

February 5, 2022

RE: Support for HB 376: Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Dear Ways and Means Committee Members,

My name is Katie Rooney and I am the Director of Early Childhood Education at Irvine Nature Center in Owings Mills. I am also a resident of your districts.

I urge you to vote in favor of HB376 to establish an Outdoor Preschool Licensing pilot and thereby increase access to high quality child care and learning experiences that nurtures the whole child.

Over the last 13.5 years I have had the immense pleasure of working with young children, primarily 3 to 7yrs old, in either nature-based preschool programs or at a charter school in Baltimore city. For the last 4 years I have been the Director of Early Childhood Education at Irvine, directly overseeing our Nature Preschool. At Irvine, we are fortunate enough that we have two indoor classrooms and can therefore be licensed by the state. While we have these classrooms and do use them, we operate primarily outdoors, spending the majority of both the half and full day classes in the woods, meadows, and wetlands.

As a teacher, a director, and now as a parent of an outdoor preschooler, I have witnessed the incredible value and role of play and learning outdoors.

As a parent, nothing means more to me than my 4 yr old's lifelong health, happiness, and ability to thrive and grow into who she is. Without a doubt, the days she is the most in tune with her body, her soul, and with the world around her are her days at Nature Preschool. She is more inquisitive, calmer, more compassionate, and more likely to persevere in the face of challenge. All children deserve to feel that way, regardless of their race or socioeconomic status.

Taking childcare and learning outside...

- helps combat obesity and promotes physical health including improved eye sight.
- exposes children to sensory-rich experiences which offer endless opportunities for strengthening skills in all areas of development . Not just what they can see, feel, hear, and taste, but also their vestibular and proprioceptive senses. So much so that occupational therapists often create obstacle courses and interventions that often mimic the uneven terrain and opportunities to climb and hop outdoors.
- supports cognitive development, especially in regards to boosting creativity and problem-solving! Nature is constantly changing, providing an endless supply of new materials to explore and use, new play ideas, and new questions to think about. Constant change also means new problems arise naturally and children adapt and find solutions to regular meaningful problems regularly. All of this in turn leads to better executive functioning and increased confidence.
- allows children to experience first-hand STEM and environmental science concepts.
- encourages children to move and be in more developmentally appropriate ways. It's hard to be too loud outside or move around too much!

- enables children with developmental needs or learning differences to flourish! For some of these children, the open-ended nature of outdoor programs allows them to better develop skills, especially social emotional skills like interacting with peers and self-regulation.
- improves children's mental and psychological health.
- nurtures a child's sense of connection with the natural world, increasing the likelihood of future acts of stewardship

For all of these reasons and more, outdoor preschool and child care is clearly beneficial. But why do we need these types of programs to be licensed?

Expanding child care licensing to include exclusively outdoor programs also:

- increases the number of licensed child care programs, a desperate need for Maryland families. Just this past year we had a waitlist of over 30 families for our program.
- ensures that outdoor preschool programs are safe and of high quality through regulatory oversight and by instituting teaching and safety standards to mitigate risks and inform best practices unique to outdoor learning.
- Empowers nature-based early childhood educators to access quality professional development through state funds.
- Helps combat the current inequity in access to outdoor programming. The current limitation on number of hours an unlicensed program can operate combined with the ineligibility to participate in the Child Care Scholarship program, makes outdoor programs either too expensive or not feasible with their need for full time care.

When I think about what this bill is capable of doing, I think about the child who needs to move and whose voice is bombastic and pitched. Inside he would be labeled as challenging, disruptive, or worse. Outside he has space to be, he climbs freely, and that boisterous voice is a leading cry that organizes his peers in games or cooperative work.

I think of the child of the single mom, quiet and hesitant to try new things. She lives in a small apartment with no yard or green space. At Nature Preschool she gets regular access to all things alive. She builds her connection to the land and starts to see herself as part of it.

I think of the child learning English, their family recently immigrated. He is reserved and unsure how to communicate. Outside, the language of play is so universal he can jump right in and share.

I think of the child with a congenital muscular condition who has difficulty walking over curbs, up a step stool, or down a hill. Outside, her play and life activities are filled with therapy as she chases after friends in their inventive games over logs, rolls down hills, and scales mulch piles. She has ample opportunities to grow stronger and more confident each day.

I think of the child whose father suddenly and unexpectedly died. Outside he has space to grieve in both big and small ways. When it becomes too much he can run, push the hurt away as he rolls large stumps to help him climb, and splash in the mud to see he can still affect change, that he does indeed have some power and control. Seeking connection, he looks for frogs and salamanders, caring for them gently and teaching his classmates to do the same. Outside, he has space to breathe and can feel the cooling wind and rain. As the seasons and weather changes, he learns that no time of darkness lasts forever, that storms pass and the sun does eventually return.



I think of the kids that joined me regularly for a visit to learn and play once a month. Kids that already carried so much on their little backs: homelessness, food insecurity, trauma upon trauma. I think of how we ran out to play in trickling rain, capturing it on our tongues, filling buckets, making dams. The loudest most explosive child squealed with delight. And suddenly all the tenseness of the indoor lesson melted away. Their teacher whispered to me, "This is wonderful. They need this so much. They never get to *really play and be kids.*"

For these children and all others, I support HB376.

If you're unsure, head outside, find a tree, and breath deep. Then vote **for** HB376.

Sincerely,

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