



Date: March 17, 2023

Senate Education, Energy, and The Environment Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Education, Energy, The Environment Committee:

My name is Allison I Charapp, and I am an Education Director who resides in Annapolis, Maryland. I have been teaching for over 30 years as a Montessori Teacher with training in Reggio Emilia and Orton-Gillingham.

I am the founding Director of Tree of Life Preschool at Congregation Kol Shalom here in Annapolis. In 2015, we were the 5th nature preschool to open in Maryland. Since then, we have grown dramatically – my small little Jewish nature preschool has attracted quite a diverse population – we are colorful – I have families representing all the continents on Earth. Families practicing many religions – Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian – all celebrate the gift of nature together.

Families find us for various and obvious reasons. But I want you to consider one of them right now – many young children – not a small lot of them – need more than what has become a traditional preschool experience. Families have come to me with YOUNG children who were not successful in their current preschool. They could not conform on demand to the needs of that structure. For far too many children, their NEEDS – developmental, emotional, and social cannot be balanced while indoors. A century ago, we began using the word WORK in reference to a child's activity. It was meant to garner respect for their time and focus. But today, WORK in many preschool programs simply limits the child. Work has become a cage for too many...

I believe that education opens doors and must be taught well and clearly. I believe that children should be mightily challenged – not pushed. But, academics – learning – is not confined by walls.

Through free play in nature we watch each child think, plan, evaluate, succeed, fail, join others, move apart, create, deconstruct, and even find peace. This is NOT wasteful. This demands our respect and our effort. This Outdoor Pilot Program would secure this mission.

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.

An outdoor educational program supports the emotional, behavioral and intellectual development of preschoolers. Studies have shown that students who learn outdoors develop: a sense of self, independence, confidence, creativity, exploration of ideas, decision making and problem solving. Outdoor learning connects families and the community to the school and being part of student learning.

Lawmakers need to vote in support of the bill. 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,

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