

# Animals in K-12 Schools: Template to Create a Health and Safety Plan

This template outlines recommendations to support the development of school policies and health and safety plans regarding animals in classrooms and on school grounds.

This guidance does **not** apply to service animals, which are defined under [RCW 49.60.040](#).

## Teacher plan for animals in classrooms

Prior to bringing an animal to school, the teacher responsible for the animal must develop a written plan. The plan must be reviewed and approved by the principal or head of the school.

The teacher's written plan must address the items below:

### **Educational value and how long the animal will be kept**

- Explain how the animal is appropriate for the classroom.
- Explain the educational value of the animal.
- Define how long the animal will stay in the classroom.
- If the animal will move locations, identify when they're moving and for how long.

### **Animal care**

- Procedures for daily care including food, water, cleaning, daily maintenance, and removal and disposal of waste.
- Care for the animal when the teacher is not present and on weekends, holidays, and school closure.
- Proper treatment and handling of the animal. Consider if the animal should be kept away from windows, air ducts, carpets, or upholstered furniture.
- Proper cleaning of the animal and the animal's area.
- Where the animal's food and necessary supplies are stored.
- Instructions on housekeeping and proper cleaning near the animal. For example, some surfaces must be cleaned more frequently to control dust.

### **Safety precautions**

- Describe actions taken to prevent injury or illness to anyone handling the animal.
- Describe student supervision when handling the animal.
- Remind students not to feed animals directly from their hands.

### **Handwashing guidance**

- Provide a handwashing sign to remind students and staff when and how to wash their hands.
- Detail proper handwashing steps for students and staff that handle the animal or

the animal's food, water, or equipment. Include reminders to wash hands:

- Immediately after feeding the animal or handling its food, water, or equipment.
- Immediately after handling the animal's habitat or bedding material.
- Immediately after removing animal waste.
- Prior to leaving a classroom that contains an animal.
- Prior to consuming food or drink. Do not eat or drink in a classroom with an animal.

### **Student health concerns**

- Develop a procedure in the event of injury or illness to anyone handling or exposed to the animal.
- Develop a process to monitor and report allergies and health concerns related to the animal, including:
  - School walkthrough inspections.
  - Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) concern reports.
  - Staff meetings.
  - Parent and guardian notification.

### **Care for sick animals**

- Observe the animal daily for signs of illness.
- Identify potential signs of illness for the animal.
- Specify a veterinarian, including contact information.
- Determine how the animal will be transported for care.
- Develop a process to prevent students from coming into contact with the sick animal.

### **Exit plan**

- Designate who will care for the animal if it is removed from the school. Only adults may care for the animal outside the classroom.
- Develop care instructions for the animal if it is removed from the school.
- Determine how the animal will be moved in case of emergency.

## **Animals appropriate for the classroom**

Some animals can be suitable for the classroom if they are housed and cared for in a manner that ensures student safety and animal welfare. All animals must be approved by the principal. Appropriate classroom animals include:

- Reptiles and amphibians such as turtles, lizards, snakes, and frogs.
- Fish, including freshwater or saltwater species. Keep fish in secure aquariums safe from any unwanted access. Place them in a sturdy location in compliance with all safety and electrical codes.
- Small mammals such as guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, or rats.

Additional considerations may apply based on local health jurisdiction regulations, student health needs, and educational relevance.

The following animals should **not** be allowed in classrooms:

- Inherently dangerous wild animals such as cougars, wolves, or bears.
- Mammals with higher risk for transmitting rabies such as bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, and coyotes.
- Animals with aggressive or unpredictable behavior.
- Stray dogs or cats.
- Animals with unknown health and vaccination history.
- Venomous or toxin-producing spiders, insects, reptiles, or amphibians.
- Birds, especially those associated with psittacosis, such as parrots, parakeets, and cockatiels. Psittacosis can be transmitted to people.
- Rabbits because they are easily stressed and do not like to be handled.

## Animal safety precautions

- Ensure good handwashing practices.
  - Reptiles and amphibians such as turtles, lizards, snakes, and frogs, may be a source of Salmonella bacteria. The bacteria can spread from the animal to surfaces of the animal's enclosure, other surfaces, and to people's hands. Salmonella bacteria on a person's hands can cause illness and spread to other people and surfaces.
- Only allow reptiles that were bred in captivity. Reptiles can live for several years. Understand their behavior patterns and care prior to getting a classroom reptile.
- Clean fish aquariums correctly. Do not dispose of used tank water in sinks used for food preparation or drinking water. Wear disposable gloves when cleaning aquariums.
- Handle small animals such as guinea pigs, hamsters, mice, and rats, with leather gloves whenever possible.

## Animal contact and handwashing practices

- Always wash hands with soap and warm water immediately after handling an animal, or its food, waste, or habitat.
- Avoid touching your face while handling an animal.
- Provide ongoing education to emphasize proper hygiene and hand washing.
- Supervise children who handle animals, their food, or their habitat when washing their hands. Make sure they wash immediately using soap and warm water.
- Wash hands after removing gloves used to handle animals.

## Care and handling of an animal and supplies

- Ensure animals are fed the right amount of appropriate food on a regular basis.
- Always have fresh water available.
- Follow all appropriate safety precautions when using lights or heat lamps near animal habitat and bedding material.
- Do not expose animals to extreme temperatures, such as heat radiating through sunny windows.
- Ensure animal rooms are comfortable and ventilated over weekends and holidays.
- Coordinate and supervise student contact with animals.
- Store animal food and bedding in appropriate, sealable containers to avoid attracting pests.
- Do not put animals or their supplies near the following:
  - Handwashing sinks.
  - Anywhere human food is prepared, stored, or served.
  - Anywhere food dishes or utensils are stored or cleaned.

## Cleaning and sanitizing

Routinely clean all surfaces the animal touches within its habitat. Clean and sanitize all surfaces it touches if it is placed outside its habitat.

## Food consumption

Do not consume food in a room containing an animal. If you're eating in a room that has recently contained an animal, properly clean and sanitize tables, desks, or surfaces prior to consuming food. Follow all handwashing recommendations, especially when eating.

## Allergies and health concerns

Notify the principal if a student or staff member has an incident with a classroom animal. This may include allergic symptoms, injury, or other concerns. The principal will contact the parent, guardian, or care provider.

- Address student and staff health issues, like allergies and asthma, before allowing an animal to be in the school.
- Provide written notification to parents before allowing an animal in a classroom. Do this yearly, and when a new student enrolls. Ask parents to notify the teacher or principal if their student is allergic to the animal. If a student is allergic, the principal will determine available options. This may include removing the animal from the classroom.

- Accommodate students and staff with allergies or animal sensitivities. The location of the animal, its cleanliness, and any indoor air quality concerns must be addressed.
- After an animal is brought into the classroom, if a parent or care provider finds their student is allergic to the animal, the school will work with the parent, care provider, and teacher to quickly resolve the issue.
- Immunocompromised students may be especially susceptible to zoonotic diseases. Take extra precautions to minimize the risk of disease transmission to these students. Consult with the child's parents about precautionary measures.

## School visitors with animals

Communicate the following expectations to all school visitors, including parents and guardians, to ensure student safety and compliance with school policy:

- Animals are **not** permitted on school or district property during school hours unless explicitly approved by the principal. Remind visitors to keep animals off school property when students are present, including during arrival and dismissal.
  - Define school hours, and if that time includes when students arrive, depart, participate in school-sponsored activities, events, or field trips.
  - Clarify the school's policy as it applies to indoor and outdoor spaces.
- If visitors bring animals in their vehicles, advise them to prevent student contact by not opening doors or windows. Park vehicles with animals inside away from students.
- School policy or local ordinances may prohibit animals—except service animals—from being on school grounds outside of regular school hours. Confirm whether this applies in your jurisdiction.
- Jurisdictions vary on resources and requirements to help with stray animals. Know your local laws and resources. Some jurisdictions have animal control ordinances and compliance officers. Rural locations may rely on law enforcement agencies to respond.
  - Attempting to capture stray animals is not recommended. It may lead to bites, injuries, or disease transmission. Contact [Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife](#) for wild animal issues.

## Animal venue operators

If the school provides a setting that encourages animals to be handled by students or the public, such as a petting zoo or other animal exhibition, it may need to meet the rules for an animal venue operator. See [WAC 246-100-192](#), Animals in Public Settings—Measures to Prevent Human Disease, and [DOH Animal Venue Operator Requirements](#).

# Resources

Washington K-12 Health and Safety Guide: [WA K-12 Health and Safety Guide](#), Appendix E  
Animals in Schools

Guidelines for Animals in School Buildings: [Appendix D: Guidelines for Animals in School Settings](#)

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