

February 5, 2026

Delegate Jheanelle K. Wilkins, Chair
Delegate Jessica Feldmark, Vice Chair
House Ways and Means Committee
130 Taylor House Office Building
131 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: House Bill 128 – County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Position: Support with Amendment

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing as a retired school psychologist and a Kent County resident in SUPPORT of House Bill 128 - County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools, with an important amendment. This legislation would require county boards of education to allow the use of certified or registered therapy dogs in public schools, subject to locally adopted policies addressing training and certification, appropriate times and locations for dogs, notification procedures, and accommodations for allergies or discomfort around dogs.

Youth mental health is widely recognized as being in crisis, with recent years marked by added strain from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased social media exposure, and social and environmental stressors. Data from the Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2023) reflect a troubling rise in mental health concerns among young people. Twenty-eight percent of Maryland high school students and 22% of middle school students reported that their mental health was “not good” most of the time or always during the past year, with higher rates among female students and those identifying as LGBTQ+. Alarmingly, 17.9% of high school students reported seriously considering suicide, 14.3% reported making a plan, and 9% reported attempting suicide.

Therapy dogs—calm, well-trained canines that provide comfort and companionship—offer schools a low-barrier, evidence-informed way to enhance engagement with existing school-based mental health supports. Research highlights effective safeguards that schools can implement to ensure safety, including accommodations for students with dog phobias or allergies, designated spaces and “time-out” areas for dogs, limits on the number of students and duration of interactions, clear expectations for student behavior, and standardized guidelines to ensure consistent and safe implementation across school settings. The Kent County Public Schools have deployed therapy dogs since 2018, using these safeguards, and the results have been highly positive, both in terms of mental health benefit for students, and in terms of the safe and orderly operation of our schools.

I would suggest an amendment to HB 128, consistent with Kent County’s current practice – the dog should be accompanied to school by their specific handler. On page 2, line 6, the wording should indicate “ ACCOMPANIED BY THE DOG’S HANDLER.” This appears to be the intent of the bill, but it’s essential that the dog’s specific handler/trainer be present.

Thank you for considering my comments on HB 128. I urge a favorable report, with the added amendment.

Respectfully submitted,

Wm. Flook, Ph.D.

William Flook, Ph.D.

Jordan's Testimony For Therapy Dog Bill-2026

My name is Jordan. I was born on May 7th 2015. I am 10 years old and am in the 5th grade at Twinbrook Elementary School. I just want to ask you if you want me to talk about Therapy Dogs and I can tell you a lot about them. The first therapy dog I ever met was Kozy Girl. I really liked Kozy Girl, Ms. Kuhn's therapy dog who used to come to Twinbrook. She was adorable, had a cute collar and was a therapy dog. She used to lick me and let me pet her and scratch her chin.

Therapy dogs help kids by helping kids learn to be good leaders. I miss Kozy Girl and am sad that she died. Ms. Kuhn has a new dog who is here today. His name is Louie. A Therapy dog's job is to be nice to kids and nice to adults and to be nice to everyone. Maybe you will agree that all kids should be able to have a therapy dog come to their school. Other kids should have therapy dogs in their schools because it would be nice to have the dogs to help

kids learn to be good people. Dogs let kids pat their heads and their heads are very soft and I feel good and happy when I pet a therapy dog's head. Dogs can do different tricks to make kids feel better and you can also feed them treats. The dogs make kids feel happy and loved and the kids make the dogs feel loved. When I get to walk with a therapy dog, I feel loved and special. Do you agree or not that we can have dogs in schools in the state of Maryland. So that's it for today. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

Dear Maryland General Assembly,

This letter is in support of Therapy Dogs in Schools (HB0128/SB0299). This bill directly addresses supporting youth mental health needs, has no fiscal note, and collaborates with community partners.

Therapy dogs visit schools to bring comfort to students. The global pandemic has exacerbated an already increasing youth mental health crisis. (Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy identified a nationwide youth mental health crisis in both 2021 and 2023.) Routinely, students show symptoms of depression, anxiety, have parents struggling with unemployment and financial stress, and worry about the state of our communities.

Too often crises occur and thankfully, therapy dogs come to schools to help the students process their complex feelings about fear, loss, and even death.

Ms. Erika Huck is the lead school counselor at Thomas W. Pyle Middle School in Bethesda. For the past 3 years, she has arranged regular, weekly, visits from a therapy dog- Koda- for our student body. Koda is a registered therapy dog with PAL and comes every Tuesday. Students are allowed to sign-up for 10 minute time slots to pet, cuddle, and hang out with Koda. This is a part of the week that students really look forward to. Time with Koda is often the motivation some of our most vulnerable students need to attend school or get through the day.

Community therapy dog organizations, such as People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, Fidos for Freedom and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools (and other facilities like nursing homes, veteran centers, and libraries) do not have to pay any fees for the visits. This is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

The court system in Maryland already has a highly successful Court Dog Program, passed into law in 2020-MD Code, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 9-501. This program provides therapy dogs for youth in the court setting that may be called as a witness of part of a trial. Now is the time to replicate this program in Maryland schools. (Note: no student is forced to participate for any reason)

Dogs are natural therapists and non-verbally connect with students on a deep level. I hope you will support the Therapy Dogs in School bill, which is an educational mental health bill with **no fiscal note**. It is a bill that needs to be legislated. The bill requires that county Boards of Education allow, subject to requirements and policies, the use of therapy dogs in schools and provide access for these therapeutic services in schools

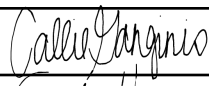

and during times of crisis. All students deserve access to therapy dog visits, and this Bill removes any inequity so that schools across the State have legislation promoting these free, impactful programs.

Thank you for promoting Therapy Dogs in Schools as Maryland law. Therapy dogs provide comfort, especially following crises, alleviate anxiety, lower testing stress, and increase school attendance. Both the dogs and their handlers are assessed for temperament, complete training and evaluation, and are certified and insured by recognized therapy dog organizations. Students have an opt out if they do not want to participate, or for any other reason (such as an allergy).

As you know, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has piloted this program with great success. Maryland is the trendsetter and the first state in the nation to promote these services which have such a great impact on students and staff. There is a promise that this will go nationwide once Governor Moore signs the bill in July 2026.

Thank you for your consideration of this excellent bill and please reach out if you have any other questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Name (Printed)	Title	Signature
Callie Ganginis	School Psychologist	
Erika Huck	Resource Counselor	

Dear Maryland General Assembly,

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Too often crisis occur and thankfully, therapy dogs come to schools to help the students process their complex feelings about fear, loss, and even death. Over the last 5 years, therapy dogs have deployed to schools in recent times due to school shootings, student fatalities (at a bus stop and in a crosswalk at school dismissal) and a student losing their battle with cancer.

As the Co-Presidents of the Montgomery County School Psychologist Association (MCSPA), we have been heavily involved in advocating for both the well-being and needs of our students and fellow psychologists. This is an outstanding opportunity for us to support a cause that we believe in, whole heartedly, as well. Therapy dogs benefit the mental wellness and recovery of both students and staff following a traumatic event, as well as with everyday stress, anxiety, and depression.

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Thank you for your consideration of this excellent bill and please reach out if you have any other questions.

Madison Buckholz & Alondra Anderson

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Madison Buckholz, and the signature on the right is for Alondra Anderson. Both signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

MCSPA Co-Presidents

madison_b_buckholz@mcpsmd.org

alondra_anderson@mcpsmd.org

Good morning!

I am a school social worker and my pup and I are a therapy dog team. We currently visit children at Kennedy Krieger Inpatient Hospital. My dream is to be able to incorporate her into therapy with students. I work with student to manage intense feelings, and therapy dogs have a unique effect on stress responses. From friends in other states who have therapy dogs in their schools, they report the mood of the staff is lifted and student attendance and engagement is up. Having standardized procedures for responsibly bringing therapy dogs into schools in our state would be in line with promoting student and staff mental health.

Thanks for your time,

Jon

Jonathan Rosenblum, LCSW-C

School Social Worker/Trabajador Social Escolar

Lansdowne High School

Baltimore County Public Schools

3800 Hollins Ferry Rd.

Lansdowne, MD 21227

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Principal Scott Smith Testimony-HB0128 –County Boards of Education Therapy Dogs Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Good afternoon. My name is Scott Smith, and I'm the principal of Northwest High School in Montgomery County, Maryland.

I want to begin with a snapshot of a typical day in my role. Before lunchtime, I may have supported a student experiencing anxiety, helped a teacher manage burnout, met with a family worried about their child's mental health, and responded to an unexpected crisis. This is the daily reality in schools today. Our young people are carrying significant academic pressure, social stress, and emotional weight—and schools are often where that shows up first.

Every Wednesday at lunch, something different happens at Northwest High School. Therapy dogs visit our building. The impact is immediate and visible. Students who are usually rushed or guarded slow down. Students who struggle with anxiety take a breath. Students who don't always feel connected find a moment of calm and belonging. I've watched students who rarely engage with adults open up while sitting on the floor petting a dog. In just a few minutes, stress levels drop and smiles appear.

These therapy dogs are not a novelty. They are a powerful, research-supported tool that promotes emotional regulation and well-being.

And the impact doesn't stop there. When students are calmer, they are better able to focus. When they feel safe, they engage more fully. When their emotional needs are supported, learning improves. Attendance improves. Behavior improves. School becomes a place they want to be.

As a principal, I am constantly balancing safety, accountability, and care. Therapy dogs help us do all three. They allow us to support mental health proactively—before issues escalate into crises. And they send a clear message to students: you are seen, you are supported, and you matter.

This bill gives school systems across Maryland the encouragement and clarity to expand practices like this. From my perspective, leading a high school every day, this is a practical, compassionate, and effective way to support students.

Thank you for your time and thank you for advocating for the well-being of Maryland's students.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to share a practitioner's perspective. I look forward to Thursday's hearing.

Respectfully,

Scott Smith

Principal

Northwest High School

Scott E. Smith



Principal

Northwest High School
13501 Richter Farm Road
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240.740.7100

follow on twitter @NorthwestJags

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HOME ADDRESS AND ZIP CODE: Olney, MD 20832
PHONE NUMBER: 301 233-6900

keshher.ltd@gmail.com

For the purposes of this note, I should be addressing you as The Honorable Ms. Kaiser; however, since we do meet occasionally at Tikvat Israel, that feels a bit formal, even if it is proper.

Ziva and I have been visiting schools with Fidos for Freedom for nearly 20 years. Community therapy dog organizations, such as Fidos for Freedom, People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools and other facilities that we visit like nursing homes, hospitals, veteran centers, and libraries do not have to pay any fees for the visits.

Therapy dogs provide comfort, especially following crises, alleviate anxiety for students and staff, lower testing stress, and increase school attendance. Both the dogs and their handlers are assessed for temperament, complete training and evaluation, and are certified and insured by recognized therapy dog organizations. It is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

Just a few months ago we were able to provide help to the mental health professionals working with the students and staff at Earle B. Wood Middle School after one of their students was tragically killed in a school bus accident by their school.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has piloted this program with great success. Maryland is the trendsetter and the first state in the nation to promote these services which have such a great impact on students and staff. We hope you will support the Therapy Dogs in School bill, which is an educational mental health bill with **no fiscal note**.

I look forward to being able to thank you in person for your help.

Jerry & Ziva Schuchman



Dear Maryland General Assembly,

As a psychologist who has spent fifty years working with children and adult, I urge you to support Therapy Dogs in Schools (HB0128/SB0299). This bill supports the emotional well being of our students and has no/minimal cost

Over a third of our students report symptoms of depression, anxiety, have parents struggling with unemployment and financial stress, and worry about the state of our communities. Concern about immigration status has been another big factor. Therapy dogs can rapidly soothe these students and make them more available for learning.

I know several people, including retired mental health professionals who have trained their dogs to be therapy dogs and who are happy to assist in schools. Community therapy dog organizations, such as People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, Fidos for Freedom and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools (and other facilities like nursing homes, veteran centers, and libraries) do not have to pay any fees for the visits. This is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

Thank you for promoting Therapy Dogs in Schools as Maryland law.

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Thank you for your consideration of this excellent bill and please reach out if you have any other questions.

Faith

Faith Witkin Schwartz, Ph.D

MCPS School Psychologist and retired psychologist

School (Faith_W_Schwartz@mcpsmd.org)

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On my visits with my therapy dog, I've seen how petting the dogs have helped one student to work through her grief of losing her own dog. The dogs create an atmosphere that allows the students to feel less stressed as they interact with the dogs. I've also observed that it has been beneficial to the staff at the schools as they've interacted with our dogs, communicating that the dogs brighten their days.

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Thank you for all of your hard work for schools and consideration of this excellent bill.

Sincerely,

Joanne Harrington (kaoru.harrington@gmail.com)

Fidos for Freedom Volunteer (Dog Handler)

