

February 1, 2022

Dear Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Amanda Merillat, and I am an Elementary Dean and a parent of 3 school aged children who reside in St. Leonard- District 27C.

I am writing to ask that you vote in favor of HB376 to establish an Outdoor Preschool Licensing pilot. Here are a few of the reasons why I urge you to support the bill:

Children from low-income communities and those with special needs do not have equitable access to State scholarships or special education and are cut off from the benefits of nature-based early childhood education because immersive outdoor preschools currently cannot be licensed.

A staggering number of childcare programs in Maryland have closed during the Covid-19 pandemic leaving a shortage of options for families. Outdoor preschools offer an alternative form of childcare at a time when many families seek the physical and mental health benefits of being outdoors.

Outdoor preschools promote the skills and values that lead to environmental literacy, which supports goals of the Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature and the K-12 Environmental Literacy Standards required for graduation in Maryland.

I have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, a teaching certification that includes birth through 3rd grade and a master's degree in administration and supervision. I have taught grades K, 1, 2, 3, and 4 for 18 years and I have been in administration for 2 years. Over the years I have noticed a huge increase in childhood obesity. I feel that children spend most of their time on electronics. They sit idle, indoors for hours. When we are outdoors, we are moving, exploring, and we are exposed to more language opportunities which foster early reading, speaking, and listening skills. I believe if preschoolers develop a love, appreciation, and tolerance for the outdoors at an early age they will continue that love as an elementary student and hopefully they will decide to go on a hike instead of going on Tik-Tok. When we are outside, we are receiving Vitamin D. Vitamin D is one of the best, natural, anti-inflammatories that you can consume. We all could use more Vitamin D to support our immune system and fight inflammation. Vitamin D is vital for mental health. Not having enough Vitamin D can lead to depression-like symptoms. Mental health in elementary schools is on a sharp rise, another reason why being outdoors is beneficial for our youngest learners.

Thank you for your time and consideration of H B376. I hope that you will support this important effort and vote in favor of HB376.

Sincerely,
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