



Testimony Concerning HB 376
“Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program - Establishment”
Submitted to the House Ways & Means Committee
February 10, 2022

Position: Favorable with Amendment

Maryland Family Network (MFN) respectfully requests an amendment to HB 376, which would require the Maryland State Department of Education by August of this year to establish a three-year pilot program for up to 10 newly defined “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care program[s].”

MFN has worked since 1945 to improve the availability and quality of child care and early childhood education, as well as other supports for children and families in Maryland. We have been active in state and federal debates on child care policy and are strongly committed to ensuring that children, along with their parents, have access to high-quality, affordable programs and educational opportunities.

The concept of outdoor preschools, which operate without indoor space, is intriguing but has not been sufficiently vetted in Maryland. Indeed, only one other state has enacted legislation permitting outdoor preschools. Left unanswered here are fundamental questions: under whose authority and under what recognized standards do outdoor preschools currently operate in Maryland? How are children’s basic health and safety needs ensured? What evidence exists to guide best practices and document children’s outcomes?

MFN would support and happily participate in a more deliberate process to explore the outdoor preschool concept thoroughly, arrive at answers agreed upon by multiple stakeholders, and report back to the General Assembly. MFN strongly believes such an examination should precede the establishment of up to 10 pilot programs. HB 376 regrettably circumvents this necessary step.

In materials they have distributed, the proponents of the legislation acknowledge “the need to conduct a careful review of COMAR 13.A regulations to address these points of concern.” MFN concurs. Therefore, prior to such careful review, MFN urges the Committee to adopt the following amendment: On page 3, in line 11, strike "MAY" and insert "SHALL NOT."