



# Millie the school therapy dog retires after 10 years (or 70 dog years) of service

**Mackenzie Ryan**, mryan@dmreg.com Published 12:18 p.m. CT May 22, 2018 | Updated 6:32 p.m. CT May 22, 2018



(Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

Cowles Montessori students said farewell to a beloved member of their school's staff, a lab who was faithfully there to greet them each morning.

Millie the therapy dog is believed to be [the first dog to work in a school](https://www.dmschools.org/2018/05/therapy-dog-digs-big-hole-cowles/) (https://www.dmschools.org/2018/05/therapy-dog-digs-big-hole-cowles/) in the Des Moines metro.

After 10 years of wagging her tail, offering kisses and serving as a gentle presence for students, Millie is retiring along with her owner, Tracy Lepeltak, who worked in Des Moines for 38 years.

Millie's last day at school was Monday, and she took one last lap around, lavishing the adoring goodbyes of students.

"She's very intuitive about picking up on the signs and signals of the people around her," Lepeltak said. "I've loved working with her."



Millie the therapy dog gets petted on her last day of school at Cowles Montessori after 10 years of serving students. (Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

Millie has a natural knack for offering a calming presence to students, Lepeltak told the Register.

Lepeltak is a counselor and dean of students, and her office was near the preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

If the door was open, Millie would listen for sounds of crying, which isn't unusual at that age.

Then she'd pick up a toy — typically her favorite toy, a knitted stuffed bear that students made her — and bring it to the crying student.

"She just had this innate sense about it," Lepeltak said.

**MORE ONLINE:** [Watch a 2014 video about Millie. \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3EB\\_8c8gBQ&feature=youtu.be\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3EB_8c8gBQ&feature=youtu.be)



**Millie the therapy dog gets petted on her last day of school at Cowles Montessori after 10 years of serving students.** (Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

Lepeltak was amazed at how quickly students bonded with the dog.

The "canine counselor" could turn a frown into a grin or help a student [overcome a fear of school](https://www.dmschools.org/2018/05/therapy-dog-digs-big-hole-cowles/) (<http://www.dmschools.org/2018/05/therapy-dog-digs-big-hole-cowles/>).

Most memorable, though, was when a student's distraught behavior had escalated and Millie helped calm him down, Lepeltak said.

The student was pacing the hallway, and Millie started pacing along with him. Millie walked parallel with the child for a few laps, down and back.

The child moved toward Millie and walked with his hand on her fur. Millie started licking his hand to comfort him.

Soon the student, without adult intervention, stopped pacing.

He sat on the ground and Millie sat next to him. "Okay, I'm ready to talk," the student told school staff.

"If you hadn't been there and watched it, you wouldn't believe me," Lepeltak said. "It's that sense that she has that she wants to comfort and calm people, mostly children."



**Millie the therapy dog gets petted on her last day of school at Cowles Montessori after 10 years of serving students.** (Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

"Montessori Millie" became an integral part of the school. When a parent couldn't make a student performance, Millie would sit in their place instead.

Treat time was written into lesson plans — so as not to surprise substitute teachers.

She even had her own locker, where Lepeltak kept Milk-Bone treats. But it also served as a "crisis closet," and Millie would "give" students a coat or other necessities.

Families were eager to show Millie the same affection after she was attacked by another dog in a kennel.

A parent printed T-shirts with the dog's likeness on them to raise money for her knee replacement surgery. In addition, students researched recovery techniques to help her heal.



**Millie the therapy dog grins on her last day of school at Cowles Montessori after 10 years of serving students.** (Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

Across the United States, there are now more than 50,000 therapy dogs who work with all ages, from children to veterans to the elderly.

Lepeltak first noticed Millie's intuitive nature when the pair visited a relative in hospice.

At the time, Millie was a 9-month-old; lab puppies are typically rambunctious and can't sit still. But Millie was different.

She offered comfort, letting Lepeltak's relative stroke her ears and back for 45 minutes.

"I always saw something special about her," Lepeltak said.



**Millie the therapy dog gets petted on her last day of school at Cowles Montessori after 10 years of serving students.** (Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

Millie helped pave the way for therapy dogs in other Des Moines schools.

Lepeltak said it was a process to get Millie trained and approved to work at Moulton Elementary, their previous school.

Today, each Des Moines school is allowed to have a therapy dog on staff at their discretion, the district said.

Now that Millie is retired, and Lepeltak soon will be, they plan on enjoying their time together by going on walks.

"She and I are both going to sleep in and rest and relax," Lepeltak said.

They'll likely return to visit Cowles periodically as well, Lepeltak said.

Millie loves children so much, it would be hard to keep her away.



**Millie the therapy dog used locker No. 2760 during 10 years of serving students at Cowles Montessori. She "retired" Monday.** (Photo: Jon Lemons / Des Moines Public Schools)

Read or Share this story: <https://dmreg.co/2IF9ekw>