

Dear Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Rachel Martin Jones and I am a parent with a background in education who resides in district 5. 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; I have witnessed this firsthand when I was a Special Ed paraeducator at Green Holly Elementary School. Many children with special needs require more intensive supervision, and sometimes equipment, to enjoy the outdoors and often their families can't provide these services outside of school. Providing children as many opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, especially at an early age, can help with physical and mental growth and provide an important place to play and learn;

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; I also have a firsthand experience with my oldest child's part time preschool closing during the pandemic and no similar options for my second child who will be at preschool age this Fall. There are no longer many options for younger children to have a part time preschool with outdoor learning and play in our area;

Finally, 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.

I have witnessed firsthand how much the wonder of nature can promote an interest in sciences, environmental learning and community appreciation. From working at an Elementary School, to volunteering at the Elms Environmental Learning Summer camp, to my own children, I've seen how learning in the outdoors strengthens children's interest. They love learning about local plants and animals, and can really see for themselves how things work- not by having to imagine them, but by being able to experience them themselves.

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,

Rachel Martin Jones

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