



**ROMEO
COMMUNITY
SCHOOLS**

GOOD NEWS ACROSS 'R' DISTRICT

September 19, 2023



Washington Elementary welcomed Milo the therapy dog this fall.

Meet Milo!

Washington Elementary students had seen Milo around the hallways last year, but little did they know the 1½ year old goldendoodle would become a regular presence at their school beginning this fall. The therapy dog's "big reveal" took place during a school assembly on August 31.

While the idea to bring a therapy dog to Washington received the green light from Principal Dana Hepner and Superintendent Dr. Todd Robinson, considerable research and planning went into navigating the legal, procedural and logistical issues involved to turn the dream into a reality.

The first order of business was determining what breed would be best suited to this role. Before any decisions could be made, however, someone needed to step up to serve as the dog's owner.

“My kids have been begging for a dog for two years,” said second grade teacher Kristi MacDonald. “As a working parent, I knew I didn’t have the time to dedicate to a dog and that he’d be in a crate at home all day.”

The idea she could bring the dog to school with her sealed the deal.

“My children get a dog and he comes to school all day,” Kristi said. “Problem solved.”

Even better, resource room teacher Janet Austin, who views any time she can spend with animals as “a win-win,” offered to serve as the dog’s handler at school. This is the ideal “home” room for Milo, as it is a destination for many students during the school day.



Janet Austin and Milo are a frequent presence in the hallways or making classroom visits.

Not only do Kristi and Janet co-parent Milo, but each passed a series of certification tests so that each are certified handlers, able to accompany Milo at school, as is required. Milo, too, is certified, having passed a series of pre-examinations with the Alliance of Therapy Dogs and successfully completed training classes.

Proceeds from last year’s Autism Awareness Month fundraiser paid for his initial puppy training with A New Leash on Life, and a grant from the Romeo Foundation of Excellence covered more intensive training with Detroit Dog Behavior.

Speech-language pathologist Carrie Littlefield was instrumental in writing grant proposals to obtain the funding to make Milo’s training possible, including a grant awarded by Charlotte's Litter, a national program that advocates for therapy dog programs in educational settings for his final training with Sit Means Sit.

Accompanying the Charlotte's Litter grant was a classroom set of books, including *Good Dogs, Good Listeners*. This book was featured during a StoryWalk at the Washington Family Fun Night on Sept. 8, with Milo greeting students at the beginning of the walk.

Already Washington staff have witnessed the difference Milo has made at school – for adults and children alike. He is a fixture during morning arrival, greeting families and staff and easing the start of school anxiety for all students, especially the Young 5 and kindergarteners and other new students. Even students who were afraid of dogs have overcome their fears due to how gentle and friendly he is, Kristi says – an observation reinforced by many parents during the Fun Night.



Milo was a hit during the Washington Family Fun Night, sponsored by the PTO.

Milo is well suited to Washington's culture as a Caring School Community. He is available to calm students through difficult moments, offer comfort during sadness, and motivate them to keep their behaviors in check. A reward, for example, might be the opportunity to toss his football with him in the courtyard or read a book to him in the classroom.

Milo is not only up to the job, he is ready for it each morning, according to Kristi.

“He gets so excited when he sees me packing my schoolbag,” she said. “He is waiting by that door, ready to come to school.”

Follow Milo on his Instagram page @milo_washingtontherapydog and look for fundraisers to support the day-to-day costs of having a dog at school. Donations of items from [Milo's Amazon wish list](#) are welcome.

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