

Thank you to Chair Kaiser and all the members of the Ways and Means Committee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of House Bill 713.

As the Chief Mission Officer for Pet Partners, I am pleased to be able to support HB 713 and the benefits of therapy dogs in schools. Established in 1977, Pet Partners is the national leader in demonstrating and promoting the health and wellness benefits of therapy animals. With more than 10,000 registered teams making more than 3 million visits annually, Pet Partners is a respected nonprofit organization registering volunteer therapy animal teams to the most rigorous standards in the industry.

Our therapy animal teams visit in a variety of settings with many different populations including with patients in recovery, people with intellectual disabilities, seniors living with Alzheimer's, veterans with PTSD, people who have experienced crisis events, those approaching end of life, as well as students in school – all with the goal of improving human health and well-being through the human-animal bond.

While many of us intuitively understand the benefits of positive interactions with animals in our lives, the body of empirical evidence supporting work with therapy animals has also become increasingly robust.

The findings from research on animal-assisted interventions in educational settings give us plenty of evidence to suggest the positive impacts of incorporating therapy animals in the classroom. Research has shown that therapy animals may help with the following aspects in learning environments:

- Foster reading abilities, such as reading rate, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.
- Enhance primary skills such as object recognition and categorization.
- Reducing stress levels, especially surrounding events like final exams.
- Provide a source of motivation, stimulation, and focus in learning.

Bringing animals into schools, of course, should be done thoughtfully, intentionally, and with steps to mitigate risk. Fortunately, publications such as *Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Interventions* which articulate guidelines for therapy animal and their handlers can be an excellent resource for school boards adopting policies to ensure both safe and effective interaction.

Pet Partners is excited to see the state of Maryland leading the nation in proactive legislation around therapy animals and we are happy to support HB 713. I'm available to answer any questions you may have.

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Pet Partners, Chief Mission Officer

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