

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2021 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 409 (Senator Kramer)
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling 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 and requires a handler to accompany each therapy dog in school. The policy must include (1) certification requirements for therapy dogs; (2) guidelines for handlers; (3) guidelines for when therapy dogs and handlers are allowed in school buildings; (4) notification requirements; and (5) guidelines for the management of students and staff with allergies or who are uncomfortable around dogs. 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. A “handler” is an individual who provides care and training for the therapy dog. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2021.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None.

Local Effect: Beginning in FY 2022, 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 likely to be minimal and depend on the exact policies adopted by school boards and on the prevalence of therapy dogs in a school district. 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.

Local Expenditures: Each local board of education must allow the use of therapy dogs, but a local board does not have to provide therapy dogs or provide or pay for their certification, training, or handler. School systems experience operational effects to the extent they do not currently allow the use of therapy dogs in public schools. 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.

Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) advises that the bill will raise expenditures by about \$287,000 annually. PGCPS notes that these expenditures reflect the additional cleaning that would be required by custodians at every school in Prince George's County and the need to develop a training plan that school nurses can deliver in after school training sessions to all school staff. However, the Department of Legislative Services advises the bill does not require the use of therapy dogs at every school, or that nurses provide training to all school staff. School cleaning costs may increase as a result of additional cleaning under guidelines developed by local school boards to accommodate the management of student and staff with allergies. However, such costs are likely to be minimal and will depend on the prevalence of therapy dogs within a school system. PGCPS estimates that for every school with a therapy dog, an additional 15 minutes of cleaning will be required each day resulting in \$1,200 in annual expenditures per school with a therapy dog.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Designated Cross File: HB 713 (Delegate Guyton) - Ways and Means.

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

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