



February 9, 2023

The Honorable Catherine Forbes
Baltimore, MD 21212

RE: Your Support for HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Delegate Forbes,

My name is Katie Rooney and I am both an educator and parent who resides in your district.

I am writing to thank you for your support of House Bill 525 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.

Over the last 14.5 years I have had the immense pleasure of working with young children, primarily 3 to 7yrs old, in either nature-based preschool programs or at a charter school in Baltimore city. For the last 5 years I have been the Director of Early Childhood Education at Irvine Nature Center, directly overseeing our Nature Preschool. At Irvine, we are fortunate enough that we have two indoor classrooms and can therefore be licensed by the state. While we have these classrooms and do use them, we operate primarily outdoors, spending the majority of both the half and full day classes in the woods, meadows, and wetlands.

As a teacher, a director, and now as a parent of an outdoor preschooler, I have witnessed the incredible value and role of play and learning outdoors.

As a parent, nothing means more to me than my 5yr old's lifelong health, happiness, and ability to thrive and grow into who she is. Without a doubt, the days she is the most in tune with her body, her soul, and with the world around her are her days at Nature Preschool. She is more inquisitive, calmer, more compassionate, and more likely to persevere in the face of challenge. All children deserve to feel that way, regardless of their race or socioeconomic status.

There are many urgent reasons why we need to pass HB525 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.

When I think about what this bill is capable of doing, I think about the child who needs to move and whose voice is bombastic and pitched. Inside he would be labeled as challenging, disruptive, or worse. Outside he has space to be, he climbs freely, and that boisterous voice is a leading cry that organizes his peers in games or cooperative work.

I think of the child of the single mom, quiet and hesitant to try new things. She lives in a small apartment with no yard or green space. At Nature Preschool she gets regular access to all things alive. She builds her connection to the land and starts to see herself as part of it.

I think of the child learning English, their family recently immigrated. He is reserved and unsure how to communicate. Outside, the language of play is so universal he can jump right in and share.

I think of the child with a congenital muscular condition who has difficulty walking over curbs, up a step stool, or down a hill. Outside, her play and life activities are filled with therapy as she chases after friends in their inventive games over logs, rolls down hills, and scales mulch piles. She has ample opportunities to grow stronger and more confident each day.

I think of the multiple children in our care with cognitive delays or sensory processing disorder. In an outdoor setting, their time is filled with sensory rich experiences that offer endless opportunities for them to engage in developmentally appropriate ways while also helping to build their ability to regulate.

I think of the child whose father suddenly and unexpectedly died. Outside he has space to grieve in both big and small ways. When it becomes too much he can run, push the hurt away as he rolls large stumps to help him climb, and splash in the mud to see he can still affect change, that he does indeed have some power and control. Seeking connection, he looks for frogs and salamanders, caring for them gently and teaching his classmates to do the same. Outside, he has space to breathe and can feel the cooling wind and rain. As the seasons and weather changes, he learns that no time of darkness lasts forever, that storms pass and the sun does eventually return.

I think of the kids that joined me regularly for a visit to learn and play once a month. Kids that already carried so much on their little backs: homelessness, food insecurity, trauma upon trauma. I think of how we ran out to play in trickling rain, capturing it on our tongues, filling buckets, making dams. The loudest most explosive child squealed with delight. And suddenly all the tenseness of the indoor lesson melted

away. Their teacher whispered to me, "This is wonderful. They need this so much. They never get to *really play and be kids.*"

For these children, and all others, I support HB525!

Please help us champion an outdoor preschool licensing pilot by urging your fellow lawmakers in the Ways and Means Committee to see that we get a vote on HB525!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katie Rooney', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Katie Rooney

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