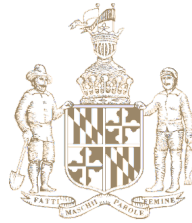


KATIE FRY HESTER
Legislative District 9
Howard and Montgomery Counties

Education, Energy, and
Environment Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



Annapolis Office
James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street, Room 304
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3671 • 301-858-3671
800-492-7122 Ext. 3671
KatieFry.Hester@senate.state.md.us

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB299 - County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

February 25, 2026

Chair Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 299, which requires each County Board of Education to establish a policy for therapy dogs in public schools.

Maryland children are experiencing increased rates of depression and anxiety, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down schools in 2019 and 2020.¹ Nearly 13% of school-aged children struggle with these issues as of 2022, a significant increase from pre-pandemic rates. This creates a major barrier for our children to engage fully in educational environments, and burdens academic success. We have a responsibility to support our youth however we can: therapy dogs can be a part of this solution. Therapy dogs in schools are proven to reduce symptoms of stress, increase positive emotions, and reduce task avoidance in classrooms.²

The presence of therapy dogs in schools, nursing homes, and other public spaces has grown significantly as communities recognize their unique ability to provide comfort, stability, and emotional support. Unlike service dogs, which are individually trained to perform specific tasks for a person with a disability, therapy dogs work alongside trained handlers to serve many people at once. Research demonstrates that therapy dogs can deliver measurable socio-emotional, cognitive, and health benefits across diverse age groups— benefits which are especially meaningful in light of recent data showing that more than one in four Maryland high school students struggles with poor mental health.

Organizations such as the Alliance of Therapy Dogs and similar national accrediting bodies have documented consistent positive outcomes in educational settings, including:

- Higher attendance,

¹ <https://mdeconomy.org/kids-count-marylands-children-are-experiencing-higher-rates-of-anxiety-and-depression/>

² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8217446/>

- Reduced anxiety,
- Improved mood and focus, and
- Stronger problem-solving and social skills.

Therapy dog programs are not a substitute for counseling or clinical care, but they are a proven, low-cost, and non-invasive complement that can help create calmer classrooms.

To implement this supportive measure, SB299 would:

- Permit each County Board of Education to establish a policy allowing trained and certified therapy dogs and their handlers in public schools,
- Clarify what must be covered by local policies, including certification and training standards for therapy dogs; qualifications and expectations for handlers; and clear accommodations for individuals with allergies, phobias, or other sensitivities, and
- Require that therapy dogs in schools must always be accompanied by a handler.

In response to feedback received at the House hearing, I have one sponsor amendment to ensure that local school boards retain control and flexibility over their own policies. Rather than requiring therapy dogs be permitted in each school, the bill now requires schools to choose whether or not to authorize them, and if they are authorized, to create an associated policy. It further clarifies that the handler with the dog must be registered.

SB299 expands access to therapy dogs as an evidence-backed, non-invasive means for Maryland students to cope with mental and behavioral health struggles. The bill does this without imposing new obligations upon local school boards: it serves only as enabling legislation that authorizes the presence of therapy dogs in Maryland public schools if Local Education Agencies elect to participate. It supports our youth and safeguards local autonomy without further burdening the State's finances, having no associated fiscal note.

This bill ensures that there is another effective tool to support mental health that school systems can access – which might just save the life of one of your constituents. For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB299.

Sincerely,



Senator Katie Fry Hester
Howard and Montgomery Counties