



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

HB0128: Therapy Dogs - Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Ways and Means Committee

Thursday, February 5th - 1:00 pm

Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, Members of the House Ways & Means Committee,

The presence of therapy dogs in schools, nursing homes, and other public spaces has grown significantly in recent years 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. A growing body of research on animal-assisted interventions demonstrates that therapy dogs can deliver measurable socio-emotional, cognitive, and health benefits across diverse age groups.

HB0128 would require each Local Education Agency to establish a policy permitting trained and certified therapy dogs and their handlers in public schools, while ensuring a safe, structured, and well-supervised environment. Every therapy dog would be accompanied by a qualified handler, and each county school board would retain local flexibility to determine how therapy dog programs are implemented based on community needs and school capacity.

At a minimum, these policies must address certification and training standards for therapy dogs, qualifications and expectations for handlers, designated locations and times when dogs may be present on school grounds, procedures for notifying parents, students, teachers, and staff, and clear accommodations for individuals with allergies, phobias, or other sensitivities. This framework balances access with accountability, allowing schools to benefit from therapy dog programs while safeguarding student health and comfort.

Organizations such as the Alliance of Therapy Dogs and similar national accrediting bodies have documented consistent positive outcomes in educational settings ranging from early childhood classrooms to college campuses. Schools that incorporate therapy dogs often report higher attendance, reduced anxiety, improved focus, and stronger problem-solving and social skills among students.¹ These improvements are not anecdotal; they are supported by peer-reviewed

¹ Anderson, K. L., & Olson, M. R. (2006). [The value of a dog in a classroom of children with severe emotional disorders](#). *Anthrozoös*, 19(1), 35–49.

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research demonstrating reductions in stress hormones, improvements in mood, and increased student engagement following structured interactions with therapy animals.

These benefits are especially meaningful in light of recent youth mental health data in Maryland showing that more than one in four high school students reports poor mental health, and over one-third reports persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.² 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 and more supportive school climates.

HB0128 ensures that Maryland public schools can responsibly access these evidence-based benefits by establishing clear statewide expectations while preserving local control. With defined standards for training, supervision, communication, and accommodations, this legislation promotes both student well-being and operational clarity for educators.

I urge the Committee to give a favorable report on HB0128.

² [Youth Risk Behavior Survey/Youth Tobacco Survey](#)