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January 27, 2026

BILL: HB 128/SB 0299 – County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

COMMITTEE: Ways and Means

POSITION: Support

RE: Statement of Support

Dear Chairwoman Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, Honorable Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

I am Alita-Geri Carter, the owner of Qualequity Access, LLC., a consultancy grounded in data-driven transformation that advocates for quality, equity, access, and accessibility in healthcare and education. I am the mother of two children with disabilities, a former practicing nursing practitioner, special education parent advocate, and public health servant.

I am writing to express my strong support for **House Bill 128**, which would require county boards of education to establish policies for the use of therapy dogs in public schools. This legislation represents a vital step in addressing the escalating mental health crisis facing our youth.

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) underscores the critical need for school-based emotional support:

- **High Prevalence:** Approximately **1 in 5 children** aged 3 to 17 in the U.S. (roughly 20.9%) have been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral health condition (CDC, 2025).
- **Persistent Emotional Distress:** As of 2023, nearly **40% of high school students** reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year (CDC, 2024).
- **Treatment Gaps:** Despite high need, it is estimated that only about **20% of children** with mental health disorders receive specialized care from mental health providers (CDC, 2025).

By mandating that county boards adopt policies for therapy dogs, HB 128 leverages a proven method for providing affection and comfort to children in need of emotional support. Therapy dogs are specifically trained to mitigate stress and foster a sense of safety, making them an ideal intervention for the school setting.

Ensuring that every county has clear guidelines for handlers, certification, and school building access will allow for the safe and effective integration of these animals into our educational system. I urge you to issue a favorable report on HB 128 to provide our students with this much-needed resource.

I respectfully urge a Favorable report on HB 128.



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Respectfully Submitted,
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