



PSSAM
Public School Superintendents' Association
OF MARYLAND

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BILL: SB 299

TITLE: County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

DATE: February 27, 2026

POSITION: Unfavorable

COMMITTEE: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM
(Proud mother of 4-year old Goldendoodle, Annie)

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents, **sadly opposes** Senate Bill 299.

This bill requires each local board of education to allow, and adopt a policy for, the use of therapy dogs in public schools, and requires a handler to accompany each therapy dog in school. The policy must include (1) certification requirements for therapy dogs; (2) guidelines for handlers; (3) guidelines for when and where therapy dogs and handlers are allowed in school buildings; (4) notification requirements; and (5) guidelines for the management of students and staff with allergies or who are uncomfortable around dogs. Under the bill, a “therapy dog” is a dog that is trained to provide affection and comfort to children who need emotional support in a school setting and is certified or registered as a therapy dog. A “handler” is an individual who provides care and training for the therapy dog.

PSSAM appreciates the intent of this legislation and the focus on supporting students' emotional and mental well-being. Local school systems share that goal and are deeply invested in creating safe, supportive learning environments for all students.

Federal and State law already allow for the use of **service animals** in schools when they are trained to perform specific, documented tasks—such as alerting individuals of an oncoming seizure, reminding someone to take medication, or assisting with mobility or medical needs.

These service animals are subject to well-established legal standards and protections. This bill goes beyond those existing frameworks by requiring every local board of education to allow and adopt policies for **therapy dogs**, which are not covered under federal disability law in the same way.

While well-intentioned, this raises several concerns.

First, the bill relies on a concept of “certification” for therapy dogs that is **not legally recognized**. There is currently no uniform, legally defined certification standard for therapy dogs providing affection and comfort in schools. As written, the bill would leave substantial room for interpretation regarding what qualifications are sufficient for a dog to serve in this role, creating inconsistency and potential risk across school systems.

Second, the bill would **unreasonably mandate the presence of a handler** to accompany each therapy dog in a school setting. This raises practical and operational questions about supervision, staffing, training, liability, and cost—particularly in environments where schools are already managing complex student needs with limited resources.

Third, dogs that are not otherwise trained for structured school environments may unintentionally become a **distraction or disturbance** to other students and staff. Schools must also consider unintended consequences, including classroom disruptions, safety concerns, and the management of students and employees with allergies, fears, or cultural discomfort around dogs.

Finally, this legislation would **expand the scope and complexity of student supports** that schools would be required to manage without requiring a documented need for this intervention. Local school systems already use a range of evidence-based supports—social workers, counselors, psychologists, behavioral interventions, and targeted programs—tailored to individual student needs. Mandating a specific support tool without an individualized determination could undermine that existing framework.

We welcome continued dialogue on how best to support students’ social and emotional well-being in a manner that is flexible, legally sound, and responsive to local conditions.

Therefore, PSSAM **sadly opposes** Senate Bill 299.

Annie Fannon

