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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

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

The Maryland Psychological Association (MPA), which represents over 1,000 doctoral-level psychologists across the state, writes in SUPPORT of House Bill 128 - County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools. 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.

The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health emphasizes that schools are uniquely positioned to support student mental health by fostering learning, relationships, and a sense of belonging. At the same time, negative school experiences—such as bullying, academic stress, and social isolation—can contribute to or exacerbate mental health challenges. Maryland has been a national leader in expanding access to school-based mental health services, recognizing that teachers and school staff are often the first to identify early signs of distress and can provide support in the environment where challenges arise.

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. A randomized controlled trial found that dog-assisted interventions significantly reduced cortisol levels, a physiological marker of stress, among students in both mainstream and special education school settings (Meints et al., 2022). Additional research has documented improvements in students’ social and learning engagement, school attendance, self-regulation, mood, and confidence (Baird, Berger, & Grove, 2023). Importantly, the literature 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 (Baird et al., 2023).



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Therapy dogs have been used successfully for many years in Maryland hospitals and rehabilitation centers and have expanded into Maryland courts to support child and veteran witnesses. More recently, therapy dog programs have been implemented with success in Kent and Montgomery County Public Schools. Taken together, this evidence supports the rationale underlying HB 128: **with appropriate policy guardrails, therapy dogs represent a promising, safe, and supportive addition to Maryland's school well-being and youth mental health efforts statewide.**

Thank you for considering our comments on HB 128. If we can provide any additional information or be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact the Chair of MPA's Legislative Committee, Dr. Stephanie Olarte, at mpalegislativcommittee@gmail.com.

Respectfully submitted,

Stephanie Wolf, JD, Ph.D.
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President

Stephanie Olarte, Ph.D.
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Chair, MPA Legislative Committee

cc: Barbara Brocato & Dan Shattuck, MPA Government Affairs