



February 2, 2022

Honorable Members of the Maryland House of Delegates,

I represent the Washington Nature Preschool Association ([WaNPA](#)) and I am writing in support of House Bill 376. We support this Bill, and encourage you to do the same, because of the incredible success we have experienced as the result of our own licensing pilot in Washington state, as well as the continued positive impacts we're seeing now that licensing of outdoor nature-based childcare is permanent here. We deeply admire the state of Maryland's strong commitment to stewardship in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. You were first in the nation to pass K-12 Environmental Literacy graduation requirements and you are clearly committed to growing future generations of citizens who will cherish and protect the natural world. HB 376 is a logical extension of that commitment; it has the potential to positively impact thousands of children and families, and offers a pathway to providing equitable access to safe, high-quality outdoor learning, which has never been more important.

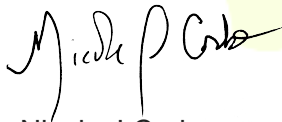
In 2017, the WA state legislature established the outdoor preschool licensing pilot with overwhelming bi-partisan support. Over the following four years, many of us at WaNPA worked with the Washington state Department of Children Youth and Families (DCYF) to develop safety and quality standards for outdoor classrooms. Our pilot program was guided by the ever-growing research that speaks to the benefits of outdoor nature-based learning: it supports social and emotional growth, positive academic outcomes, and provides a multitude of physical and mental health benefits, all while enabling children to form a meaningful bond with the natural environment. We currently have 6 fully licensed outdoor preschool programs, with 4 more in process, and DCYF is regularly providing completely booked orientations to interested providers. One of the most exciting results of licensing outdoor nature-based learning in WA is how many new programs are seeking licensure. You see, licensing supports offering full-day programming and services for children with special needs (and their families) who lack equitable access to outdoor preschools, and these new programs are seeking DCYF's oversight and partnership so that they can better meet the needs of all families.

Equitable access to high quality early learning programs and the outdoors is central to the need for licensing. As you no doubt know, there is a disparity in the socio-economic and racial makeup of those who frequently occupy natural spaces. Sadly, children are the ones most often denied access to the benefits of spending time outdoors. Either families don't have safe natural spaces nearby or, if they do, those natural spaces do not feel welcoming. Meanwhile, many working families simply cannot find the time to spend outdoors. As a result, we do not see the diversity of our communities fully represented in our natural spaces, nor in our nature

preschools. Children from low-resourced communities are not able to reap the benefits of outdoor preschool if their parents cannot access subsidies and state funding to attend. Take, for example, the *Saplings & Cedars* program at the Squaxin Island Child Development Center here in WA, where they have 12 ECEAP families and 15 families utilizing Working Connections or other state, federal, or tribal subsidies. That's 27 out of 32 families that are provided care through subsidies. Squaxin Island provides an example of the clear demand for access to state subsidized outdoor learning - demand that is also present in Maryland. How exciting that you have an opportunity to expand access to high-quality early learning in safe, welcoming natural spaces through an outdoor preschool licensing pilot program.

Across the nation, the number of nature-based programs has risen significantly over the past decade ([a 25 fold increase, which more than doubled from 2017 to 2020](#)), and there has been another increase since the beginning of the pandemic, with many indoor programs moving to learning outdoors as well. There is much uncertainty in this time, and the health impacts of COVID-19, which disproportionately affect Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and other people of color, continue to be staggering. However, through a licensing pilot, you can bring opportunities to children, their families, and the schools that serve them, with the potential to not only improve their health and safety now, but truly alter the course of their lives for the better. We in Washington urge you to please pass HB 376, taking a critical step toward equitable access to high-quality education and access to the outdoors.

Sincerely,



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