

MICHELE GUYTON
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Baltimore County

Ways and Means Committee

Education Subcommittee

Finance Resources Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Support HB981

County Board of Education -Therapy Dogs-Certification and Use in Schools

Dear Madame Chair and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for your consideration of HB981 to allow Therapy Dogs in Maryland Public Schools with guidelines to be developed by County Boards of Education. Currently there is no consistent policy that either prohibits or allows therapy dogs in schools and this lack of guidance is confusing to educators and HB981 clarifies this issue.

Therapy dogs are not service animals or emotional support animals. Animal - Assisted Therapy is defined by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations as "goal-oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human service...for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans."

Animal Assisted Therapy may sound like a "feel good" solution to students' well-being and performance but there is actually very solid science behind the significant benefits of allowing therapy dogs in school settings. Studies have demonstrated that interacting with a therapy dog once a week is successful in reducing depression and anxiety and alleviating the effects of social rejection. Many studies have shown that interaction with a canine has demonstrable effects on physiological correlates of stress such as blood pressure and cortisol levels. Academically, students who interact with therapy dogs show increased school attendance, demonstrated behavioral changes and decreases in office referrals, gains in confidence and motivation and significant increases in reading and writing levels (10-15% percent). My own sons learned to read with the Karma Dogs Literacy program at our local library.

There are over 4000 schools using the most common preK-12 volunteer curriculum program in US schools and therapy dogs are in every state and many countries. New York City Public Schools began a Comfort Dog pilot program in seven schools to improve school climate and culture and teach social emotional learning. All students have access to the program but it is particularly mandated for students who require counseling and students with special education needs. Students with ASD respond particularly well to these interventions. The program is an integral part of the school systems crisis intervention protocols and used to de-escalate violent situations. The school system describes the dogs as part of the counseling team. After one year, the program has grown from 7 to 40 schools and is considered an incredibly impactful and cost-effective intervention.

I ask for a favorable report for HB 981.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michele Guyton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Delegated Michele Guyton