

2/12/23

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Heather Symons and I am a pediatric oncologist and parent who resides in Anne Arundel County, Arnold, 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 pediatric oncologist and the parent of four children—ages 15y, 13y, 12y, and 4y. Our 4yo has been attending an outdoor preschool and we could not be happier. More importantly, HE could not be happier. From the moment he started preschool at Tree of Life in Annapolis, Maryland he has felt at home. This school has fostered his love of the outdoors—from bugs to nature walks, planting and rock collecting he always has a smile on his face. On more than one occasion, our 4yo has walked outside and stated simply, “what a beautiful view.” The mother in me sees how outdoor education encourages his creativity, fosters both connection and independence, develops social skills, and and helps in overall wellbeing. The physician in me understands the benefit to his overall health. The American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that, “the earlier you share nature with your baby, the more likely they are to develop a life-long love of the outdoors... build nature sculptures

with twigs, leaves, acorns, rocks and more. More outdoor time is linked with improved motor development and lower obesity rates and myopia (nearsightedness) risk. Safely getting some sun also helps us make vitamin D that our bodies need to stay healthy and strong. Research also shows that when children spent time in natural settings they had less anger and aggression. Impulse control is also better. Stress and depression are lower for people who spend time in nature. Children can also show increased focus and reduced symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Playing outside promotes curiosity, creativity and critical thinking. Studies have found that children who spent more time in nature exploration had improved learning outcomes. ([AAP Offers Tips for Keeping Kids Active, Healthy Through Outdoor Play](#)).”

All kids should have the benefit of safe, accessible outdoor education.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heather Symons".

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