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February 25, 2026

Senator Brian J. Feldman, Chair
Senator Cheryl C. Kagan, Vice Chair
Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
2 West Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Senate Bill 299 – County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Position: Support with Amendment

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing as a retired school psychologist and a Kent County resident in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 299 - County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools, with a clarifying 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+. Alarming, 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 a clarifying amendment to SB 299, 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 SB 299. I urge a favorable report, with the added amendment. I would welcome follow-up inquiries: 410-703-1791; wmflook@gmail.com.

Respectfully submitted,

Wm. Flook, Ph.D.

William Flook, Ph.D.