

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB0128/SB0299 — THERAPY DOGS IN SCHOOLS

Position: Favorable

Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee:

My name is **Sonja Bartolomei, BSN, RN, BMTCN**, and I respectfully submit this testimony in support of **HB0128/SB0299, Therapy Dogs in Schools**. This legislation is a practical, low-cost way to support student well-being. It carries **no fiscal note**, strengthens partnerships with trusted community organizations, and allows implementation through local policies and procedures.

I am a registered nurse and spent 20 years on the Hematology/Oncology and Stem Cell Transplant Unit at the National Institutes of Health, caring for patients and families facing life-threatening diagnoses. In that setting, I witnessed firsthand the unique support therapy dogs can provide. A calm, well-trained dog can reduce stress in the moment, help individuals feel grounded, and offer comfort when words are difficult. Therapy dog visits often brought relief not only to patients, but also to families and staff, helping people cope during some of the most challenging moments of their lives.

Maryland's students are facing unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety. Many children experience worry, grief, and emotional overload. For some students, these feelings show up as difficulty focusing, withdrawal, irritability, or behavioral challenges. Schools are working hard to meet these needs, and therapy dogs are one evidence-based tool that can help students feel safe, regulated, and ready to learn.

Therapy dogs provide meaningful mental, emotional, and physical benefits. Through calm, nonjudgmental companionship, they can help lower stress and anxiety, improve social connection, and support emotional regulation. In school settings, therapy dogs may also encourage attendance, improve classroom engagement, and help students during times of crisis.

HB0128/SB0299 provides a thoughtful framework to expand access to these services statewide. The bill requires county Boards of Education to allow the use of therapy dogs in schools, subject to local requirements and policies. Therapy dogs and their handlers must be trained, evaluated for temperament, certified through recognized therapy dog organizations, and appropriately insured. Importantly, students may opt out for any reason, ensuring that participation remains voluntary and respectful of individual needs.

All Maryland students deserve equitable access to supportive resources, regardless of where they live. This bill helps remove barriers and ensures that therapy dog programs—often offered at no cost—can be available statewide, including during times of crisis.

Thank you for your consideration. I respectfully urge a **favorable report** on HB0128/SB0299.

Respectfully submitted,
Sonja Bartolomei, BSN, RN, BMTCN
sonjabartolomei@hotmail.com
202-510-2669