

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 299 (Senator Hester, *et al.*)
Education, Energy, and the Environment

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 and where 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 trained to provide affection and comfort to children who need emotional support in a school setting and is certified or registered as a therapy dog. A “handler” is an individual who provides care and training for the therapy dog. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None. The bill pertains only to local school systems.

Local Effect: Beginning in FY 2027, 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 absorbable within existing resources, as discussed below. Revenues are not affected.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Current Law: With the assistance of the Local Health Department (LHD), each local board of education must provide adequate school health services, instruction in health

education, and a healthful school environment. The Maryland State Department of Education and the Maryland Health Department must jointly develop public standards and guidelines for school health programs and offer assistance to the local boards of education and LHDs in their implementation. Each local school system must designate a school health services program coordinator, but it may authorize the LHD to designate a coordinator.

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 under the bill, but a local board does not have to provide therapy dogs or provide or pay for their certification, registration, training, or a 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 or 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 and absorbable within existing resources.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: HB 128 (Delegate Vogel) - Ways and Means.

Information Source(s): Maryland State Department of Education; Anne Arundel County Public Schools; Baltimore City Public Schools; Frederick County Public Schools; Montgomery County Public Schools; Prince George's County Public Schools; St. Mary's County Public Schools; Wicomico County Public Schools; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 3, 2026
sj/mcr

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