



02/12/2023

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Lisa Poe and I am the co-chair of Nature Learning Collective, an organization that specializes in providing nature-based education for parents, caregivers, educators and child care providers across the state.

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 child care programs closed during the pandemic leaving a shortage of child care 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.

Our organization was started in 2021, when we realized that more educators were looking for ways to play outdoors and learn with nature. We have hosted conferences, workshops, and virtual training. We have also had the honor of presenting at nationwide conferences such as the annual conference for the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Throughout our journey we have heard the educators advocate for outdoor learning and the mental health benefits that learning in nature has had for their students and themselves. Many of them want to start programs like these, but often lack the indoor space needed to be approved by licensing.

We believe

- Licensing Outdoor Preschools will create additional child care spaces across the state which are desperately needed
- Early Childhood educators working in this field are resourceful and passionate about learning outdoors
- The teachers have and will gain the tools to be successful running an outdoor preschool
- Families are looking for these types of programs and want their children to be outdoors more
- Children from low income families deserve to participate in programs like these
- Creating equity and removing barriers for outdoor learning

I am encouraging you to vote YES on this bill to change the future of our young children and make a difference!

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

Sincerely,

Lisa Poe

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