

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

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Good afternoon, Madame Chair, Madame Vice Chair, and members of the Ways and Means Committee.

My name is Harriet Lurensky Kuhn, and this is Louie. I am in my 35th year as a school psychologist—26 years in DC Public Schools and now my 10th year in Montgomery County Public Schools. I sat in this very seat six years ago, testifying in support of allowing therapy dogs in all Maryland schools. The pandemic interrupted that effort and it was also suggested that the bill was in need of additional evidence based data to move forward. We have it all now and therapy dogs are now permitted in all MCPS schools. MCPS has successfully piloted a school therapy dog program across all schools in the district with 5 agencies through the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU's) with the district, and their therapy dog teams—fully vetted and trained volunteers—This is the right time to pass this bill statewide.

HB0128/SB0299 has no fiscal note. It establishes a consistent, statewide framework that ensures safe, responsible, and equitable implementation across the state—while still allowing each school system the flexibility to create policies that meet local needs. As both a psychologist and a therapy dog handler, I have seen firsthand the difference a therapy dog can make to help students in crisis. The dog/handler teams are first responders after a crisis and I have watched how the children/staff respond after a tragedy when a student was killed by a driver. Dog/handler teams have responded to multiple crises in MCPS this year and in past years, as well.

I am a witness to a growing mental-health crisis among our students— Children across Maryland are struggling with suicidal ideations, drug use, anxiety, grief, depression, and school avoidance. Mental health providers work hard to do what we can, but there are large gaps and the needs far outpace the staff.

Therapy dogs are not a luxury item. They are an important mental health tool. These trained handler-dog teams provide an evidence-based, no-cost, high-impact intervention that helps dysregulated students become ready and available to learn. Research consistently shows that interactions with therapy animals promote feelings of safety and improve mood—exactly the conditions necessary for academic success. Some therapy dogs also serve as READ dogs, supporting reluctant readers in developing confidence and fluency.

Yet in many Maryland schools, therapy dogs are still banned or inconsistently allowed. The lack of clear statewide guidance leaves districts hesitant to use a tool that schools want and students crave. Everyone will benefit from having the trained dogs in schools.

I respectfully urge you to give HB0128 a PAWSITIVE vote of confidence so it has the opportunity to soar out of committee. This way every school system in Maryland has the guidance and opportunity to use therapy dogs to support students and staff in schools.

Thank you and I am grateful to all of you.