, and some of them had advertised about this grant opportunity. They all talked really positively about their experiences with their own pets and I thought, ‘I have to do this!’ It just sounded so cool,” Eberhart said.

“I went to this particular website and applied and filled out why I wanted a pet and what I was going to do with a pet in the classroom and how it would benefit my classroom. I heard back from them within a matter of days, saying I had been awarded the grant. They sent me some coupons and vouchers to buy all the things you need to get a pet.”

Eberhart said there were several pets from which you could choose, including a rabbit, fish, lizard or guinea pig.

“I had kind of done some research and thought a guinea pig would be good for my class. I teach kindergarten and the kids are younger. I just wanted something that would be easy to maintain and something good for them to get out, hold and play with,” she said. “When I first introduced Gertie to my students, that was all they could talk about for weeks. They were so excited.”

Gertie has been a part of Eberhart’s classroom for a little more than a year now and what Gertie’s presence has brought to not just Eberhart’s own students, but to students in other classrooms as well, is obvious, Eberhart says.

“Gertie has gotten to be quite popular at my school. Students I have never even had in my class before, stop by in the mornings and ask to see her. She dresses up for each holiday. She has lots of hats. She’s very social and squeaks. She talks to the students. She’s become like a little celebrity at our school. She gets out during ‘center time,’ and I’ll let her sit in the students’ laps or put her on the table and they’ll play with her and help me feed her,” Eberhart said.

Eberhart has made charts that she calls anchor charts that show the students what they can feed Gertie.

“They know if they want to give Gertie something, it has to be a picture that’s on the chart,” Eberhart said. “Everyday somebody brings her something from the cafeteria — salad, vegetables. She gets lots of treats from the cafeteria. She is so loved.”

Gertie is incorporated into lots of other classroom activities, too.

“We talk about responsibility, what you need to do to care for her. We even write about her. Today, we did a ‘thankful for’ writing prompt. My students had to write about something they were thankful for, and three students wrote that they were thankful for Gertie. Because some of them don’t have pets at home, they’ve learned a lot from Gertie. I really think it forces them to have some responsibility and think about others. It teaches them the importance of caring for something besides themselves. My students may only be 5, but they get it. They really do,”

Eberhart said.

Even though sometimes it's a challenge to stay on top of Gertie's needs while still taking care of her students, Eberhart says it's never overwhelming because she has lots of willing helpers.

"My students fill up her water bottle and help me with whatever needs to be done. Gertie is an extra little something to take care of, and that can be a little challenging at times, but it's very rewarding, too," she said.

Eberhart's students aren't the only students in our area getting to experience a classroom pet. Trish Jones' second-grade class at Kingsport's John Adams Elementary actually has two pets — a pair of African dwarf frogs.

Just before Christmas break last year, one of Jones' students surprised her with the frogs.

"At the beginning of the year, early fall last year, we wanted to do a life cycle science project. I had ordered some tadpoles from an online company, and they sent me one little tadpole. I think the tadpole would have been an African dwarf frog if it had gone through its life cycle. But my little tadpole never did turn into a frog. He was the oldest living tadpole ever," Jones said, laughing. "We got him in September and he finally passed away in January. One student was concerned because this little tadpole seemed like it was never going to turn into a frog. Then he surprised me on our last day before Christmas break with these two African dwarf frogs."

And now, almost one year later, Chippy and Willie, are a big part of Jones' classroom.

"We do not do a lesson around the frogs exactly. But when we do talk about life cycles, we talk about the African dwarf frogs. We just finished up a science unit on life cycles. We looked at pumpkin seeds, insects, and fish and, of course, the children are curious about the frogs. We talked about the kind of animal a frog might be. These little frogs are so very unusual because they live in water all the time. They do come up for air occasionally. You'll see them swim up to the surface to get a gulp of air and then they go right back down. They have been a part of our classroom from day one," Jones said.

Jones says Chippy and Willie's dynamic little personalities more than make up for the students not being able to hold or touch the frogs.

"They are hilarious and so much fun. They have all kinds of personality. They can get aggressive with one another, and they'll fuss sometimes when I feed them. One will grab hold of the other one's leg. Fortunately, they don't have teeth so there's no harm done," she said. "When they get frightened, or they get upset, they'll hold each other. It is the wildest thing to see. [Their aquarium] sits on top of a little book shelf that is about waist high, right where the children can look at them, almost eye-level, depending on the size of the student. The children come in and say good morning to them and we kind of watch them throughout the day. They're funny and they're calming," she said.

But the greatest benefit to having Chippy and Willie, Jones says, is having another living creature to care for in the classroom.

"The students have learned Chippy and Willie have their own environment. They have their own needs. The children are very much aware of what they have to do to keep Willie and Chippy safe and healthy. They know they can't tap on their aquarium. They're very careful about walking around the bookshelf. There's a lot of awareness of the life skills that need to be in place when you have a pet. They are our responsibility," she said.