

Testimony for HB 376

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Feb 8, 2022

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to share why outdoor preschool licensing is needed in our state. It is my great privilege to speak to you about House Bill 376 to establish an outdoor preschool licensing pilot here in Maryland.

My name is Monica Wiedel-Lubinski. I am the founding executive director of the Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools. I am also the founder/co-founder of three nature-based programs in Maryland including the nature preschool at Irvine Nature Center which was Maryland's second licensed, NAEYC-accredited nature preschool. I have written about nature-based education for various journals and books, and I frequently teach others on the topic as a keynote speaker, lecturer, and even on international podcasts. I am currently writing a book about nature-based early childhood education for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). My formal education was at Towson University where I earned a Master's Degree in early childhood education while working and raising two young children. I am also an Adjunct professor at Goucher College in their Environmental Studies certificate program.

I've been a member of Project Green Classrooms with their Nature Play Space working group for several years and was the co-chair of the Council for Nature and Forest Preschools with the Natural Start Alliance, a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). I'm very pleased to say that they provided a letter of support in favor of this bill, alongside our colleagues at the National Wildlife Federation and local Sierra Club.

I am one of 10 authors who contributed to the *Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practices Guidebook* published by NAAEE in 2019 to professionalize standards in our growing field. I share my background to help provide context for the much larger considerations there are for outdoor preschools, which many of my contemporaries may not be aware of. The concept of outdoor preschool is not new. What we need is a path to make it licensed here in Maryland so that more children and families can reap its benefits. As it stands, only the privileged can afford to attend outdoor preschool.

Outdoor preschools are different from other early learning programs that can be licensed. Licensed programs have a building or facility with an indoor classroom. They may spend portions of their day outside, but they have an indoor location that qualifies for licensing purposes. There are many wonderful licensed nature preschools and childcare centers in Maryland! The distinction here is that there are also **immersive outdoor preschools** that spend 100% of their time engaged in outdoor learning. Outside! They do not have indoor classrooms - nor do they want or need them. Outdoor preschools have emergency shelter spaces, but the focus of their learning is with, in, and about nature.

Because outdoor preschools lack an indoor facility, there is a fundamental issue with being able to count the square footage or get a 'use and occupancy permit' for example as part of the licensing process. For an outdoor preschool, it makes no sense to pay overhead for an indoor facility that simply will not be used.

To be clear, outdoor preschools are not camp. They run year round, the way any other early learning programs do. They utilize curriculum, early learning standards, build community with families, assess student learning, implement health and safety protocols, document learning through evidence-based practices, and provide a deeply meaningful experience about what it means to learn and grow in the place you call home.

Outdoor preschools offer a very specific, place-based philosophy centered on nature pedagogy and environmental literacy. Not every family may want an immersive outdoor preschool for their child. But a growing number of families recognize that they want their children to be active, healthy, and engaged in sensory-rich, experiential, hands-on learning. Physical development is on full display in outdoor preschool programs. Social and emotional learning is also deep and rich in immersive outdoor preschools. Children work together in community as they have adventures in all kinds of weather. Outdoor learning provides stress relief and mental health benefits, especially for children who experience trauma. Empathy and respect for living things are common threads across these programs - and that empathy is crucial for the much larger goals that we have here in Maryland for environmental literacy and the protection of our natural resources.

I should note that Maryland was the first in the nation to pass a graduation requirement for K through 12 environmental literacy standards. Even at the age of three, the children are keenly aware of their place and their impact in the natural world. These pro-environmental attitudes usher in the next generation of compassionate people who want to protect and conserve our incredible natural resources in Maryland.

Outdoor preschools provide soil for the seeds of all kinds of cognitive and intellectual development to blossom. Beyond the obvious science concepts, we address other development domains including language and literacy, math and creative arts, technology and engineering - even history that comes to life while reading the landscape and discovering the ways in which the land has been used for centuries if not millenia. Learning is active and alive outside. There is no sacrifice of foundation skills. In fact, according to a peer-reviewed 2019 study, researchers did a critical review of recent literature and found, **"In academic contexts, nature-based instruction outperforms traditional instruction."** (Kuo et al, 2019). See the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* for more information:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305/full>

Given Maryland's leadership in environmental literacy including the Partnership for Children in Nature and Project Green Classrooms, and the abundant research about the value of nature-based, outdoor learning, it makes sense for us to extend the opportunity to younger children.

The most compelling reason we need to conduct a pilot program for outdoor preschool licensing is because of the barriers that exist for families who want to attend outdoor preschools but cannot.

Children that come from low-resourced backgrounds and rely on child care scholarships can only use them in licensed programs. This means that outdoor preschools cannot accept children who need to use child care scholarships to attend. As you might imagine, this disproportionately places a burden on low-income families and many of those families are in black and brown communities. This is not acceptable and it is not equitable. Further, outdoor preschool programs are then forced to choose between budgeting for scholarships and paying teachers less, or paying teachers a more fair and livable wage but with no additional funds for scholarships support to families in need. What a horrible position for any program to be put in! When outdoor preschools are able to be licensed, we will be able to accept child care subsidies so that we will never have to turn away any families who want this enriching opportunity for their children.

Currently, outdoor preschools can only operate for short periods of time before being required to be licensed. But as stated, there is no path to do so. This means that short, part-day outdoor preschools can only be accessed by families with the luxury of attending a 2- or 3-hour program once or twice per week. This denies equitable access for working families who need longer hours of care.

Safety is also a concern. Teachers in licensed programs are vetted to be sure they understand child development, health and safety considerations, developmentally appropriate practices, etc. Right now, anyone could offer an unlicensed program that could pose potential harm to children because the state does not allow for licensing. Additionally, licensed programs can access professional development funding to ensure teachers have, and can maintain, their credentials with financial help from the state.

Children with special needs (and their families) lack equitable access to outdoor preschools and experience disproportionate barriers to getting special services if they wish to attend. Far more supportive infrastructure is in place for children in licensed child care settings. There are a range of developmental benefits for children with special needs and diverse abilities, and the pilot program can further address how to include all children in outdoor preschools.

It is also baffling that another state department, the Maryland Dept. of Mental Health and Hygiene, licenses 100% outdoor programs in the summer - without indoor facilities - yet the Maryland State Dept. of Education's Office of Child Care does not acknowledge the same for year-round outdoor preschool. If health and safety standards are acceptable for hand washing and toileting, even amidst COVID protocol, and camps can obtain state licensure working with the same age of children - why are there additional barriers in place for outdoor preschools through the Office of Child Care? The pilot program through this bill would address these challenges and ensure a path licensure.

We also want to acknowledge the staggering number of childcare programs that have closed since the start of the pandemic (nearly 1,000). Outdoor preschools can provide another high-quality option and build capacity for high quality early learning opportunities. For existing child care programs, they would be able to take families off their waitlists with an expanded outdoor preschool option.

Fortunately, Washington state is the first in the nation to make a path for outdoor nature-based preschools to be licensed. Our Outdoor Preschool Licensing Advisory Team has been in close contact to learn more about their progress. Following a comprehensive 4-year pilot program, their final report concludes that children demonstrated 'kindergarten readiness' that exceeded the state's average for other licensed care programs and found gains that overwhelmingly support the value of outdoor preschools.

Outdoor Preschools demonstrate an ability to meet rising demand for high quality care, increase capacity to provide enriching early learning opportunities, and address issues of equitable, affordable access to outdoor learning for all children. WA's pilot provided an opportunity for experienced nature-based ECE providers to work alongside state department officials to collaborate on specific protocol that supports evidence-based standards and dually addresses the unique needs of outdoor preschools. We hope that Maryland will be the second state in the US to embark on an outdoor preschool licensing pilot program and ultimately forge a path for licensing.

I understand some of my colleagues in traditional early childhood education may not yet understand how and why outdoor learning is vital to early childhood education. At this stage, the benefits of nature-based early childhood education and outdoor preschool are well established and not up for debate. What we need to do is ensure that ALL families have equitable access to these programs. We have a trail map in WA and leaders and stakeholders here in Maryland guiding these efforts. House Bill 376 will provide the opportunity for us to work with the Office of Childcare to adapt existing regulations so there is a path for licensing. I urge you to vote in favor of HB376 to create a pilot program that will help provide more equitable access to outdoor preschool.

With Gratitude,

Monica Wiedel-Lubinski