

02/01/2022

RE: Support for HB 376: Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Dear Ways and Means Committee Members,

My name is Amy Beam. I am a nature educator and passionate advocate for helping children and their caregivers to spend time in nature. I have been teaching preschool and school-aged children since 1977 in Maryland and Washington DC. I am the recipient of the 2015 Margaret O'Neill Early Childhood Nature Educator Award and my work has been featured in the PBS documentary Mother Nature's Child, The Washington Post, Montessori Life, The National Association for the Education of Young Children's publication The Great Outdoors, the cable television show Emerald Planet, and others.

I currently serve as Vice-president on the board of directors for the Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools. I also work to train teachers and administrators in nature education. I own and operate Camp Shady Grove and Kids Love Nature! I have seen, first hand and over dozens of years, the immediate and long-term benefits that nature-connection brings to children, their families and their care providers. I've also seen how detrimental the loss of that connection has been in recent years. Mental, emotional and physical health has been declining and is amply restored when nature-connection is provided for.

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. This is because immersive outdoor preschools currently have no avenue to 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 in nature; 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.

Currently, access to nature is generally limited to families who have the means to travel to a park or camp. BIPOC are particularly limited statistically to accessing enriching outdoor adventures. Overcoming obstacles to access consistently and inexpensively generates a multitude of positive results in health and well-being for participants. Licensing forest kindergartens will provide safety guidelines that will enable access to quality nature programs for young children.

I implore you to vote YES for this bill.

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

Sincerely,

Amy Beam

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