

Good afternoon, Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy and the Environment .

My name is Harriet Lurensky Kuhn, and this is Louie. I am in my 35th year as a school psychologist—26 years in DC Public Schools and now my 10th year in Montgomery County Public Schools. I have testified in support of allowing therapy dogs in all Maryland schools previously and it is a passion of mine.

This bill provides a framework for boards of education statewide and guidance on how to integrate dogs into schools. Therapy dogs are now permitted in all MCPS schools. MCPS has successfully piloted a school therapy dog program across all schools in the district with 5 agencies through the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU's) and their therapy dog teams—fully vetted and trained volunteers—In many Maryland schools, therapy dogs are still banned or inconsistently allowed. This is the right time to pass this bill statewide.

SB0299 has no fiscal note. It establishes a consistent, statewide framework that ensures safe, responsible, and equitable implementation across the state—while still

allowing each school system the flexibility to create policies that meet local needs.

As both a psychologist and a therapy dog handler, I have seen firsthand the difference a therapy dog can make to help students in crisis. The dog/handler teams are first responders after a crisis and I have watched how the children/staff respond after a tragedy when a student was killed by a driver. Dog/handler teams have responded to multiple crises in MCPS this year and in past years, as well including a shooting, death of several students and other significant mental-health crisis among school age students who struggle with suicidal ideations, drug use, anxiety, grief, depression, and school avoidance.

Therapy dogs are not a luxury item. They are a important mental health tool. These trained handler-dog teams provide an evidence-based, no-cost, high-impact intervention that helps dysregulated students become ready and available to learn. Research consistently shows that interactions with therapy animals promote feelings of safety and improve mood—exactly the conditions necessary for academic success. Some therapy dogs also serve as READ dogs, supporting reluctant readers in developing confidence and fluency.

I respectfully urge you to give SB0299 a PAWSITIVE vote of confidence so it has the opportunity to soar out of committee. This way every school system in Maryland has the guidance and opportunity to use therapy dogs to support students and staff in schools.

Thank you and I am grateful to all of you for the work you do to help children.