

Pet Advocacy Network

Uploaded by: Alisa Clements

Position: FAV



February 27, 2026

RE: Support of House Bill 128/SB 299

Dear Chair Feldman and members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

As the advocacy voice of the responsible pet care community, the [Pet Advocacy Network](#) represents the interests and expertise of retailers, companion animal suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, pet owners, and others involved in the many aspects of pet care across the United States. Our association promotes animal well-being and responsible pet ownership, fosters environmental stewardship, and ensures healthy pets' availability through our local, state, and federal work. In addition, we routinely advocate for legislative and regulatory proposals to protect the health, safety, and availability of companion animals.

On behalf of the responsible pet care community, **we ask that you vote YES on House Bill 128/SB 299, which would allow the use of therapy dogs in public schools.**

Having pets available to children and teens alike in classrooms, with all the associated physical and emotional benefits of animal-assisted interactions, is more important than ever before and the Pet Advocacy Network commends the legislature for proposing this legislation.

The value of classroom pets in realizing positive outcomes on mental health is well-supported with scientific data. In 2019, American Humane, the [Human Animal Bond Research Institute](#) (HABRI), and The Pet Care Trust published the largest-ever study¹ on pets in the classroom. It assessed the social, behavioral, and academic effects of the presence of resident animals ranging from guinea pigs to small reptiles in almost 600 third and fourth-grade classrooms in the United States.

Programs like this don't just benefit the students. They support teachers by giving them new tools to create calm, connected classrooms. This program helps educators bring real-life learning into the classroom. Students learn responsibility, empathy, and science in a hands-on way. And for some students, the classroom pet is the first animal they've ever really spent time with.

¹ <https://www.americanhumane.org/press-release/publication-of-largest-ever-study-on-pets-in-the-classroom-indicates-positive-impact-on-academic-and-social-behavior/>



According to [Pet Partners](#), the national leader in demonstrating and promoting the health and wellness benefits of animal-assisted interventions, there are numerous benefits to allowing therapy dogs into classrooms, including:

- Interactions with therapy animals improve social skills among peers, reduce stress and anxiety, and increase endorphins.
- Children experience better focus and confidence while learning with therapy animals present.
- Children who are learning to read are often shy or hesitant about their abilities. When reading to a therapy animal, research shows children feel at ease because animals are just there to listen—not to judge how well they are reading.

Participating teachers in these programs have reported significant increases in social skills, social competence, and academic reading. They also saw decreases in hyperactivity, withdrawal and inattention in students as compared to those in non-pet control classrooms. The parents of the students in pet classrooms reported greater increases in pro-social behaviors at home, as well. These positive outcomes and research findings demonstrate that this supplemental approach to education is worthy of significant additional support, especially now.

We urge you to vote Yes on HB 128/SB 299 and welcome the opportunity to collaborate with you on legislation that promotes and protects responsible pet ownership. All of us in the responsible pet care community are dedicated to removing unnecessary barriers that keep people from enjoying all types of pet companionship.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisa Clements
Director, Government Affairs

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Washington, DC 20036
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Petadvocacy.org



Testimony For Therapy Dog Bill SB299-2026.pdf

Uploaded by: Delia Dunlap

Position: FAV

Testimony For Therapy Dog Bill SB299-2026

TARTEIL'S AHMED - Student

Testimony Link to Video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/11Acdoxt7IQ_vaWxlQcci4j1YSrMxeOYk/view?usp=sharing

Good Afternoon, Chairman Feldman, Vice Chairwoman Kagan and other members of the Education, Environment and Energy Committee.

I am in grade 6 at Silver Spring International Middle School in Silver Spring Maryland.

I would like to speak to you about advocacy for therapy dogs and how they reduce stress at school. I believe that therapy dogs should be available to every student and it is every students right. I have had incidents at school where I was stressed and on the verge of tears and I had no one to confide in and I had to keep it in. Therapy dogs provide comfort and warmth to students and to everyone in general. Therapy dogs are not biased and are simply there to make everyone feel better. If therapy dogs were available to every single student in Maryland, the kids will feel mentally better and will be able to focus more during class.

The board of education is supposed to make sure that everywhere is a safe environment for students to learn but how can we accomplish that when countless students are going home crying stressed from school.

Harriet Lurensky Kuhn Testimony01SB0299.pdf

Uploaded by: Harriet Kuhn

Position: FAV

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.

Jordan Hamouch Testimony SB299.pdf

Uploaded by: Jordan Hamouch

Position: FAV

Jordan's Testimony For Therapy Dog Bill - SB299

My name is Jordan Hamouch. I was born on May 7th 2015. I am 10 years old and am in the 5th grade at Twinbrook Elementary School. I just want to ask you if you want me to talk about Therapy Dogs and I can tell you a lot about them.

The first therapy dog I ever met was Kozy Girl. I really liked Kozy Girl, Ms. Kuhn's therapy dog who used to come to Twinbrook. She was adorable, had a cute collar and was a therapy dog. She used to lick me and let me pet her and scratch her chin.

Therapy dogs help kids by helping kids learn to be good leaders. I miss Kozy Girl and am sad that she died. Ms. Kuhn has a new dog who is here today. His name is Louie. A Therapy dog's job is to be nice to kids and nice to adults and to be nice to everyone.

Maybe you will agree that all kids should be able to have a therapy dog come to their school. Other kids should have therapy dogs in their schools because it would be nice to have the dogs to help kids learn to be good people.

Dogs let kids pat their heads and their heads are very soft, and I feel good and happy when I pet a therapy dog's head. Dogs can do different tricks to make kids feel better and you can also feed them treats. The dogs make kids feel happy and loved and the kids make the dogs feel loved. When I get to walk with a therapy dog, I feel loved and special.

Do you agree or not that we can have dogs in schools in the state of Maryland? So that's it for today. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

Hester Therapy Dog Testimony.docx.pdf

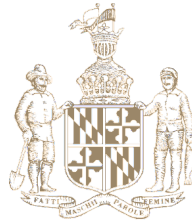
Uploaded by: Katie Fry Hester

Position: FAV

KATIE FRY HESTER
Legislative District 9
Howard and Montgomery Counties

Education, Energy, and
Environment Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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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

Merged_Testimony_therapy_Dogs.pdf

Uploaded by: Katie Fry Hester

Position: FAV

February 5, 2026

Delegate Jheanelle K. Wilkins, Chair
Delegate Jessica Feldmark, Vice Chair
House Ways and Means Committee
130 Taylor House Office Building
131 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: House Bill 128 – County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Position: Support with Amendment

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing as a retired school psychologist and a Kent County resident in SUPPORT of House Bill 128 - County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools, with an important 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+. Alarmingly, 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 an amendment to HB 128, 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 HB 128. I urge a favorable report, with the added amendment.

Respectfully submitted,

Wm. Flook, Ph.D.

William Flook, Ph.D.

Jordan's Testimony For Therapy Dog Bill-2026

My name is Jordan. I was born on May 7th 2015. I am 10 years old and am in the 5th grade at Twinbrook Elementary School. I just want to ask you if you want me to talk about Therapy Dogs and I can tell you a lot about them. The first therapy dog I ever met was Kozy Girl. I really liked Kozy Girl, Ms. Kuhn's therapy dog who used to come to Twinbrook. She was adorable, had a cute collar and was a therapy dog. She used to lick me and let me pet her and scratch her chin.

Therapy dogs help kids by helping kids learn to be good leaders. I miss Kozy Girl and am sad that she died. Ms. Kuhn has a new dog who is here today. His name is Louie. A Therapy dog's job is to be nice to kids and nice to adults and to be nice to everyone. Maybe you will agree that all kids should be able to have a therapy dog come to their school. Other kids should have therapy dogs in their schools because it would be nice to have the dogs to help

kids learn to be good people. Dogs let kids pat their heads and their heads are very soft and I feel good and happy when I pet a therapy dog's head. Dogs can do different tricks to make kids feel better and you can also feed them treats. The dogs make kids feel happy and loved and the kids make the dogs feel loved. When I get to walk with a therapy dog, I feel loved and special. Do you agree or not that we can have dogs in schools in the state of Maryland. So that's it for today. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

Dear Maryland General Assembly,

This letter is in support of Therapy Dogs in Schools (HB0128/SB0299). This bill directly addresses supporting youth mental health needs, has no fiscal note, and collaborates with community partners.

Therapy dogs visit schools to bring comfort to students. The global pandemic has exacerbated an already increasing youth mental health crisis. (Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy identified a nationwide youth mental health crisis in both 2021 and 2023.) Routinely, students show symptoms of depression, anxiety, have parents struggling with unemployment and financial stress, and worry about the state of our communities.

Too often crises occur and thankfully, therapy dogs come to schools to help the students process their complex feelings about fear, loss, and even death.

Ms. Erika Huck is the lead school counselor at Thomas W. Pyle Middle School in Bethesda. For the past 3 years, she has arranged regular, weekly, visits from a therapy dog- Koda- for our student body. Koda is a registered therapy dog with PAL and comes every Tuesday. Students are allowed to sign-up for 10 minute time slots to pet, cuddle, and hang out with Koda. This is a part of the week that students really look forward to. Time with Koda is often the motivation some of our most vulnerable students need to attend school or get through the day.

Community therapy dog organizations, such as People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, Fidos for Freedom and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools (and other facilities like nursing homes, veteran centers, and libraries) do not have to pay any fees for the visits. This is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

The court system in Maryland already has a highly successful Court Dog Program, passed into law in 2020-MD Code, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 9-501. This program provides therapy dogs for youth in the court setting that may be called as a witness of part of a trial. Now is the time to replicate this program in Maryland schools. (Note: no student is forced to participate for any reason)

Dogs are natural therapists and non-verbally connect with students on a deep level. I hope you will support the Therapy Dogs in School bill, which is an educational mental health bill with **no fiscal note**. It is a bill that needs to be legislated. The bill requires that county Boards of Education allow, subject to requirements and policies, the use of therapy dogs in schools and provide access for these therapeutic services in schools

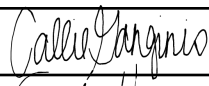
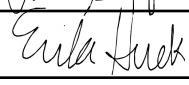
and during times of crisis. All students deserve access to therapy dog visits, and this Bill removes any inequity so that schools across the State have legislation promoting these free, impactful programs.

Thank you for promoting Therapy Dogs in Schools as Maryland law. Therapy dogs provide comfort, especially following crises, alleviate anxiety, lower testing stress, and increase school attendance. Both the dogs and their handlers are assessed for temperament, complete training and evaluation, and are certified and insured by recognized therapy dog organizations. Students have an opt out if they do not want to participate, or for any other reason (such as an allergy).

As you know, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has piloted this program with great success. Maryland is the trendsetter and the first state in the nation to promote these services which have such a great impact on students and staff. There is a promise that this will go nationwide once Governor Moore signs the bill in July 2026.

Thank you for your consideration of this excellent bill and please reach out if you have any other questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Name (Printed)	Title	Signature
Callie Ganginis	School Psychologist	
Erika Huck	Resource Counselor	

Dear Maryland General Assembly,

This letter is in support of Therapy Dogs in Schools (HB0128/SB0299). This bill directly addresses supporting youth mental health needs, has no fiscal note, and collaborates with community partners.

Therapy dogs visit schools to bring comfort to students. The global pandemic has exacerbated an already increasing youth mental health crisis. (Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy identified a nationwide youth mental health crisis in both 2021 and 2023.) Routinely, students show symptoms of depression, anxiety, have parents struggling with unemployment and financial stress, and worry about the state of our communities.

Too often crisis occur and thankfully, therapy dogs come to schools to help the students process their complex feelings about fear, loss, and even death. Over the last 5 years, therapy dogs have deployed to schools in recent times due to school shootings, student fatalities (at a bus stop and in a crosswalk at school dismissal) and a student losing their battle with cancer.

As the Co-Presidents of the Montgomery County School Psychologist Association (MCSPA), we have been heavily involved in advocating for both the well-being and needs of our students and fellow psychologists. This is an outstanding opportunity for us to support a cause that we believe in, whole heartedly, as well. Therapy dogs benefit the mental wellness and recovery of both students and staff following a traumatic event, as well as with everyday stress, anxiety, and depression.

Community therapy dog organizations, such as People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, Fidos for Freedom and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools (and other facilities like nursing homes, veteran centers, and libraries) do not have to pay any fees for the visits. This is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

The court system in Maryland already has a highly successful Court Dog Program, passed into law in 2020-MD Code, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 9-501. This program provides therapy dogs for youth in the court setting that may be called as a witness of part of a trial. Now is the time to replicate this program in Maryland schools. (Note: no student is forced to participate for any reason)

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Thank you for your consideration of this excellent bill and please reach out if you have any other questions.

Madison Buckholz & Alondra Anderson

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Madison Buckholz, and the signature on the right is for Alondra Anderson. Both signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

MCSPA Co-Presidents

madison_b_buckholz@mcpsmd.org

alondra_anderson@mcpsmd.org

Good morning!

I am a school social worker and my pup and I are a therapy dog team. We currently visit children at Kennedy Krieger Inpatient Hospital. My dream is to be able to incorporate her into therapy with students. I work with student to manage intense feelings, and therapy dogs have a unique effect on stress responses. From friends in other states who have therapy dogs in their schools, they report the mood of the staff is lifted and student attendance and engagement is up. Having standardized procedures for responsibly bringing therapy dogs into schools in our state would be in line with promoting student and staff mental health.

Thanks for your time,

Jon

Jonathan Rosenblum, LCSW-C

School Social Worker/Trabajador Social Escolar

Lansdowne High School

Baltimore County Public Schools

3800 Hollins Ferry Rd.

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Jrosenblum@bcps.org



Principal Scott Smith Testimony-HB0128 –County Boards of Education Therapy Dogs Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Good afternoon. My name is Scott Smith, and I'm the principal of Northwest High School in Montgomery County, Maryland.

I want to begin with a snapshot of a typical day in my role. Before lunchtime, I may have supported a student experiencing anxiety, helped a teacher manage burnout, met with a family worried about their child's mental health, and responded to an unexpected crisis. This is the daily reality in schools today. Our young people are carrying significant academic pressure, social stress, and emotional weight—and schools are often where that shows up first.

Every Wednesday at lunch, something different happens at Northwest High School. Therapy dogs visit our building. The impact is immediate and visible. Students who are usually rushed or guarded slow down. Students who struggle with anxiety take a breath. Students who don't always feel connected find a moment of calm and belonging. I've watched students who rarely engage with adults open up while sitting on the floor petting a dog. In just a few minutes, stress levels drop and smiles appear.

These therapy dogs are not a novelty. They are a powerful, research-supported tool that promotes emotional regulation and well-being.

And the impact doesn't stop there. When students are calmer, they are better able to focus. When they feel safe, they engage more fully. When their emotional needs are supported, learning improves. Attendance improves. Behavior improves. School becomes a place they want to be.

As a principal, I am constantly balancing safety, accountability, and care. Therapy dogs help us do all three. They allow us to support mental health proactively—before issues escalate into crises. And they send a clear message to students: you are seen, you are supported, and you matter.

This bill gives school systems across Maryland the encouragement and clarity to expand practices like this. From my perspective, leading a high school every day, this is a practical, compassionate, and effective way to support students.

Thank you for your time and thank you for advocating for the well-being of Maryland's students.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to share a practitioner's perspective. I look forward to Thursday's hearing.

Respectfully,

Scott Smith

Principal

Northwest High School



Scott E. Smith

Principal

Northwest High School
13501 Richter Farm Road
Scott_E_Smith@mcpsmd.org
240.740.7100

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NAME: Jerry & Ziva Schuchman
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For the purposes of this note, I should be addressing you as The Honorable Ms. Kaiser; however, since we do meet occasionally at Tikvat Israel, that feels a bit formal, even if it is proper.

Ziva and I have been visiting schools with Fidos for Freedom for nearly 20 years. Community therapy dog organizations, such as Fidos for Freedom, People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools and other facilities that we visit like nursing homes, hospitals, veteran centers, and libraries do not have to pay any fees for the visits.

Therapy dogs provide comfort, especially following crises, alleviate anxiety for students and staff, lower testing stress, and increase school attendance. Both the dogs and their handlers are assessed for temperament, complete training and evaluation, and are certified and insured by recognized therapy dog organizations. It is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

Just a few months ago we were able to provide help to the mental health professionals working with the students and staff at Earle B. Wood Middle School after one of their students was tragically killed in a school bus accident by their school.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has piloted this program with great success. Maryland is the trendsetter and the first state in the nation to promote these services which have such a great impact on students and staff. We hope you will support the Therapy Dogs in School bill, which is an educational mental health bill with **no fiscal note**.

I look forward to being able to thank you in person for your help.

Jerry & Ziva Schuchman



Dear Maryland General Assembly,

As a psychologist who has spent fifty years working with children and adult, I urge you to support Therapy Dogs in Schools (HB0128/SB0299). This bill supports the emotional well being of our students and has no/minimal cost

Over a third of our students report symptoms of depression, anxiety, have parents struggling with unemployment and financial stress, and worry about the state of our communities. Concern about immigration status has been another big factor. Therapy dogs can rapidly soothe these students and make them more available for learning.

I know several people, including retired mental health professionals who have trained their dogs to be therapy dogs and who are happy to assist in schools. Community therapy dog organizations, such as People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, Fidos for Freedom and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools (and other facilities like nursing homes, veteran centers, and libraries) do not have to pay any fees for the visits. This is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

Thank you for promoting Therapy Dogs in Schools as Maryland law.

As you know, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has piloted this program with great success. Maryland is the trendsetter and the first state in the nation to promote these services which have such a great impact on students and staff. There is a promise that this will go nationwide once Governor Moore signs the bill in July 2026.

Thank you for your consideration of this excellent bill and please reach out if you have any other questions.

Faith

Faith Witkin Schwartz, Ph.D

MCPS School Psychologist and retired psychologist

School (Faith_W_Schwartz@mcpsmd.org)

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Therapy dogs visit schools to bring comfort to students. The global pandemic has exacerbated an already increasing youth mental health crisis. (Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy identified a nationwide youth mental health crisis in both 2021 and 2023.) Routinely, students show symptoms of depression, anxiety, have parents struggling with unemployment and financial stress, and worry about the state of our communities.

Too often crisis occur and thankfully, therapy dogs come to schools to help the students process their complex feelings about fear, loss, and even death. Over the last 5 years, Therapy dogs have deployed to schools in recent times due to school shootings, student fatalities (at a bus stop and in a crosswalk at school dismissal) and a student losing their battle with cancer.

On my visits with my therapy dog, I've seen how petting the dogs have helped one student to work through her grief of losing her own dog. The dogs create an atmosphere that allows the students to feel less stressed as they interact with the dogs. I've also observed that it has been beneficial to the staff at the schools as they've interacted with our dogs, communicating that the dogs brighten their days.

Community therapy dog organizations, such as People Animal Love, Pet Partners, Pets on Wheels, Fidos for Freedom and the National Capital Therapy Dogs provide handlers and dogs free of charge. Schools (and other facilities like nursing homes, veteran centers, and libraries) do not have to pay any fees for the visits. This is a tremendous resource to help those in emotional need.

The court system in Maryland already has a highly successful Court Dog Program, passed into law in 2020-MD Code, Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 9-501. This program provides therapy dogs for youth in the court setting that may be called as a witness of part of a trial. Now is the time to replicate this program in Maryland schools. (Note: no student is forced to participate for any reason)

Dogs are natural therapists and non-verbally connect with students on a deep level. I hope you will support the Therapy Dogs in School bill, which is an educational mental health bill with **no fiscal note**. It is a bill that needs to be legislated. The bill requires that county Boards of Education allow, subject to requirements and policies, the use of therapy dogs in schools and provide access for these therapeutic services in schools and during times of crisis. All students deserve access to therapy dog visits, and this Bill removes any inequity so that schools across the State have legislation promoting these free, impactful programs.

Thank you for promoting Therapy Dogs in Schools as Maryland law.

Therapy dogs provide comfort, especially following crises, alleviate anxiety, lower testing stress, and increase school attendance. Both the dogs and their handlers are assessed for temperament, complete training and evaluation, and are certified and insured by recognized therapy dog organizations. Students have an opt out if they do not want to participate, or for any other reason such as an allergy.

As you know, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has piloted this program with great success. Maryland is the trendsetter and the first state in the nation to promote these services which have such a great impact on students and staff. There is a promise that this will go nationwide once Governor Moore signs the bill in July 2026.

Thank you for all of your hard work for schools and consideration of this excellent bill.

Sincerely,

Joanne Harrington (kaoru.harrington@gmail.com)

Fidos for Freedom Volunteer (Dog Handler)

SB299_MSEA_Lamb_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Lauren Lamb

Position: FAV

FAVORABLE
Senate Bill 299
County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Senate Committee on Education, Energy, and the Environment
February 27, 2026

Lauren Lamb
Government Relations

The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 299, which would require county boards of education to establish a policy that allows and sets guidelines for the use of therapy dogs in public schools.

MSEA represents 76,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students so they can pursue their dreams. MSEA also represents 44 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

We appreciate that educators, especially school social workers and counselors, may wish to implement unique yet evidence-based interventions that fit their students' needs. Therapy dogs are an excellent example: a 2021 study notes that "dog-assisted reading programs generally show promising results such as gains in reading skills (e.g., reading accuracy, oral reading fluency, comprehension), as well as more positive attitudes and improved behaviors toward reading."¹ The same study identified that a key barrier to implementing school-based therapy dog programs was a lack of guidelines on the appropriate process.²

This bill does not require schools to implement a certain program. Rather, it creates a policy framework so that educators can pursue a therapy dog program if it fits their school context. Proactively addressing the standards and procedures for the use of therapy dogs would provide educators with a new tool to support students' learning and ensure that, when therapy dogs are used in schools, it is handled safely and thoughtfully.

We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 299.

¹ Grové, C., Henderson, L., Lee, F., & Wardlaw, P. (2021). Therapy Dogs in Educational Settings: Guidelines and Recommendations for Implementation. *Frontiers in veterinary science*, 8, 655104.

[https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8217446/#:~:text=There%20is%20preliminary%20evidence%20which,outcomes%20\(22%2C%2023\).](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8217446/#:~:text=There%20is%20preliminary%20evidence%20which,outcomes%20(22%2C%2023).)

² Ibid.

LOS HB0128 SB0299.pdf

Uploaded by: Mary Margaret Callahan

Position: FAV

On behalf of the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals (AAAIP) and Pet Partners, we respectfully submit this letter in support of HB0128 / SB0299, concerning the inclusion of therapy dogs in Maryland schools.

AAAIP is a professional membership organization that supports individuals who incorporate therapy dogs into paid vocations, including educators, school counselors, and other school-based professionals. Pet Partners is a national leader in animal-assisted interventions and has, for more than four decades, trained, registered, and insured volunteer therapy animal teams—many of whom provide services in educational settings across the country.

We strongly support the intent of SB0299 and commend the legislature for recognizing the potential benefits that appropriately implemented therapy dog programs can offer students, educators, and school communities. When thoughtfully designed and responsibly managed, therapy dog programs can contribute positively to student well-being, social-emotional learning, and school climate.

At the same time, our collective experience underscores the importance of ensuring that such programs are grounded in established evidence-based practices that prioritize student safety, animal welfare, and ethical implementation. The field of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) has developed comprehensive guidance to support these goals. In particular, we wish to respectfully note the existence of two widely recognized resources:

- **The Standards of Practice in Animal-Assisted Interventions**, developed through a multidisciplinary collaboration of professionals and available at therapyanimalstandards.org; and
- **The Competencies for the Ethical Inclusion of Therapy and Facility Animals**, which outlines core knowledge and skills for professionals working with animals in human services and educational environments available at aaaiponline.org/resources/.

These resources reflect current professional consensus and are designed to be applicable across settings, including schools. We believe they may serve as helpful reference points as Maryland considers implementation details, guidance, or future rulemaking related to SB0299.

AAAIP and Pet Partners stand ready to serve as resources to legislators, school administrators, and policymakers as this important work moves forward. We share a common goal of ensuring that therapy dog programs in schools are effective, ethical, and sustainable, and that they operate in a manner that protects both students and the animals involved.

Thank you for your leadership on this issue and for the opportunity to share our perspective. We appreciate your consideration and support of responsible, evidence-informed approaches to animal-assisted interventions in Maryland schools.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Margaret Callahan

marymargaretc@petpartners.org

425-679-5507

Chief Mission Officer | Pet Partners

Director of Education, Standards and Certification | AAAIP

2026 MOTA SB 299 Senate Side.pdf

Uploaded by: Michael Paddy

Position: FAV



Maryland Occupational Therapy Association

PO Box 36401, Towson, Maryland 21286 ♦ mota-members.com

Committee:	Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Bill Number:	Senate Bill 299
Title:	County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools
Hearing Date:	February 27, 2026
Position:	Support

The Maryland Occupational Therapy Association (MOTA) supports Senate Bill 299 - County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools. This bill requires county boards of education to allow therapy dogs in public schools and to adopt formal policies governing their use. The policies must address certification standards, handler requirements, permitted locations and times, parent and staff notification, and accommodations for allergies or discomfort.

Occupational therapy practitioners support this bill because therapy dogs can help students improve emotional regulation, attention, and social participation which are all core areas of school-based occupational therapy. Animal-assisted interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety, increase engagement, and support sensory regulation, which can make it easier for students to participate in classroom tasks and therapeutic activities. By requiring clear policies and safety standards, the bill also creates a structured framework that allows therapy dogs to be used safely and consistently as part of supportive school services.

We ask for a favorable report. If we can provide any further information, please contact Michael Paddy at mpaddy@policypartners.net.

SB299 FAV Therapy Dogs NAMI MD.pdf

Uploaded by: Morgan Mills

Position: FAV

February 27, 2026

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

NAMI Maryland and our 11 local affiliates across the state represent a network of more than 60,000 families, individuals, community-based organizations, and service providers. NAMI Maryland is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to providing education, support, and advocacy for people living with mental illnesses, their families, and the wider community.

We fully support SB299 and urge a favorable report.

Children go through developmental phases that include changes in their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

NAMI Maryland believes that policies should enable schools, public and private, to increase access to appropriate mental health services.

Hugging and speaking with an animal who won't judge you for your feelings or thoughts is cathartic and helps people get through tough times. Research has shown that therapy dogs can reduce stress and anxiety, provide comfort and companionship, and encourage socialization.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.

Testimony in support of SB0299 - Therapy Dogs.pdf

Uploaded by: Richard KAP Kaplowitz

Position: FAV

SB0299_RichardKaplowitz_FAV

02/27/2026

Richard Keith Kaplowitz

Frederick, MD 21703

TESTIMONY ON SB#0299- POSITION: FAVORABLE

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

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

FROM: Richard Keith Kaplowitz

My name is Richard Keith Kaplowitz. I am a resident of District 3, Frederick County. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB#0299, **County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools**

As a student at Frederick Community College I have personal experience with therapy dogs. My friend, Diego, is a joy to interact with every time we encounter each other. Who is Diego?
*Companion dog on community college campus brightens spirits in Frederick*¹

FREDERICK, Md. ([DC News Now](#)) — Chances are on a visit to Frederick Community College, you will encounter Diego, or “Diggy,” a companion dog.

You might refer to him as the staff canine. However, he is family as far as folks on campus are concerned.

Staff at the school refer to Diggy as a “wellness ambassador,” and it doesn’t take much for him to brighten your mood.

Diggy is referred to as a “companion” dog or “facility” dog, as opposed to a therapy dog, because he is just on campus to hang out, brighten the mood, lift spirits and be a source of fun.

Yet, for many students and staff, encounters with Diego are therapeutic for them.

This bill will require a county board of education to allow, subject to certain requirements and policies, the use of therapy dogs in public schools in the county.

Having seen and felt the impact that a dog on campus can have on myself and my fellow students, all of it positive, I wholeheartedly endorse this bill.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on SB#0299.

¹ https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/companion-dog-community-college-campus-203049132.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHwlxYNNi7MFjURZHoVE8x2Sxw51L0e9-QGhKSE6BMXczh8I5WoHyhZIXdEtY8rpGxMIYGIFJ1e4BHxsVtkaWhwiVKed81Z52NtmBwUAvgUeelXRIURp4V-Fh8cxOL_FzpJluA86N-0BZ6GQhV1a7aq5ucn-g2uOYpfvDkHRiA72

HB0128_Hester_fav.pdf

Uploaded by: Sonja Bartolomei

Position: FAV

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

SB 299 - Therapy Dogs in Schools - SWA - personal.

Uploaded by: William Flook

Position: FWA

23746 Lovely Lane, Chestertown, MD 21620

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.

SB299 OPPOSE.pdf

Uploaded by: Grace Wilson

Position: UNF



SB0299 – COUNTY BOARDS OF EDUCATION – THERAPY DOGS – POLICY FOR HANDLING AND USE IN SCHOOLS

February 27, 2026

EDUCATION, ENERGY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

OPPOSE

Grace Wilson, Director of Legislation & Policy (410.440.1758)

Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) opposes **SB0299 – County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools**. This bill requires county boards to allow the use of therapy dogs in public schools in the county. For the purpose of the bill, a therapy dog is a certified or registered dog that is trained to provide affection and comfort to children who need emotional support in school settings. Therapy dogs in public schools must be accompanied by a handler.

Additionally, county boards are required to adopt a policy for the use and handling of therapy dogs in public schools in the county. The policy is required to include: (1) local or national certification or registration requirements for therapy dogs; (2) guidelines for handlers of therapy dogs; (3) guidelines for when and where therapy dogs and handlers are allowed in school buildings; (4) notification requirements for parents, students, and school faculty and staff; (5) and guidelines for the management of students and staff with allergies to dogs or who are uncomfortable around dogs.

AACPS complies with both State and federal law in providing for the use of service animals to individuals with disabilities. Therapy and emotional support dogs do not fall under the scope of these laws. Emotional support animals, comfort animals, and therapy dogs are not considered service animals under Title II and Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Accordingly, this bill would expand the scope and complexity of student support that a school would be required to manage without requiring a documented need for this support. While this legislation defines “therapy dog” as a dog that is “certified” to provide affection and comfort to children who need emotional support in a school setting, there currently is not a legally recognized “certification” for this purpose. As such, this legislation would leave open to interpretation of what dogs could serve as therapy dogs, creating the risk of having disruptive dogs that are not trained causing a disturbance at schools and potential harm to students, teachers, and staff. Having such a dog in schools could have the unintended consequences of creating additional issues for children who are already in need of emotional support.

Accordingly, AACPS respectfully requests an **UNFAVORABLE** committee report on SB0299.

SB 299 - Oppose - Therapy Dogs in Schools .pdf

Uploaded by: Sam Mathias

Position: UNF



621 Ridgely Avenue, Suite 300, Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-5414 · 800-841-8197 · Fax: 410-841-6580 · MABE.org

BILL: Senate Bill 299
TITLE: County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools
HEARING DATE: February 27, 2026
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Education, Energy, and the Environment
CONTACT: Sam Mathias, Legal & Policy Director (smathias@mabe.org)

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the State’s local boards of education, **respectfully opposes Senate Bill 299, County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools.**

SB 299 requires local boards of education to establish a policy for the use and handling of therapy dogs in public schools, allowing their use with requirement and policy parameters. This bill also outlines the requirements for each local board of education’s therapy dog policy, including registration, guidelines, and safety considerations.

MABE respects and understands the research of the benefits of therapy dogs in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression in humans, just to name a few. However, SB 299 requires that local school boards allow the use of therapy dogs in all public schools, usurping the power of local school boards to make decisions that are in direct response to the needs of their communities. Additionally, unlike the federal American with Disabilities Act that has a specific definition of “service dog” and significant guidance on service dogs, there is no parallel in state or federal law for therapy dogs. As a result, there has not been consistent application of what constitutes a “certified” therapy dog. Therefore, while MABE recognizes the benefits that animals can provide for students and staff, MABE supports the ability of local boards to pass and implement policies in response to the needs of their school systems, rather than as a result of a mandate from the State.

For these reasons, **MABE opposes SB 299 and respectfully requests an unfavorable report.**

SB 299 - County Boards of Education - Therapy Dog

Uploaded by: Zaniah Anderson

Position: UNF



PSSAM
Public School Superintendents' Association
OF MARYLAND

Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director
1217 S. Potomac Street
Baltimore, MD 21224
410-935-7281
marypat.fannon@pssam.org

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

