



National Wildlife Federation

Mid-Atlantic Regional Center

20 Ridgely Ave, Suite 203 • Annapolis, MD 21401 • 443-759-3400

Date: February 3, 2022

Bill: HB 376, Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Washington, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

The National Wildlife Federation respectfully requests a favorable report for **HB 376 – Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program - Establishment**, which will authorize the Maryland State Department of Education to license a select number of outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs in order to expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs and to investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms.

In Maryland, an outdoor preschool licensing program is needed because:

- Families who rely on State scholarships to help support childcare expenses are excluded from the benefits of nature-based early childhood education because immersive outdoor preschools currently cannot be licensed, creating inequities in low-income communities and those with special needs and;
- 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.

As one of the nation's largest conservation organizations, the National Wildlife Federation believes that in order to save wildlife and ourselves, we need to ensure that everyone has clean air and water, safe communities, easy and equitable access to the daily benefits of nature, and protection from the ravages of climate change. Educating and connecting the next generation of conservationists with the natural world is central to our work. Research has shown that nature-based, environmental education in young children results in physical, mental, social-emotional, and cognitive development benefits, including significant reductions in perceived stress. Unsurprisingly, these programs also result in an increased connectedness with nature and a desire to sustain it. Positive direct experience in the outdoors and being taken outdoors by someone close to the child—parent, grandparent, or other trusted caregiver—are the two factors

that most contribute to individuals choosing to take action to benefit the environment as adults.

By passing HB 376, Maryland will be taking a meaningful step toward expanding access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs. **We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 376.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Mihills". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jennifer Mihills
Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Regional Center
National Wildlife Federation
443-759-3403 | mihillsj@nwf.org

