

February 11, 2023

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot Bill

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Alison Anuzis and I am a parent who resides in Lusby, MD in Calvert County.

I am writing to urge you to support the House Bill to establish an Outdoor Preschool Licensing pilot. This bill has 13 co-sponsors and tremendous support in counties across Maryland! We need lawmakers to act by passing legislation to expand safe, equitable access to outdoor preschools as another form of high-quality early childhood education.

There are many urgent reasons why we need to pass the Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill:

- All children deserve safe, equitable access and the ability to choose outdoor preschool as an option for high-quality early childhood education;
- Children from low-income communities and those with special needs do not have equitable access to the Child Care Scholarship. Licensing is required for these families to use State scholarship funds to attend outdoor preschool. This is an environmental justice issue and unfair barrier that disproportionately impacts low-resourced families;
- Outdoor preschools offer an alternative that can help expand high-quality early childhood education options. Hundreds of childcare programs closed during the pandemic leaving a shortage of childcare across Maryland;
- Teachers and programs should be vetted for early childhood credentials, including specific training in health and safety, to operate. Without licensing, there is no oversight of existing outdoor preschools in Maryland; and
- Outdoor preschools promote 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 daughter Lily (3) started attending an outdoor preschool last summer and has truly blossomed with her experience there. I recently took her for a hike and was blown away when she correctly identified a beech tree. I marveled at her confidence and creativity as she climbed up the root system of a giant fallen tree and declared it her castle. That one fallen tree provided a canvas for such deep creative play that we were there for almost an hour. I feel so lucky that

we got through the waitlist to secure a spot for her in the one outdoor preschool in our county, but I would love to see more programs like hers available and accessible throughout the state.

I believe that time in nature is essential for human growth and the antidote to a lot of the stressors we all face today. Many years ago I worked for a summer internship program where high school students from low-resourced families in an inner-city area came to a historic site to help tend the grounds. It was more exposure to nature than any of them were used to and I was struck by their responses to being in that environment. They enjoyed the safety and quiet, were able to relax in ways they couldn't closer to home. They were able to get perspective on problems they faced day to day. I believe these benefits are even more important for younger children.

With the many threats to our environment posed by climate change, raising environmentally conscious people is essential to our future. There is no better way to instill a connection with nature than by providing children the opportunity to learn and play outdoors, to build an intimate knowledge of the natural world early on.

Please help us champion an outdoor preschool licensing pilot by voting to support the Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill and urging your fellow lawmakers to do the same!

Sincerely,

Alison Anuzis
Alison.anuzis@gmail.com
609.933.8463
11845 Blue Point Court
Lusby, MD 20657