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**February 9, 2023**

Ways and Means Committee

**RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill**

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Kayla Souza and I am a licensed childcare provider, educator, and parent who resides in Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland.

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.

This bill is personally important to me as the parent of a preschool aged child who receives early intervention support. Research has shown that time in nature supports brain development, builds strength, boosts immunity, and regulates the body systems. As a child with a history of brain injury, it's extremely important to me that my child has access to an environment that emphasizes outdoor time. When I was looking for options for her when she became preschool age, it was extremely difficult to find

a nature based program that was able to work with her special accommodations. Nature is a benefit to all children (and adults), but especially those with a history of medical diagnosis, life trauma, or who for various reasons may be at-risk in the future.

Please vote in support of this important bill. I have been an early childhood educator for over 20 years, both in the classroom and the childcare setting, and I fully believe that a licensed outdoor preschool option in our state would provide benefits that would be seen for ALL parties, even years down the road.

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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kayla Souza". The ink is a light grey color.

Kayla Souza

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