

## MEET THE MOST POPULAR MEMBER OF CLASS



She might be just six months old, but Maggie the golden retriever is teaching students a few things about life. The pup is a popular new member in a Grade 5/6 class at Delacombe's Lumen Christi Primary School and already she is helping children with school and life skills. Reading, writing and responsibility are the three Rs that this bundle of energy is helping spread.

Grade 5/6 teacher Jacob Dalli is Maggie's owner and selected her specially for her new role. After much research about the benefits of having dogs in the classroom and gaining school approval, Mr Dalli searched for the right breeder and started training Maggie as soon as she came home.

Maggie spends up to three days a week at school as she still has her L-plates on, learning new commands and how to behave. "At the moment because she is training she just works with the senior students, but the goal is to have her working across the whole school," he said.

Each student in Mr Dalli's class is timetabled to have a role in Maggie's care, whether it is making sure she has enough fresh water, reading her a story, brushing her or taking her outside. Isaac, 10, said he enjoyed the responsibility that came with having Maggie in the classroom. "She always makes us laugh, and when you are down or sad she cheers you up," he said. "We are teaching her that when we are working it's not time to play, and sometimes to check our work we can read it to her," said Sam, 10.

She has made a massive impact in the classroom. “The change in the kids has been incredible. There’s less tension in the room and the ability to be ‘on task’ having the dog nearby is much improved,” Mr Dalli said. “No more do they lean on chairs, because they’re worried she might be behind them, they keep the door closed and they’re aware of the heating and know when to be quiet. They realise when they get silly she gets silly.”

Grooming Maggie has also proved therapeutic for many students, who open up and talk to the dog while she is close. They also read to Maggie, and when she is a year old she will be formally trained as part of a reading dog program and as a therapy dog. For now, she is practicing, listening to students read books and their writing – and is often the focus of their stories.

Mr Dalli decided to research dogs in schools after teaching prep students for the past three years. “I’ve seen in early development the importance of social skills, and searched for something we could use to support that learning that could be a bit different. There’s a lot of evidence to support dogs in schools,” he said.

*Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier, text by Michelle Smith*

*Photo: Isaac and Sam relax with Maggie the golden retriever, who has been a popular addition to the grade 5/6 class at Lumen Christi Primary School in Delacombe. Picture: Dylan Burns*