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**February 10, 2023**

Ways and Means Committee

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

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Anne Arnold, and I am an elementary school teacher and parent of two who resides in Galesville, in Anne Arundel 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.

I have a certificate in Elementary Education and have taught second through fifth grades in public schools for 14 years. Nevertheless, I was unfamiliar with outdoor preschools prior to having my own children. When the pandemic shutdown occurred, I found myself home with my then 15-month-old

daughter. I quickly discovered that our days passed quickly and my entire family life remained more harmonious if my daughter spent several hours per day outdoors. At the beginning, I started with two hours, and by the end of that summer, we often spent seven to eight hours a day playing outside! I saw firsthand how much it benefitted my daughter in terms of not only her physical and emotional health but also what I previously thought of as academic learning. While I struggled to encourage her to sit at a table inside for more than a minute or two, she excelled at counting when we used rocks in the yard, and she learned to write her name in the sand.

After witnessing this growth, I began to research extensively on my own. I learned about all the research that confirms the value of time outdoors not only for children but for all humans! Thus when it came time to transition her from an in-home daycare to a school around age three, I knew that time outdoors (rain or shine) was a nonnegotiable criterion in choosing a program for her to attend. We found Tree of Life Preschool and it's nature-based program, and a year later, my daughter continues to thrive and absolutely loves school. While she still has another whole year of Pre-K next year, she already meets most of the Kindergarten Readiness benchmarks that we test for at the elementary school where I work. My husband and I will undoubtedly choose the same program for our younger daughter as soon as she is old enough.

Every child deserves the opportunity to experience a connection to nature and the well being it brings to their mind, body and soul. This bill is a chance to expand the possibilities of Early Childhood Education in Maryland in an important and positive way. 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,

Anne Arnold

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