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Columbia MD, 21044

RE: Support for HB 376: Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Dear House Committee on Ways and Means:

My family moved to two acres in Columbia, Maryland to open a Forest Preschool after having spent a year holed up in our Baltimore City home. We were surprised to learn that we could not become licensed despite the many known benefits of a childhood spent mostly outdoors. We were able to open only by operating as a private faith-based club, outside the jurisdiction of state legislation but also without access to the resources and guidance that licensing would provide. Our program has been wildly popular, and we will hit full enrollment next month, having only been open since August 2021.

Despite our daily dog walks during the pandemic, my children first approached the two-acres of wild land in our new backyard with trepidation. They didn't want to play outside. They were reluctant to take their shoes off and let the sand in our small creek surround their toes. They tripped over branches and demanded screen time.

Months later, I can't get them to come inside. Every morning my daughter spends at least fifteen minutes crouched in the creek, quietly observing and interacting with water, sand, and water skippers. My son spends his mornings skillfully running through the forest, at five he is always in sight but loves the freedom of not being within arm's distance. They point out frog sounds and know the names of our local plants. They are physical and observant in ways that could not be cultivated when their days were spent indoors.

Outdoor preschool has made my children more confident, improved their gross motor skills, and taught them to love and appreciate our world. This hasn't been at the expense of typical preschool skills. My son learned his letters and has begun reading in Forest Preschool. They trace letters in the snow, paint letters on leaves, and read stories with their teachers and each other daily.

Math is also naturally integrated into their curriculum. They count leaves to identify plants. They count and collect their magnifying glasses, pots and pans each day – storing them for the next adventure. They learn about angles as they build kid-sized pulley systems with ropes and buckets, urging their treasures to travel from tree to tree by holding their ropes higher or lower as needed.

Outdoor preschool is especially timely in the context of COVID-19. I am worried about my vaccine-ineligible children spending their days in crowded, indoor preschools. How effective is a mask donned by a three-year-old for six to eight hours? Amplifying fears that young children cannot properly wear masks for extended periods of time are other mask-related concerns. My daughter has speech delays. I do not believe these delays are mask related as they run in my family, but I do worry that spending her preschool years unable to watch how sounds should be properly produced will exacerbate this delay. At Forest School, she is able to roam and learn unmasked while also staying safer from COVID than her masked, indoor-oriented peers.

Licensing outdoor preschool is an important step to connecting young children with the world around them while helping them to navigate shifting and variable terrains, temperatures and challenges.

I hope that you will support this important effort and vote in favor of HB376!

Sincerely,

Erin Wildermuth
Director, Wild Child Association