

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Support HB 525 – Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program – Establishment

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 525 offered by Delegate Guyton. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people, of all generations, and nature thrive together.

Under current law, the Office of Child Care (OCC) cannot license outdoor preschool and childcare programs unless they have indoor classroom or building space. As such, the OCC has no path for licensing or regulating these teachers and the children they serve. This has cut off access to outdoor preschools for low-income families, as state vouchers can only be used in licensed, accredited preschool and childcare programs. Non-licensed programs can also only operate for certain amounts of time; these part-day programs often fail to meet working families' needs, which has resulted in outdoor preschool programs becoming predominantly children from middle-to-upper-income caucasian families. These programs also cannot access the services and funding needed to support children with special needs. Unlicensed teachers are not vetted for credentials that may impact children's health and safety while participating in the programs. Without licensing, Maryland State Department of Education professional development funding is not accessible to support professional training for nature-based early childhood educators. Through licensing outdoor preschool programs, HB 525 seeks to provide equitable, safe, and inclusive access to these high quality, beneficial early learning programs.

Outdoor preschools provide a fully immersive outdoor learning program using developmentally appropriate, nature-based curriculum and approaches to meet young children's educational, health, and safety needs. These programs document and assess learning, conduct parent/teacher conferences, and offer community-building events with families. Licensing will make certain that these high-quality programs can access the necessary funds, services, training, and oversight to meet families' needs as well as provide for participating children's unique health and safety needs in an outdoor learning environment.

TNC recognizes the value of accessible, nature-based educational opportunities for Maryland's youth. We commend Delegate Guyton for introducing this bill, which ensures that these opportunities are equitable, safe, and inclusive for all children and families.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 525.