Sponsored by:
Senator JAMES BEACH
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SYNOPSIS
Establishes pilot program in DOE to use therapy dogs in public elementary school wellness programs.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT
Introduced Pending Technical Review by Legislative Counsel.
AN ACT establishing a pilot program in the Department of Education on the use of therapy dogs in public elementary school wellness programs.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1. a. The Commissioner of Education shall establish a three-year pilot program to assess the academic and health benefits associated with the use of therapy dogs in public elementary school wellness programs.

   b. A school district that wants to participate in the pilot program shall submit an application to the commissioner. The application shall include, but need not be limited to: the number of elementary schools in the school district; the number of students enrolled in each elementary school; information on student participation in wellness programs at each elementary school; and information on how the school district plans to use therapy dogs to promote student wellness.

   c. The commissioner shall select two districts in each of the southern, central, and northern regions of the State to participate in the program and shall seek a cross section of school districts from urban, suburban, and rural areas of the State.

   d. The commission shall provide pilot districts with guidance regarding the use of therapy dogs in schools including: examples of activities that students may engage in with a therapy dog; recommended training requirements for therapy dog handlers; recommended measures to evaluate the health and appropriate behavior of therapy dogs; and insurance issues relevant to having therapy dogs on school district property.

   e. No later than June 30 of the third school year following the establishment of the pilot program, the commissioner shall submit to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), a report that evaluates the effectiveness of the pilot program in improving the academic performance and health outcomes of students in elementary schools.

2. This act shall take effect immediately.

STATEMENT

This bill establishes a three-year pilot program to assess the academic and health benefits associated with the use of therapy dogs in public elementary school wellness programs. A therapy dog is a dog that has been trained, evaluated, and registered with a handler to provide animal assisted therapy and other animal assisted activities within a school or other facility. Some research suggests
that the use of therapy dogs in schools is associated with improvements in school attendance, confidence, motivation, and reading and writing skills.

Under the bill, a school district that wants to participate in the pilot program is required to submit an application to the commissioner. The application is required to include, but need not be limited to: the number of elementary schools in the school district; the number of students enrolled in each elementary school; information on student participation in wellness programs at each elementary school; and information on how the school district plans to use therapy dogs to promote student wellness.

The commissioner will select two districts in each of the southern, central, and northern regions of the State to participate in the program and will seek a cross section of school districts from urban, suburban, and rural areas of the State.

The commission will provide pilot districts with guidance regarding the use of therapy dogs in schools including: examples of activities that students may engage in with a therapy dog; recommended training requirements for therapy dog handlers; recommended measures to evaluate the health and appropriate behavior of therapy dogs; and insurance issues relevant to having therapy dogs on school district property.

No later than June 30 of the third school year following the establishment of the pilot program, the commissioner will submit to the Governor and to the Legislature a report that evaluates the effectiveness of the pilot program in improving the academic performance and health outcomes of students in elementary schools.