

March 20, 2023

Energy, Education, and The Environment Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill

Dear Honorable Energy, Education, and The Environment Committee:

My name is Julie Dieguez and I am an educator and parent who resides in Annapolis, 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 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 have been an environmental educator for 22 years. I currently develop outdoor classrooms, play and learning areas for Anne Arundel County Public Schools. Prior to this, I worked closely with the Maryland State Department of Education and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources on environmental

literacy standards for schools and increasing opportunities to encourage and facilitate students, educators, families to learn and recreate outdoors. I have worked closely with the Eastern Association of Forest & Nature Schools and directly with preschools and daycares across the state to encourage and develop sustainable, safe and effective outdoor play and learning spaces for children and educators. I ask that you please support this very worthy and needed bill. 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 so much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Julie Dieguez

Anne Arundel County Public Schools: Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Center

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