



WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 128 / SB 299
County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools
Submitted by: *Rene Averitt-Sanzone, Executive Director, The Parents' Place of Maryland*
Committee: House Ways & Means / Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Support

Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of **HB 128 / SB 299**, legislation that would allow local school systems to use therapy dogs in public schools and require each county board to adopt strong, consistent policies governing their use.

As the Executive Director of **The Parents' Place of Maryland (PPMD)**, a statewide family-led organization that supports thousands of families of children and loved ones with disabilities, special healthcare needs, and behavioral health challenges each year, I see firsthand the importance of creating safe, supportive learning environments—particularly for students who experience anxiety, trauma, emotional regulation challenges, or difficulty connecting in traditional school settings.

Therapy dogs can be an evidence-based, low-cost intervention that helps students regulate emotions, reduce stress, improve attendance, and build positive relationships with caring adults. Many Maryland schools already request these supports, but the absence of consistent statewide policy creates confusion, uneven implementation, and uncertainty about safeguards. HB 128 / SB 299 addresses this gap in a thoughtful and responsible way. The bill requires every county board of education to allow therapy dogs in schools—**but only with strong safeguards in place**, including:

- Clear **certification or registration requirements** for therapy dogs
- **Guidelines for handlers** to ensure safety and professionalism
- Specific parameters for **when and where therapy dogs may be present** in school buildings
- **Notification procedures** for families, staff, and students
- Requirements to appropriately accommodate individuals with **allergies, fear of dogs, or cultural considerations**

These are exactly the types of guardrails families expect and deserve. For many students—especially those managing anxiety, grief, mental health needs, or disability-related challenges—therapy dogs can be a meaningful source of comfort and regulation. Schools frequently reach out for tools that are non-stigmatizing, accessible, and supportive of the whole child. Therapy dogs meet that need.



This legislation does **not** mandate that schools acquire therapy dogs, nor does it diminish the importance of trained mental health professionals. Instead, it creates a consistent framework so that schools wishing to use therapy dogs can do so **safely, ethically, and with clear expectations.**

PPMD urges a **Favorable** report on HB 128 / SB 299. Thank you for your leadership and for your commitment to Maryland's children and families.

Respectfully submitted,

Rene Averitt-Sanzone

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