

EQUITY FOR ALL KIDS



To: Chair Kaiser and members of the Ways and Means Committee
From: Jamesha Caldwell, Education Policy Legislative Intern
Re: HB 0981: County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Certification and Use in Schools
Date: March 6, 2020
Position: Support

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 0981: County Boards of Education - Therapy Dogs - Certification and Use in Schools. Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY) support this bill.

In 2018, Maryland had the 10th highest rate of chronic absenteeism in the nation; "the number of students absent 10% or more of school days during the year for any reason excused or unexcused"¹. As a result of the national ranking, there has been a public and critical call for the state's investment in the root-cause analysis of absenteeism for students in an effort to further address the needs of students in eliminating the occurrence of absenteeism².

For many students, chronic absenteeism can pose **drastic and detrimental consequences that impact their educational trajectory and outcomes**. Students who are unable to attend class often miss valuable academic instruction and peer social interactions, which can result in unfavorable grade reports, disciplinary action, and the social isolation of students. And while the consequences of absenteeism are critical in addressing and evaluating the types of academic and social support that needs to arise as a result of absenteeism, the contributing factors of its occurrence are dire.

In 2012, the Baltimore Attendance Campaign found that students who are chronically absent, often face many **economic, social, and health barriers** that prevent and or discourage school attendance³. For many, the experiences of barriers can often onset and or continue the cycle of chronic absenteeism. Examples can include the experiences of health barriers for students. In the National Education Association's 2017 study, researchers found that psychological and emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression can have debilitating symptoms that either begins the occurrence of absenteeism and or morph into a response that continues the cycle absenteeism⁴.

HB0981 is a critical first step in addressing the occurrence and cycle of absenteeism for Maryland students. Though extremely simplistic in concept, through the usage of therapy dogs in public schools, HB0981 will be **equipping administrators with**

¹ Data Matters: Using Chronic Absence to Accelerate Action for Student Success, September 2018.

² Every Student Succeeds Act, August 2018.

³ State of Chronic Absenteeism and School Health: A Preliminary Review for the Baltimore Community, 2012.

⁴ Chronic Absenteeism NEA Research Brief, 2017.

an alternative form of emotional and social support for students that would ultimately address absenteeism. In that, the usage of therapy dogs would also be extremely crucial in assisting students with de-escalation skills for the debilitating symptoms of panic, anger, and anxiety thus further promoting the engagement of administration in understanding and assessing the needs of students through an alternative lens. For the reasons above, **ACY urges a favorable report.**