

February 8, 2023

Ways and Means Committee

Re: Support for HB0525 - Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

My name is Atiya Wells, and I am a pediatric nurse and the Founder and Executive Director of Backyard Basecamp, an urban environmental education organization based in Baltimore City. I urge you to support the House Bill to establish an Outdoor Preschool Licensing pilot. 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.

I fell in love with nature about ten years ago when I went on my first hike. After learning more about the natural world, I recall feeling both excitement at learning what lives around me and a deep sense of grief. Growing up, I did not have outdoor experiences because my family didn't have discretionary income for these programs and activities.

As my two children have grown, we have struggled to find the integration of nature into the education system in Maryland, as we have seen in other parts of the country, especially in early childhood education. Of the programs offered, they are either too far from us or highly cost-prohibitive to our income level.

There are many urgent reasons why we need to pass the Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill:

- Research has shown that time outside has led to better children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes
- 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 requires these families to use State scholarship funds to attend outdoor preschool. This is an environmental justice issue and an 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 childcare across Maryland;
- To operate, MSDE should vet teachers and programs for early childhood credentials, including specific health and safety training. 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 the Maryland Partnership for Children in Nature goals, the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights, Baltimore Connecting Children to 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!

Thank you,

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