



National Wildlife Federation

Mid-Atlantic Regional Center
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Date: February 10, 2022

Bill: HB 525, Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee:

The National Wildlife Federation respectfully requests a favorable report for **HB 525 – Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program - Establishment**, which will authorize the Maryland State Department of Education to license a select number of outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs in order to expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs and to investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms.

An outdoor preschool licensing program would benefit Maryland because:

- Families who rely on State scholarships to help support childcare expenses are excluded from the benefits of nature-based early childhood education because immersive outdoor preschools currently cannot be licensed, creating inequities in low-income communities and those with special needs and;
- Hundreds of child care programs in Maryland closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic leaving a shortage of options for families. Outdoor preschools offer an alternative form of child care at a time when many families seek the physical and mental health benefits of being outdoors; and
- Outdoor preschools promote the skills and values that lead to environmental literacy, which supports goals of the Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature (now Project Green Classrooms) and the K-12 Environmental Literacy Standards required for graduation.

As one of the nation's oldest and largest wildlife conservation organizations, the National Wildlife Federation believes that in order to save wildlife and ourselves, we need to ensure that everyone has clean air and water, safe communities, easy and equitable access to the daily benefits of nature, and protection from the ravages of climate change. Educating and connecting the next generation of conservationists with the natural world is central to our work.

Research has shown that nature-based, environmental education in young children results in physical, mental, social-emotional, and cognitive development benefits, including significant reductions in perceived stress. Unsurprisingly, these programs also result in an increased connectedness with nature and a desire to sustain it. Positive direct experience in the outdoors and being taken outdoors by someone close to the child – parents, grandparents, or other trusted caregiver – are the two factors that most contribute to individuals choosing to take action to benefit the environment.

By passing HB 525, Maryland will be taking a meaningful step towards expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs. **We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 525.**

Sincerely,

Jennifer Mihills

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