

2/10/2023

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Lindsay Couch and I am an parent who resides in Calvert 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 childcare 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.

When my first son was just 2, my friends started sharing their children's adventures at Little Bugs nature preschool. The moment I saw what they were experiencing, I KNEW this would be the best source of early childhood education for my children. At this point, I must have reached out once a month hoping for an opening and praying, I was still on the waiting list. There are virtually no other programs like this, and I wanted in. Outdoor classrooms are the type of experience every child should have the opportunity to explore.

My son, as well as his classmates, *love* going to school every day. The experiences they are able to have is amazing. My son is much more comfortable navigating his body in nature, his confidence and social skills have flourished, and his creativity has soared. They play/learn in all weather, rain, shine, hot, cold, snow, etc. and it's created children who persevere. The number of moms who are looking for play-based learning is astronomical, there is a demand. Parents want their children to learn in their natural environment.

The type of children that will be created by having these experiences will be a generation of confident, motivated, well-communicative adults with a healthy relationship with their environment.

Please vote in favor of this bill.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Couch

8620 Thornberry Ct

Owings, MD 20736