

**02-Feb-2023**

Ways and Means Committee

**RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot Bill**

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Shealynn Franquez and I am a parent who resides in Calvert County, Port Republic, 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 childcare 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.

Currently my daughter is enrolled in Little Bugs Nature Preschool in Prince Frederick Maryland. She has been attending 5 days a week since June and it has changed her entire outlook and demeanor. She used to be very fussy, sad and act out at simple things. Now, since being outside consistently, she is happier, more creative, imaginative and overall more calm when at home. Being outside is her niche and we would have not learned that without an outdoor preschool where she is safely learning her limits. Just yesterday it was raining and she yelled "Go outside!!" because she has learned to embrace and love the rain. This outlook on life is beneficial in all aspects- physical and mental. Children have the rest of their lives to be indoors- it's so important for them to enjoy and make a habit of being outdoors. Every child deserves the opportunity to learn in a setting that looks different than your typical preschool. With the passing of this bill, outdoor preschools may become more common which is a beautiful way for children to learn and families to see what being outside really can do.

Please vote in support of the HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot Bill. You will be changing children's lives and how they learn forever.

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,

Shealynn Franquez

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