

March 6, 2020

I am writing on behalf of House Bill 981, allowing the use of therapy dogs in public schools in Maryland

Good afternoon. My name is Rosemarie Dapena, one of the two 8<sup>th</sup> grade counselors at Silver Spring International Middle School in Silver Spring, Maryland. Our team of 4.5 counselors serves a population of nearly 1100 students, 40% Latino, 24% African American and 52% Farms. Our counseling interventions are always creative and ever evolving, given the needs of our student and community.

It is in this creative and evolving environment that Kozy Girl plays a primary role in supporting our students. Having Kozy girl in meetings or addressing the emotional impasse in our students' daily school life is invaluable. When Kozy Girl walks into a room and addresses a student, she does so in a calm, behaviorally trained yet not intrusive manner. Upon the students' permission, Kozy Girl may approach or even sit on the students' lap. Once the student is willing to talk to her, or hold her, Kozy Girl becomes our mental health ally.

And that is when the magic occurs! I have observed my students respond to her physical closeness. They hold her and allow her to lead their breathing rate; and if in a case when the student is not able to calm him/herself, referring to Kozy Girl's feedback of moving her nose away, the student is reminded to self-calm to receive positive reaction from the dog. In both situations, when the student is reassured on life and lead to self-clam, the therapy of the dog supports the creation of next steps.

In addition, at SSIMS Kozy Girl has her very own weekly segment in our morning TV show. She imparts, through her handler, words of wisdom, hope and resilience. Our students recognize her in the hallways. Parents acknowledge her from stories their children have shared.

Finally, Kozy Girl is also a breath of fresh for us adults. I am proof that she can lift any beaten heart, worried mind and overwhelmed soul from the trials of a deeply invested day with young adults. I beg you consider and strongly support House Bill 981 for the betterment of our students, staff and schools in general.

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