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ECLC 'Learning is Unleashed' Program Wins State Award for Innovation
Service dog helps special needs students succeed

HO-HO-KUS, NJ – Like many youngsters, Gaby Navarro, 8, of Riverdale wasn't exactly excited about getting ready for school in the morning. But her attitude changed when she started at ECLC of New Jersey's special-needs school in Ho-Ho-Kus last year. "I used to have trouble getting her out of bed. It was hard, now it's easy," said her mom, Marie. "She runs to the van in the morning and comes off in the afternoon with a big smile on her face. I have never seen her so happy in my life."

Part of Gaby's newfound enthusiasm is thanks to Patrina, the only fulltime, service dog "working" at a school in New Jersey. Patrina is part of many students' prescribed physical or occupational therapy, and love for their furry friend has led to sustained progress. "Patrina is able to make a connection and breakthrough with some of our students who did not respond to other therapies," said school Principal Vicki Lindorff. "She lifts their spirits and helps motivate them to succeed."

ECLC also partners with "Paws for Autism" in bringing a group of specially trained dogs into the classroom for weekly sessions to help students build confidence, improve social and communication skills and reduce behavior problems.

This successful use of canine educators is among 12 programs named as the 2010 Innovations in Special Education winners across the state. The programs were honored at a ceremony in Trenton in conjunction with Special Education Week (May 16-22) by the New Jersey School Boards Association and ASAH, a non-profit organization of private schools and agencies serving students with disabilities.

In Gaby's class, the children read to Patrina and cuddle with her; other students work with Patrina during their physical therapy, train her through an agility course or simply spend time relaxing and petting her. It's all in a day's work for Patrina and her trainer, Cheryl Avino, an instructional aide who obtained the Golden Labrador/Retriever cross from Canine Companions for Independence.

Nora Carezza of Oradell, whose autistic son, John, 20, also has a strong bond with Patrino, put it this way: "Patrino doesn't ask questions. It's simply unconditional love."

About ECLC

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, ECLC has grown from a small, early-intervention program into a comprehensive network of non-profit agencies serving special-needs children and adults throughout central and northern New Jersey. ECLC educates more than 100 students in Ho-Ho-Kus and 220 at a sister school in Chatham. For its graduates and other disabled adult clients, ECLC provides job placements and transition services after high school through Community Personnel Services, Inc., and vocational skills and independent living skills training in its P.R.I.D.E. adult day and evening programs.