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Ways and Means Committee

Education Subcommittee

Finance Resources Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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In Support of HB 713 – County Boards of Education – Therapy Dogs – Policy for Handling and Use in Schools

Dear Madame Chair and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for your consideration of HB713 to allow Therapy Dogs in Maryland Public Schools with guidelines to be developed by County Boards of Education. Currently there is no consistent policy that either prohibits or allows therapy dogs in schools and to educators this lack of guidance is confusing and HB713 clarifies this issue.

Therapy dogs are not service animals or emotional support animals. Animal - Assisted Therapy is defined by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations as “goal-oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human service...for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans.”

Animal Assisted Therapy may sound like a “feel good” solution but there is actually very solid science behind the significant benefits of allowing therapy dogs in school settings. Studies have demonstrated that interacting with a therapy dog once a week is successful in reducing depression and anxiety and alleviating the effects of social rejection. Many studies have shown that interaction with a canine has demonstrable effects on physiological correlates of stress such as blood pressure and cortisol levels. Academically, students who interact with therapy dogs show increased school attendance, demonstrated behavioral changes and decreases in office referrals, gains in confidence and motivation and significant increases in reading and writing levels (15-30% percent). My own sons learned to read with the Karma Dogs Literacy program at our local library.

There are over 4000 schools using the most common preK-12 volunteer curriculum program in US schools and therapy dogs are in every state and many countries. New York City Public Schools began a Comfort Dog pilot program in seven schools to improve school climate and culture and teach social emotional learning. All students have access to the program but it is particularly mandated for students who require counseling and students with special education needs. Students with ASD respond particularly well to these interventions. The program is an integral part of the school systems crisis intervention protocols and used to de-escalate violent situations. The school system describes the dogs as part of the counseling team. After one year, the program has grown from 7 to 40 schools and is considered an incredibly impactful and cost-

effective intervention. AND they are adorable! I did introduce this bill at the very end of last session and in the interim have tried to address concerns shared by county Boards by providing more guidance in the bill regarding certification, insurance and notification in particular.

I have a short video for you demonstrating the hard work of Captain- a therapy dog in DC school system and I ask for a favorable report for HB 713.

Sincerely,

Delegate Michele Guyton

- **Legal liability.** There are a number of reliable and well experienced organizations such as Pet Partners and Therapy Dogs International who help train, evaluate and sponsor their dog handlers. Dog handlers representing these organizations carry significant insurance coverage of \$1-2 million dollars to cover potential risks or liabilities. Furthermore, consent forms can be provided for children and parents to ensure full awareness and to deter potential liability.
- **Allergic reactions.** Understandably, parents and educators may be concerned about potential allergic reactions to dogs within the school environment. However, qualified dog handlers are required by their organizations to meet cleanliness and grooming requirements minimizing allergic contact. Dogs also are only put in situations where students voluntarily participate thus avoiding risky contact.
- **Animal maintenance.** Reliable therapy dog organizations require regular veterinarian checks for their dogs along with regular evaluations of their handlers to maintain their certification status. Competent dog handlers are trained to watch for potential harm to either a child or their own dog and are primarily responsible to manage the animal when on site.
- **Fear of dogs.** There is no doubt that some children have had very traumatic experiences with a pet and thus have a severe fear of contact with a dog for example. Because the therapy dog program is implemented by permission or voluntarily, and only in areas where unwanted contact with a dog can be avoided, the fear issue can be minimized. Experience and research has also shown that with proper guidance and handling, children can learn to overcome their fear of animals and with it, grow in respect and appreciation of them.