

Golden Standard

Toby was acquired from Wynwood Goldens Golden Retrievers in Michigan as a family companion, we instead acquired a community and local school district member. After the pandemic, students struggled with masks, isolation, social distancing, virtual learning: the school environment became increasingly harder to manage. The middle school administration knew Toby was special, and, after his therapy dog certification, they asked me to try him out with students. In his first days, Toby was able to identify students struggling with anxiety, stress, depression, anger, and illness quicker than the instructors; from students with emotional impairments, to adults with masters degrees, Toby was seeking them out and providing comfort.

Toby's ability to assist in emergency situations was first seen in a restraint situation with a student who was having an emotional breakdown. The student was violently agitated and refused to go to class. Toby walked to the crying and screaming student and put his head in the student's lap. The student instantly relaxed, stood up and walked with Toby: a violent situation was averted.

Since those first days, Toby became an integral part of our mental health team. The district became increasingly aware of the impacts the dog was having with students and created time with students in both preventative and management situations. Toby devotes weekly time for students as his caseload supports our most difficult special needs students. Some of his most successful work is with students in our MOISD Emotionally Impaired room. Toby is part of our school SEL (Social Emotional Learning) program, and participates in our district PBIS, Positive Behavior Support System. These students use a system daily to reflect feelings and "Toby Time" is implemented based on their responses.

Withdrawn students who were struggling to communicate with professionals, sat down with Toby and discussed positives, abuse, and struggles. Soon students were requesting *Time with Toby*. Adults noticed and requested that Toby spend time with both students and adults.

We now have parents call the school and request that their child get *Time with Toby*. Toby Time is now often used as a reward for students who exhibit positive behaviors.

Another example of Toby's impact unfolded when he walked into a classroom and a student considered autistically mute (he only communicates by mimicking what is said) screamed out "Toby" without prompting. The professionals in the room shared surprised, smiling looks. When the student repeated "Toby" the adults teared up; it was the first time the student ever spontaneously communicated his own thoughts.

Toby has created an environment of care that radiates through the district and has provided the basis for our school based therapy dog program that now includes three others at RCMS and two others in the district. Toby is recognized in the entire community; when in the community people ask about Toby, and I hear people say, "That is Toby's person." Toby has impacted the people of this community in deep ways: to quote Mrs. Decker, the middle school counselor, "Toby does priceless, amazing work".