

TESTIMONY-IN SUPPORT OF SB409

Good Afternoon,

I am Harriet Lurensky Kuhn and I have been a School Psychologist for 30 years. I work in Montgomery County Public Schools. I previously came before the House of Delegates Ways and Means Committee on March 6, 2020 and again yesterday to testify about my passion for helping children and the use of therapy dog in schools. Over the years I have had success in using a therapy dog with children. Therapy dogs create magic in schools and are needed now more than ever. It is hard to find any program that matches having a kind and compassionate, trained dog in a school being there to assist children. That is why Senate Bill 409 must be passed. Please allow me to elaborate and tell you why this bill is so important to the students, staff and families of Maryland schools-especially now.

We have a wide range of students who attend Maryland schools from Head Start to high school, special education to general education students. As you all know, we are currently experiencing a once in a lifetime pandemic where children have been out of school buildings for a year and have been engaged in virtual learning. Once it is safe to return, children will need a wide range of mental health services. I want to convey to the committee that therapy dogs provide emotional and social support for students. Data driven research shows these specially trained dogs improve well-being and mental health. Children exposed to dogs, are naturally able to learn about kindness, empathy and self-control. When there is a friendly dog in a school environment, staff and students thrive. We will need as many student supports as are available to assist in meeting the needs of all students when we can safely go back into the school buildings.

Therapy Dog programs rely on volunteers so this is a no cost way to provide mental health services to children in school. As I stated back in March of 2020 before this committee, when therapy dogs are allowed in schools, students benefit. They make improvements in the areas of social/emotional functioning, gross motor skills, as well as reading and language skills. Research and first-hand knowledge tells us that dogs build confidence and allow kids to grow and develop in order to reach their maximum potential. Dogs in schools provide comfort and an unparalleled sense of normalcy for students which is an area of great need right now.

Kozy Girl loves everyone. She is my therapy dog who currently works in two Montgomery County Public Schools with me. She has been tested, is registered as an American Kennel Club Therapy Dog, an Alliance of Therapy Dog and a Canine Good Citizen. Kozy Girl always works to assist as needed in school. Students who experience suicidal thoughts, anger, depression or anxiety have found that a visit with Kozy Girl has helped them calm down, refocus and go back to class, which is preferable to having an administrator phone a parent. All Maryland students should have access to working with a therapy dog in their school if it will benefit them. Thank you for your support.

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