

February 9, 2023

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Tamara Cohen and I am a parent, homeschooler, nature-based school administrator and advocate who resides in Anne Arundel County, Annapolis, MD.

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.

I am a mother of 2 and when it was my daughter's time to start pre-school, I knew I wanted to put the work into making the right decision. After spending 3 years with my daughter, I knew her favorite thing was to spend time in the garden. She would spend time (even at this age) looking up at the clouds, examining the birds and feeling the bark of trees. We would stop on our walks to watch a woodpecker, later see the holes and even the swarm of ladybugs it may have been enjoying for lunch. My point here is that our children are drawn outdoors and the traditional preschool would have eliminated many of those hours outside. We found Tree of Life Preschool in Annapolis through a friend attending their free Parent/Child nature classes. It was perfect! My daughter spent 2 years there. She spent her time examining, playing, laughing – all the things a child needs to learn. She left pre-school kindergarten ready. As a result of COVID, we decided to homeschool. However, with her child-led, nature-based preschool education, I was able to move forward without a bump. She began reading in kindergarten without any added pressure and also learned to follow trail markers and climb trees. Life is the best with nature and fresh air surrounding us! My son is currently attending Tree of Life preschool and will be kindergarten ready for the next school year.

This is the time! Our culture is moving more and more towards diagnoses and screens but our answer is nature. In a natural environment, children, with little or no adult input, learn how to work with their hands, math, physics, engineering, biology, geography, how to regulate their temperament and they exercise without a routine. It is the foundation for families that will spend time on walks instead of in front of the TV, it is a generation that will be better self-regulated, have an outlet for their energy and understand better the world around them. All of this...and it is an environment that is less conducive to the spreading of viruses! Now is the time to make outdoor education a new cultural wave.

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,

Tamara Cohen

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