

1 February 2022

RE: Support for HB 376: Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Dear Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Kristen Chirichella and I am a parent who resides in Saint Leonard, MD located in District 27C. 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;
- 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.

My oldest daughter is two years and three months old and is now on her fourth daycare provider. All of the changes in her care can be attributed to COVID-19. After the first wave in 2020 we were able to move her to a daycare we loved, and she was there for 15 months until they closed in December 2021 due to financial hardships. Now that she is over two years old we are looking for a preschool. Our favorite way to destress as family is to go outside for a walk. We live ten minutes from four different parks with hiking trails. My two year daughter regularly goes on nature walks/hikes with me, her longest being two miles. Since having two children I can honestly say getting outside is one of the most important things I can do as a parent. Like any two year old, my daughter loves toys and screen time, but she also loves playing in dirt, jumping in puddles, and occasionally running ahead of Mommy when we go on a hike. Our walks aren't just for exercise or a chore to walk the dogs. It's about spending time away from a screen and the distractions of daily life. I want my kids to spend as much time as they can outside exploring, and knowing what life is like to just 'be a kid' before they start real school and are stuck in classroom most of the day.

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,



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