

FAVORABLE
Senate Bill 299
County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment
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The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 299, which would require county boards of education to establish a policy that allows and sets guidelines for the use of therapy dogs in public schools.

MSEA represents 76,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students so they can pursue their dreams. MSEA also represents 44 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

We appreciate that educators, especially school social workers and counselors, may wish to implement unique yet evidence-based interventions that fit their students' needs. Therapy dogs are an excellent example: a 2021 study notes that "dog-assisted reading programs generally show promising results such as gains in reading skills (e.g., reading accuracy, oral reading fluency, comprehension), as well as more positive attitudes and improved behaviors toward reading."¹ The same study identified that a key barrier to implementing school-based therapy dog programs was a lack of guidelines on the appropriate process.²

This bill does not require schools to implement a certain program. Rather, it creates a policy framework so that educators can pursue a therapy dog program if it fits their school context. Proactively addressing the standards and procedures for the use of therapy dogs would provide educators with a new tool to support students' learning and ensure that, when therapy dogs are used in schools, it is handled safely and thoughtfully.

We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 299.

¹ Grové, C., Henderson, L., Lee, F., & Wardlaw, P. (2021). Therapy Dogs in Educational Settings: Guidelines and Recommendations for Implementation. *Frontiers in veterinary science*, 8, 655104.

[https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8217446/#:~:text=There%20is%20preliminary%20evidence%20which,outcomes%20\(22%2C%2023\).](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8217446/#:~:text=There%20is%20preliminary%20evidence%20which,outcomes%20(22%2C%2023).)

² Ibid.