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02/02/2022

**RE: Support for HB 376: Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot**

To whom it may concern,

My name is Monica French. I was born, raised, and still reside in Baltimore city. I am the mother of two young children and a passionate early childhood educator. I have 15 years of experience working a teacher, specialized teacher-trainer, and preschool director. My current role is with Baltimore City Recreation and Parks, as the Director of the Forest Preschool at Carrie Murray Nature Center. It is a honor to serve in the city's only nature center, located in the gorgeous Gwynns Falls Leakin Park in west Baltimore. I, along with my colleagues, and all of Baltimore City Recreation and Parks, support bill HB376. This very important legislation aligns with the City's mission to create a healthy and green Baltimore.

Half my career was working in traditional indoor preschool settings, the second half, was in nature-based outdoor school settings. I have witnessed the significant positive effects of outdoor preschool experiences in the children we serve everyday. When children are given the time, space and permission to learn and play outdoors, their confidence, social and communicative skills, motivation and concentration, and understanding of and connectedness to nature, strengthen. Even their immune systems are strengthened by contact with mud, soil, water and exposure to all weather!

Free unstructured, and natural play in nature is of high importance because it is a continuous process of learning. A study by the North American Association for Environmental Education shows that children in Forest Preschools are well prepared for kindergarten, individual learning processes are enhanced, and gained abilities can be transferred to the classroom. Nature-based preschools foster the skills and values that lead to environmental literacy, which supports goals of the K-12 Environmental Literacy Standards required for graduation in Maryland.

The majority of outdoor preschool programs are found in upper-middle class, suburban neighborhoods or rural areas. Unfortunately, children from low-income communities and/or urban areas usually don't have those options. The Forest Preschool at Carrie Murray Nature Center is incredibly lucky to play, explore, and learn under the healthy forest canopy of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park. Yet, we are one preschool, in one Baltimore city park. Our forest preschool program currently has a waiting list of over one hundred families. These families come from all over the city, and they are a reminder of all of those who could benefit from forest preschools in their communities. With all of Baltimore's beautiful parks, that is an exorbitant amount of potential.

Outdoor preschools promote the mission and the three guiding pillars of Baltimore City Recreation and Parks — healthy recreation, conservation, and social equity.

Carrie Murray Nature Center and Carrie Murray's Forest Preschool staff and teachers strongly believe that increasing the opportunities for children to learn outdoors will benefit the City and the State of Maryland. Support children, families, and communities. Please vote yes on HB376!

Sincerely,



Monica French  
Director of Forest Preschool  
Carrie Murray Nature Center  
410-236-7880  
Baltimore, MD 21207