

**February 7, 2023**

Ways and Means Committee

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

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Leah Balkoski and I am an outdoor educator who resides in Baltimore, MD. I am writing to urge you to support the House Bill to establish an Outdoor Preschool Licensing pilot.

I know firsthand how many benefits young children receive from ample time and education outside. They develop their motor skills, social/emotional skills, and cognitive abilities in nature in ways that are simply impossible indoors. The state of our current society is skewed against children's natural healthy development: the onslaught of screens always competing for their attention, the constant shrinking and dirtying of green spaces making their playtime outside more difficult, the increased push of academics at an early age thwarting their essential and instinctive need to play. Children of this generation need to be outside just as much as earlier generations got to be. We outdoor educators establish nature preschools because we know that parents agree, but have a hard time adequately supporting their children's need for outdoor time. And we work for outdoor preschool licensing to make this service accessible and safe for everyone. Please consider supporting this bill to help more children and families access something that could make a huge difference in their lives.

This bill already 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.

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,

*Leah Balkoski*

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2132 N Calvert St,

Baltimore MD 21218

443 540 8949