

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2020 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 981
Ways and Means

(Delegate Guyton, *et al.*)

County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Certification and Use in Schools

This bill requires each local board of education to allow, and adopt a policy for, the use of therapy dogs in public schools. Under the bill, a “therapy dog” is a dog that is certified to provide affection and comfort to children who need emotional support in a school setting. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2020.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None.

Local Effect: Beginning in FY 2021, local school systems that currently do not allow for the use of therapy dogs in public schools experience operational changes, but any associated costs are not likely to be material. Revenues are not affected.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: State law does not require local boards of education to allow the use of therapy dogs in public schools.

Background: According to an ASCD [“Education Update” article](#), therapy dogs can be used for occasional educational interventions and brief visits with students and faculty, or they can be part of more regular and in-depth programming. The article suggests that school systems should determine what goals are to be met by allowing therapy dogs on-site, such as goals related to literacy, overall school climate, or social and emotional support. The article also indicates that among items to consider when adopting a therapy dog policy are

making the right choice of dog(s), addressing pet allergies and any individual's fear of dogs, and setting schoolwide expectations. Some therapy dog programs in school systems benefit from nonprofit/volunteer efforts, thus averting costs to the school system.

Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) advises that, in addition to policy permitting services animals for individuals with disabilities (which is consistent with federal law, including the Americans with Disabilities Act), BCPS policy allows for emotional support, therapy, comfort, and companion animals on a case-by-case basis upon request, and subject to certain requirements. Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) advises that it is not aware of the use of therapy dogs in its public schools.

Local Expenditures: Each local board of education must allow use of therapy dogs, but a local board does not have to provide therapy dogs or provide or pay for their certification. School systems experience operational effects, to the extent they do not currently allow use of therapy dogs in public schools. Montgomery County Public Schools advises the bill has no fiscal impact on its school system. Despite already having a policy, BCPS advises the bill may have operational effects and could lead to increased costs. PGCPS assumes operational effects are likely but is unable to estimate any fiscal effect without knowing how permissive the local policy will be regarding the use of therapy dogs.

This analysis assumes that each local board of education may decide how permissive and expansive its policy will be regarding the use of therapy dogs and that some school systems may benefit from volunteer and nonprofit involvement in provision of therapy dog services. Therefore, any costs to local school systems due to the bill are minimal.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Designated Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Maryland State Department of Education; Baltimore City Public Schools; Montgomery County Public Schools; Prince George's County Public Schools; ASCD, Department of Legislative Services

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an/rhh

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