

SENATE BILL 1867

By Hensley

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49,
relative to therapy dogs in schools.

WHEREAS, the General Assembly finds that school children encounter challenges at school, including, but not limited to, learning difficulties, bullying, anxiety, depression, and other emotional challenges that may adversely affect their learning and well-being; and

WHEREAS, schooling plays an important role in providing support to children who experience such challenges; and

WHEREAS, studies, including "Therapy Dogs and School Wellbeing: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* 68 (Oct. 2023), demonstrate that a therapy dog, which is defined as a calm, obedient canine that is trained to provide support, comfort, and companionship to people in educational, health, and therapeutic settings, may improve the well-being of children who encounter challenges at school with regard to learning difficulties, bullying, anxiety, depression, and other emotional challenges; and

WHEREAS, following the implementation of therapy dog programs in educational settings for students in pre-kindergarten through grade twelve, school officials have reported improvement in the students' mood, anxiety, stress, motivation, emotional skills, attendance, and social and communications skills. See "Paws for Intervention: Perceptions About the Use of Dogs in Schools," *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 12 (2017) and "Turning the Page for Spot: The Potential of Therapy Dogs to Support Reading Motivation Among Young Children," *Anthrozoos* 32 (2019); and

WHEREAS, Bolo, a two-year-old Lagotto Romagnolo, also known as an Italian "truffle dog," has been deployed as a therapy dog in schools in Williamson County, Tennessee, with

encouraging results in improving student anxiety, mood, peer pressure, and in assisting students in coping with academic demands; and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly wishes to inaugurate a pilot program to introduce therapy dogs to other LEAs and public charter schools throughout this State; now, therefore, BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 6, Part 3, is amended by adding the following as a new section:

(a) This section is known and may be cited as the "Beyond Ordinary Learning Opportunities (BOLO) Act."

(b) The department of education shall establish a one-year pilot program to place a therapy dog in five (5) public schools in the 2024-2025 school year.

(c) The department shall select at least one (1) public school from each grand division of this state to participate in the pilot program and shall strive to select public charter schools and public schools from a variety of LEAs that serve students in a variety of grade levels. Each school selected to participate must receive a therapy dog.

(d) The department shall establish the requirements for each public school and therapy dog provider participating in the pilot program, including, but not limited to, requirements for the public schools selected to participate in the pilot program to collect and report data regarding the public school's experience with the provided therapy dog.

(e) The department shall submit a report to the general assembly no later than July 1, 2025, providing the results and outcomes of the pilot program and to recommend whether the general assembly should extend the pilot program.

(f) This section is repealed on July 1, 2025.

SECTION 2. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.