

January 30, 2026

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

Dear Chair Wilkens, Vice Chair Feldmark, & Members of the Ways & Means Committee:

I am writing to express my support for **House Bill 0128, County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools**. In my work as a licensed school psychologist in public schools and as a licensed psychologist in private practice, I have seen the amazing benefits therapy dogs have on wellbeing. Specifically, I have worked with credentialed, insured therapy dog and handler pairs in animal-assisted therapy, critical incident response, and programs designed to support reading skills in students with disabilities.

Therapy dogs are known to help students work through their emotions. The National Institutes of Health reports that interacting with dogs can positively affect brain chemistry by lowering stress and promoting positive emotions. Students have even shown improvements in school attendance directly linked to their interactions with therapy dogs.

This bill has been working its way through the legislature in some form for many years – it is time for it to pass. The wellbeing and mental health of our students are suffering. The most recent statistics from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System indicated 28% of high school students and 22% of middle school students report that their mental health is “not good.” Additionally, 36% of high school students and 33% of middle school students reported that they are “persistently sad,” while 17% considered suicide, 14% made a suicide plan, and 9% reported suicide attempts. Therapy dogs certainly are not a panacea for the mental health challenges of our youth, but they are an integral part of the continuum of student supports and should be widely and readily available in schools.

Importantly, some Maryland school systems, such as Montgomery County Public Schools, have demonstrated that having partnerships with therapy dog organizations is both highly beneficial and extremely cost effective. This bill does not open the door to any person who wants to bring their dog into a school; rather, it ensures school systems have a policy in place to guarantee that dogs and handlers are properly trained, credentialed, and insured.

Simply put, this legislation is cost effective and beneficial for our schools and students, and I respectfully urge a favorable report.

Respectfully,



Kyle Potter, Ph.D., NCSP