

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Caitlyn Heinz and I am a parent and community member who resides in Edgewater, 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.

As a military spouse who moves every 3 years, the one thing that we wanted, no matter where we are in the country, was a quality outdoor preschool for our children. This has become quite the challenge to find and has highlighted the massive deficit we have of outdoor nature preschools. When we moved to Maryland, "outdoor preschool. Nature certified preschool", anything that would allow my son to have a healthy balance of nature and a nurturing environment to make learning possible. The options were incredibly slim, and locations out of my area. This means I need to be privileged enough to have adequate transportation, time, and money to make this happen. There are absolutely no preschools in our city/town that have an outdoor component. This needs to change.

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.

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,

Caitlyn Heinz

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