

**Date February 2, 2022**

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

**Dear Ways and Means Committee,**

**My name is Mary Clair Sonneman and I am a parent, educator and outdoor preschool advocate.**

**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 services 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 child care programs in Maryland have closed during the covid-19 pandemic leaving a shortage of options for families. Outdoor preschools offer an alternative form of child care at a time when many families seek the physical and mental health benefits of being outdoors; and**
- 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.**

**Outdoor preschool programs are a relatively new idea in early childhood education, but they are incredibly popular and in-demand for good reason. Outdoor preschools also known as forest preschools are at the very forefront of a movement in education that is focusing on children being in harmony with nature and also their fellow humans. All of the traditional aspects of preschool are present in an outdoor classroom, but then there is an added layer of inquiry, exploration and discovery that happens on top of it all, leaving children with a deep understanding and appreciation of the natural world. In addition, many of the outdoor preschools have a distinct focus on social and emotional learning. In fact, I would say that the focus on kindness, use of compassion and empowering language, inclusion, validating and making space for understanding emotions, all of these aspects that are prevalent in the US model of outdoor preschools are more critical than ever.**