



Students in Three Lakes interact with one of the district's therapy dogs.

Four-Legged SUPPORT

Wisconsin schools are finding that therapy dogs can help students in a number of ways

As school districts look for new ways to provide support to students and create safe and effective learning environments, some Wisconsin schools are establishing therapy dog programs in their schools. Below are the stories of three school districts — Three Lakes, Shawano and Melrose-Mindoro — that have found success using therapy dogs.

Toby and Gunner

Three Lakes School District

Jennifer West

It's a Friday afternoon, and the junior-high students at Three Lakes School District have a little extra pep in their walk. As they stack books in lockers and grab supplies for the next class, they banter with friends and trade stories. The hallway buzzes with the sounds of conversation and laughter.

And in the middle of the hall, two furry black heads poke through the crowd. Two tails wag methodically. Two noses poke gently at hands reaching out to them.

"Hey, Gunner. Hey, Toby," one junior higher says as he bends down and strokes those soft ears. "How are you?"

The student's eyes light up. His face relaxes. It's the effect Nicole Lewis, junior high special education

teacher at Three Lakes, was hoping for when she first envisioned bringing therapy dogs to the district. After years of research, training and more research, the dogs are now regular fixtures at the school on Fridays, where they provide services for all students and staff.

"The dogs just have an overall calming effect in the classroom atmosphere," Lewis said. "They're here to encourage calming behaviors and help students who have ADHD. It's also proven to help improve attendance, which we've started to see on the Fridays the dogs are here."

Lewis' journey to bring therapy dogs to the school began more than seven years ago. However, at that time, the dog she owned didn't have the right temperament for therapy work. So when the time came to find a new puppy, Lewis began her search with a specific purpose.

"I intentionally picked out puppies that would make good therapy dogs," she said. "It was in the back of my mind when I picked these two up from the Vilas County Humane Society."



"The dogs just have an overall calming effect in the classroom atmosphere."

— Nicole Lewis, junior high special education teacher at Three Lakes



Training started immediately for the sibling Lab-mix pups.

At first, Lewis just focused on traditional obedience skills such as not jumping or begging along with some solid listening skills. But then, two years ago, the training got serious when she enrolled the dogs in a therapy program at Fox Valley Humane Association. There, the dogs learned how to react to balls being thrown, kids running around and other stimuli. They were taught

to only go to a person when told to, not to beg and more. And then, the dogs went through testing to become certified therapy dogs.

“We tested them separately and then together. I knew I wanted them as a team,” Lewis said.

After presenting research on the benefits of therapy dogs, Lewis received support from district administration. She suddenly had the green light to bring the now 4-year-old dogs to school.

“The challenge is proving that the dogs aren’t a distraction and that

this program has benefits,” Lewis said, “We’re still in the infancy stage. I’m still learning, the dogs are still learning, and the school administration is still learning.”

Currently, the dogs stay in Lewis’ room for most of the day. They sprawl out on the floor under a student’s desk or lay down in a corner. Sometimes, they retreat to their kennel, but most of the time they’re quietly keeping students company. When classes change, they head out into the hall to say hello to students. And although the dogs have only

Studies suggest that by **reading aloud to dogs**, students gain confidence, improve their attitudes about reading and can even increase reading scores.



Three Lake students have given positive feedback on the therapy dogs program. Students have said the animals help them feel more welcome and at home and are calming and comforting.

Service and Companion Animals

As noted in these articles, there are several policy implications when bringing service animals into public schools. The WASB's policy publication "The Focus" addressed service animals and companion animals in school in Volume 31 No. 4. This publication can be viewed by subscribers at goo.gl/FM6GJs.

been coming to the school for a couple of months now, Lewis said she's already seeing positive results.

"I have one particular kid who was reluctant to do work, but when the dogs are here, he actually does work as long as a dog is next to him," Lewis said.

Lewis has also seen how the dogs can provide emotional support.

"We had a student who had an emotional breakdown, so (the teaching staff) had her sit with the dogs. It only took 15 to 20 minutes with the dogs to get her back on track instead of all day, so that proved to me it's working," she said.

The next step for the dogs is an introduction to the elementary classes, where Lewis hopes the dogs can help students improve reading skills. Studies suggest that by reading aloud to dogs, students gain confidence, improve their attitudes about reading and can even increase reading scores.

"There's less judgment when you read to a dog," Lewis said.

To introduce the dogs to a new classroom, Lewis started by sending out permission slips to those elementary classes that agreed to participate. She asked parents about allergies and informed them about how the dogs would help. The next step is to visit the rooms with the dogs on leashes and to answer questions from the students, making sure everyone is comfortable. Eventually, the dogs will come into the room off of the leashes and be able to visit students as they wish.

"The dogs almost feel who wants them and who doesn't," Lewis said. "They're just worn out after a day of school, and I know this sounds kind of corny, but it's almost like they put so much energy into the kids that maybe they're emotionally drained by the time we get home."

That gift of emotional energy from Gunner and Toby is what we call unconditional love. And it's improving the learning environment at Three Lakes and for that, the students and staff are truly thankful. □

Jennifer West is the PR/communication coordinator for the Three Lakes School District.

Grace, Scout and Twix

Shawano School District

How can you not be happy when Twix is around?" This was overheard from a student at Brener Elementary School in the Shawano School District. Twix is a therapy dog who spends his days at the school. The therapy dog program is in its second year in Shawano.

Schools in the Shawano School District, like many others across the state and nation, are seeing an increase in the amount of students dealing with trauma and mental health issues. In response, the Shawano School District is focusing on providing support to students and is part of the first cohort of the Wis-

consin Department of Public Instruction initiative for mental health.

The district utilizes PBIS, Conscience Discipline and Trauma Informed Care. In the fall of 2016, staff members, including Kris Going, an instructional coach; Erin Prey, a school psychologist; Curt Preston,



Shawano students with Twix.



an interventionist; and Kathy Moeller, an instructional coach, approached their building principal about the idea of allowing a therapy dog in the school. A small committee was formed. They did research and put together a proposal for the school board and was given the go ahead to move forward.

The next step was to have a dog certified and to pilot a therapy dog at the primary school. The first candidate was a dog named Grace, owned by Curt Preston, a teacher at the district's primary school. The committee knew Grace was well-trained, had participated in 4-H dog shows at the county fair, and had a personality that was a good match for the position. Mr. Preston had Grace certified through a group called Therapy Dogs International.

The second candidate was a dog named Scout, owned by Brian



A student visits with Grace, one of the Shawano School District's therapy dogs.

Morstad, dean of students. During the 2017-18 school year, Scout was added to Hillcrest Primary School. Scout, who is also certified through Therapy Dogs International, does a great job of interacting with students. He spends his days with Mr. Morstad dealing with student behavior.

Grace and Scout have been great additions to the school family. They provide support for students who

are struggling socially and emotionally, and who have experienced trauma. They also help increase student confidence in reading and other academic areas. They are non-judgmental beings who provide a massive amount of support for students who do not always respond well to adult interactions.

The dogs just have a way with kids and are always loving and willing to

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sit for a pet and a snuggle. Grace and Scout also do classroom visits and can be seen greeting students around the school. The students light up when they see the dogs. Grace and Scout provide unconditional love to students; there have been many times they have helped dysregulated students and quickly brought them back to a calm state where they could begin learning again.

Megan Beauprey, a first-grade teacher, recalled how Grace helped one of her students control his emotions.

“I had a student who struggled with anger and regulating his emotions. This led to a refusal to do work at times, which led to stalled/slow academic achievement,” Beauprey said. “The first time he was introduced to Grace it was like she put him under a magic spell. I’m pretty sure it was just love at first sight. Every time he visited her, which was often, he’d come back a totally different boy than when he left. He’d leave the classroom angry, defiant, or crying, and would come back smiling and happy, as if he was walking on air. You could visibly see the tension disappear from this little boy. Grace was able to take away life’s heaviness for my student so that he could be a kid and have fun in school, and actually learn. Grace was this little boy’s actual “saving grace.”

Mr. Morstad added that at the beginning of the school year, the dogs helped ease the transition back to school for some students.

“During the first week of school, both Scout and Grace were being utilized every morning to greet the students as they arrived to school,” Morstad said. “There were lots of tears and crying children who did not want to leave mom’s side. We would bring the dogs over and students would cling to their necks like a soft teddy bear. The dogs were great! They would walk with students to the classes and comfort the tears away with their love and calm demeanor.”

The therapy dogs have also been used to help students transition between buildings. Last spring, meetings were held between teachers at the middle school and an elementary school to help transition students between the buildings. As teachers discussed what worked with students, the therapy dog came up over and over again. The kids were successful reading to the dog and interacting with the dog. At that point, Brener staff knew that getting a therapy dog for Brener School would be of great benefit to the students. The tricky part was ... what dog?

Luckily, the perfect dog for Brener Elementary School was one known to some teachers. His name is Twix and he is a mix of many different breeds including labrador and golden retriever. Twix is owned by an administrator at Shawano High School, Jessie Hanssen. Jessie’s son attends the school so she is able to drop them both off at school in the morning. Twix passed his certification through Therapy Dogs International in August.

Twix is now full time at Brener Elementary School. He has many success stories already. He has helped calm kids down when they became anxious, upset, or



angry. He has been there for kids who miss the bus and are sad. He has helped coax kids out of hiding. The school counselors and dean of students have the availability to bring Twix into a situation with a student where they may need assistance.

Twix spends most of his day in “The Zone.” This is a place where kids can go, regulate their feelings, and get back to learning as soon as possible. Sometimes all it takes is for Twix to walk them back to their classroom and their troubles are forgotten and they are ready to learn. A full-time paraprofessional is in the Zone and helps with Twix.

This fall, all three dogs went to meet the school board and give an update on their progress. The board was impressed and even asked about the possibility of expanding the program. It is wonderful to have so many people supporting a program that helps so many kids.

The Shawano School District continues to monitor the program and the students it affects. One major difference is the amount of time it takes to de-escalate a situation. What may take a human hours to accomplish, can be done with the use of a therapy dog in much less time.

The district has also learned that plans and programs need to be based on each dog’s particular habits, likes, and dislikes. Each dog has his/her own personality. Some love to be read to and some want to be walked around. Every therapy dog situation looks slightly different. The thing they share in common is their love of helping students. And for that reason, “it’s a dog’s life” in the Shawano Schools. □



Harrison and Marley

Melrose-Mindoro School District

Jordan Simonson

Imagine two elementary students sitting in a corner reading to each other. You would usually expect to see them off in their own little worlds paying attention to everything but their books.

Today is different though because Harrison, a golden retriever, is sitting next to them as they read back and forth. Harrison is not judging the children's reading, but instead he is just listening.

According to Jenna Steers, Harrison's owner and a kindergarten teacher at Melrose-Mindoro, this is a common sight when she brings one of her two therapy dogs into the school for a day.

"It has been proven that dogs bring a therapeutic rapport to environments such as classrooms, hospi-

tals, and nursing homes. Just even having a dog present has been proven through research to calm kids, to make kids feel comfortable and to give kids almost a purpose for learning," Steers said.

This is why Steers, with her dogs Marley and Harrison, and Christina Kurschner, with her dog Lambeau, bring their dogs to the Melrose Elementary School on a regular basis.

Community volunteers first brought therapy dogs to the Mindoro Elementary School two to three years ago.

"We realized that for young students, especially those that were reluctant to read, they jumped on it because it was a non-judgmental fixture. The dog is not going to judge," Melrose-Mindoro Elementary School Principal Corey Peterson said.

Steers has seen this in her classroom when students read to Marley or Harrison.

"It is calming for them knowing

that they can just read the story and all the dog is going to do is listen. They are not going to say anything back. They are not going to correct them or comment on the way they are reading," Steers said.

After the introduction of the therapy dogs, teachers saw students reading to dogs like they had never seen them read before.

"We had a lot more engagement with the kids in reading and being willing to read. Whether it was just for the sake of wanting to read to the dog or the fact that they were picking up books they were never able to read before," Peterson said.

Steers has noticed this engagement with reading even happens when a teacher isn't watching.

"If they are off by themselves, at least at the kindergarten level, they are just goofing off — they are not really always reading. When you put a dog there, I could walk away and they would actually be reading.



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“For some of these, kids they just want to **feel like they have a connection** and the dog is giving them a connection.”

— Jenna Steers, kindergarten teacher at Melrose-Mindoro

They wouldn't be fooling around,” Steers said.

■ Reading not the end

Besides advantages while reading, the therapy dogs also help with many other daily life skills students need to learn.

“It builds a lot of different skills for kids in the classroom, not only the reading component, but also understanding taking turns and positive reinforcement, just all of those things coming into play,” Peterson said.

The district is also making sure the dogs are serving those students that are at-risk.

“For some of these kids, they just want to feel like they have a connec-

tion and the dog is giving them a connection,” Peterson said.

Steers has also seen therapy dogs encourage students to make better choices and help students with disabilities.

“The last time I had Marley in here, she actually prevented probably three kids from having major meltdowns,” Steers said. “I think with students that have autism or ADHD or students with other disabilities, just that motion of petting a dog is calming and relaxing.”

The students also look forward to the days therapy dogs come into the classroom, so teachers have been able to use it as an incentive for good behavior from the students.

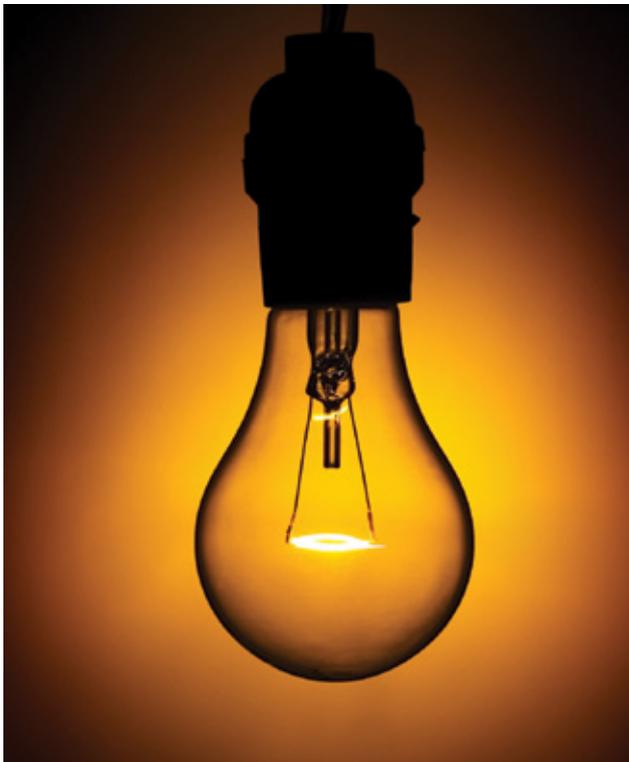
Steers has been careful to make

sure Harrison and Marley don't take the attention of students away from the classroom by implementing a simple rule: work comes first. Students are allowed to pet Harrison and Marley, but then they need to get back to work.

“He will come up to some students and they will give him a pet and then he will go around to another one. So he just roams around and checks everyone out while they do their work,” Steers said. ■

Jordan Simonson is editor of the Jackson County Chronicle.

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