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Calvert County

Honorary Mark Fisher
Lowe House Office Building Room 202
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

HB376

Dear Delegate Fisher and Ways and Means Committee Members,

Greetings. As a retired director of a large childcare center in Calvert County and a former MSDE grant appointed Early Childhood Liaison for Calvert County Public schools, I have learned that all children, including those with developmental delays and special needs learn best when they have an opportunity to be outside. Outdoor play, especially in the early preschool years, provides children with the opportunity to learn naturally with the freedom to run, jump and engage in co-operative play. Play is often talked about as if it is a relief from serious learning. However, with guided direction, children can engage in natural learning experiences that include math, science and the language arts with more ease while developing fundamental skills required for graduation from high school. Play is the serious business of learning, not a relief from learning.

In outdoor settings, there are fewer behavioral issues as children are not kept in a rigid learning environment. Each child can learn at his own pace. Although retired, I am an active community member currently overseeing a community based outdoor program. I have the joy of seeing the benefits that all children experience during outdoor play and learning.

Every child in Maryland has the need and desire to be outside. Required use of electronics during the school pandemic lockdowns has made outdoor play for children more crucial than ever. Many children are not given the opportunity to play outside due to provider obligations, parental concerns, unsafe conditions and time constraints for single and working parents. Since outdoor programs are not licensed by MSDE as full day programs, they are not eligible to receive state funded childcare scholarships. Therefore, children in low economic situations and children with developmental delays are at an even larger disadvantage.

As a resident of Calvert County and an advocate of outdoor play experiences, I am witness to the difference made when children can be outside. Studies have shown that children who experience time outside are more resilient, have fewer behavioral issues, develop a better sense of self and suffer fewer illnesses (Barefoot and Balanced). Children love to run through meadows, smell the outdoors in the changing seasons, listen to the birds and the different sounds in a natural setting.

I have met many wonderful providers of outdoor programs that desire to be involved in this pilot program. Due to the closure of many childcare centers during the recent pandemic, outdoor programs can offer an alternative to families seeking care. HB376 will allow many of the current outdoor programs to grow and become fully licensed by expanding their hours to full day care. Current licensing only

allows outdoor programs with shorter hours. This hinders working parents from using these programs. Passing HB376 will allow current programs the ability to become licensed under the MSDE Office of Childcare. I strongly encourage you to pass HB376, as the future of our children depends on it.

Sincerely,

Toni Healey
Outdoor Play Advocate