

February 08, 2022

Chair Atterbeary
Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building Room 131
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Via electronic submission

Dear Chair Atterbeary and Members of the Committee:

RE: Support for HB 376: Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

As a parent of a child currently enrolled in an outdoor nature program at Irvine Nature Center, I write to urge you to vote in favor of HB376 to establish an Outdoor Preschool Licensing pilot.

My husband and I were initially drawn to the outdoor preschool program at Irvine Nature Center because as nature lovers and environmentalists we wanted our son to have as much time in nature as possible. At the time, we did not realize how beneficial it would be for our son's unique challenges. He is 3.5 years old and was diagnosed with sensory processing disorder. He receives occupational therapy weekly to help him cope with his neurodivergent challenges. However, his time outdoors at the preschool program at Irvine Nature Center has become an important part of his therapy. The benefits of spending time in nature on brain processing are well-documented and I can personally attest that the outdoor preschool program has been invaluable to his growth.

Outdoor preschool should not be only accessible for those with financial means. Further, access to quality time in nature has been segregated along racial lines in Maryland for generations. HB 376 would help to shift this imbalance by paving the way for state scholarships for all students to experience outdoor preschool.

As Baba Dioum said, "in the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught." Investing in teaching our children the value of nature at a young age will ensure the next generation of Marylanders grow up with an appreciation and love of our natural world.

HB376 is a critically important bill for a number of reasons, including:

- 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;

- 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 in Maryland.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AH', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Angela Haren
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