

Principal Scott Smith Testimony-HB0128 –County Boards of Education Therapy Dogs Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Good afternoon. My name is Scott Smith, and I'm the principal of Northwest High School in Montgomery County, Maryland.

I want to begin with a snapshot of a typical day in my role. Before lunchtime, I may have supported a student experiencing anxiety, helped a teacher manage burnout, met with a family worried about their child's mental health, and responded to an unexpected crisis. This is the daily reality in schools today. Our young people are carrying significant academic pressure, social stress, and emotional weight—and schools are often where that shows up first.

Every Wednesday at lunch, something different happens at Northwest High School. Therapy dogs visit our building. The impact is immediate and visible. Students who are usually rushed or guarded slow down. Students who struggle with anxiety take a breath. Students who don't always feel connected find a moment of calm and belonging. I've watched students who rarely engage with adults open up while sitting on the floor petting a dog. In just a few minutes, stress levels drop and smiles appear.

These therapy dogs are not a novelty. They are a powerful, research-supported tool that promotes emotional regulation and well-being.

And the impact doesn't stop there. When students are calmer, they are better able to focus. When they feel safe, they engage more fully. When their emotional needs are supported, learning improves. Attendance improves. Behavior improves. School becomes a place they want to be.

As a principal, I am constantly balancing safety, accountability, and care. Therapy dogs help us do all three. They allow us to support mental health proactively—before issues escalate into crises. And they send a clear message to students: you are seen, you are supported, and you matter.

This bill gives school systems across Maryland the encouragement and clarity to expand practices like this. From my perspective, leading a high school every day, this is a practical, compassionate, and effective way to support students.

Thank you for your time and thank you for advocating for the well-being of Maryland's students.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to share a practitioner's perspective. I look forward to Thursday's hearing.

Respectfully,

Scott Smith

Principal

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Scott E. Smith



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