

February 9, 2023

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Katey Nelson and I am the director of Wonder in the Wild, a nonprofit outdoor school located in Queen Anne's County on Kent Island. We provide hands-on nature play and environmental education programs to local "explorers" of all ages. We would like to expand our programming, but cannot without legislative change.

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.

Wonder in the Wild plans to open a full-time nature preschool on the grounds of Camp Wright as soon as outdoor preschools are able to be licensed in the State of Maryland. There is a desperate need for childcare in the area. Many parents are not able to work because they cannot find childcare or affordable care. Additionally, many children thrive in outdoor learning environments, as we are able to provide hands-on, inquiry-based education and opportunities to learn through play. Learning outdoors also better equips the next generation of environmental stewards to care for our beautiful surroundings.

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,



Katherine Nelson, Director Wonder in the Wild

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