

Model Legislation: Therapy Animals in Schools

PURPOSE

This bill requires a local education agency to create a policy for the handling of a therapy animal if a school within the local education agency provides animal-assisted interventions. This bill does not require a school to allow the presence of a therapy animal.

DEFINITIONS

- “Therapy animal” means an animal that successfully completes a program operated by an organization that registers or certifies a therapy animal and the animal’s handler as meeting or exceeding the standards of practice in animal-assisted interventions. Therapy animal does not include a service animal or emotional support animal unless that animal has also completed a therapy animal program.
- “Handler” means the individual volunteer or paid professional responsible for the animal during interactions with members of the public, who has received training meeting or exceeding the standards of practice in animal-assisted interventions.
- “Local education agency” means a school district or charter school.
- “Animal-assisted interventions” is an intervention that intentionally incorporates therapy animals for the purpose of promoting improvement in an individual’s physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functioning.
- “Standards of practice in animal-assisted interventions” are the minimum qualifications for therapy animals and handlers based on peer reviewed, empirical evidence. Available publicly at www.therapyanimalstandards.org.

BILL LANGUAGE

If a school within a local education agency provides animal-assisted interventions, the local education agency shall adopt a policy for proper handling of a therapy animal on school grounds. The policy shall include:

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- Requirement that the therapy animal and handler team possess current credentials from a local or national therapy animal organization aligned with the standards of practice in animal-assisted interventions;
 - Requirement that a therapy animal is always accompanied by a handler;
 - Requirement that the therapy animal and handler hold for appropriate insurance coverage;
 - Guidelines for when and where a therapy animal and handler are allowed on school grounds;
 - Notice requirement for parents, students, and school faculty and staff regarding the presence of a therapy animal on school grounds; and
 - Guidelines to prevent students and staff who have an animal allergy or are uncomfortable around animals from interacting with a therapy animal while on school grounds.