



February 13, 2023

Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building
6 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401-1991

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Monica Wiedel-Lubinski. I am a resident of Glen Arm, MD in Baltimore County and a long-time leader in nature-based education. I urge you to pass HB 525 to create a pilot program for the licensure of Outdoor Preschools in Maryland.

My Master's Degree is in Early Child Education where research demonstrates that play, child-directed inquiry, hands-on experiences, and outdoor learning are not only beneficial for young children's development, they are crucial. But in practice, many traditional early learning and care settings are restrictive, over-scheduled, and have developmentally inappropriate academic expectations of children. As a nature-based educator of nearly 25 years, and a parent of two, the evidence is clear: Early childhood education is exemplified outdoors.

I am honored to be the founder/co-founder of three nature-based preschool programs in Maryland. Each is unique to the needs of the local community and provides nature-based early childhood education to young children. The first program I established is the Nature Preschool at Irvine Nature Center which was Maryland's second licensed, NAEYC-accredited nature preschool. I see an increasing demand for not only licensed nature preschools, but also for immersive preschools that meet entirely outdoors.

In addition to my role as Executive Director of the Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS), I have collaborated on a number of initiatives including work on the Project Green Classrooms Committee and Baltimore County Green Alliance. I am also one of 10 authors who contributed to the *Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practices Guidebook* published by the North American Association of Environmental Education in 2019 to professionalize standards in our growing field.



I share my background to help provide context for the much larger considerations there are for outdoor preschools, which many of my contemporaries may not be aware of. The concept of outdoor preschool is not new. **What we need is a path to license outdoor preschool here in Maryland so that more children and families can access its benefits. As it stands, only the privilege few can afford to attend outdoor preschool.**

Outdoor preschools are different from other early learning programs that can be licensed. Licensed programs have a building or facility with an indoor classroom. They may spend portions of their day outside, but they have an indoor location that qualifies for licensing purposes. There are many wonderful licensed nature preschools and childcare centers in Maryland! The distinction here is that there are also *immersive outdoor preschools* that spend 100% of their time engaged in outdoor learning. Outside! They do not have indoor classrooms - nor do they want or need them. Outdoor preschools have emergency shelter spaces, but the focus of their learning is with, in, and about nature.

Because outdoor preschools lack an indoor facility, there is a fundamental issue with being able to count the square footage or get a 'use and occupancy permit', for example, as part of the existing child care licensing process. For an outdoor preschool, it makes no sense to pay overhead for an indoor facility that simply will not be used.

To be clear, outdoor preschools are not camps. They run year round, the way any other early learning programs do. They utilize child-directed curriculum, early learning standards, build community with families, assess student learning, implement health and safety protocols, document learning through evidence-based practices, and provide a deeply meaningful experience about what it means to learn and grow in the place you call home.

Outdoor preschools offer a very specific, place-based philosophy centered on nature pedagogy and environmental literacy. Not every family may want an immersive outdoor preschool for their child. But a growing number of families want their children to be active, healthy, and engaged in sensory-rich, experiential, hands-on learning. Physical development is on full display in outdoor preschool programs. Social and emotional learning is also deep and rich in immersive outdoor preschools. Children work together in community as they have adventures in all kinds of weather. Outdoor learning provides stress relief and mental health benefits, especially for children who experience trauma. Empathy and respect for nature are common threads across these programs. Nurturing empathy is crucial for the much larger goals that we have here in Maryland for environmental literacy and the protection of our natural resources.



I should note that Maryland was the first in the nation to pass a graduation requirement for K-12 environmental literacy standards. Even at the age of three, the children are keenly aware of their place and their impact in the natural world. These pro-environmental attitudes usher in the next generation of compassionate people who want to protect and conserve our incredible natural resources in Maryland.

Outdoor preschools provide soil for the seeds of all kinds of cognitive and intellectual development to blossom. Beyond the obvious science concepts, we address other development domains including language and literacy, math and creative arts, technology and engineering - even history that comes to life while reading the landscape. Learning is active and alive outside. There is no sacrifice of foundation skills. In fact, according to a peer-reviewed 2019 study, researchers did a critical review of recent literature and found:

“In academic contexts, nature-based instruction outperforms traditional instruction.”

(Kuo et al, 2019). See the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* for more information:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305/full>

Given Maryland’s leadership in environmental literacy, including the Partnership for Children in Nature and Project Green Classrooms, and the abundant research about the value of nature-based, outdoor learning, it makes sense for us to extend the opportunity to younger children.

Perhaps the most compelling reason we need to conduct a pilot program for outdoor preschool licensing is because of the barriers that exist for families who want to attend outdoor preschools but cannot. Children that come from low-resourced backgrounds and rely on child care scholarships can only use them in licensed programs. This means that outdoor preschools cannot accept children who need to use child care scholarships to attend. As you might imagine, this disproportionately places a burden on low-income families and many of those families are in black and brown communities. This is not acceptable, especially because this is a barrier we can remedy through licensure.

Safety is also a concern. Teachers in licensed programs are vetted to be sure they understand child development, health and safety considerations, developmentally appropriate practices, etc. Right now, anyone may offer an unlicensed program that could pose potential harm to children because the state does not allow for licensing. Additionally, licensed programs can access professional development funding to ensure teachers have, and can maintain, their credentials with financial help from the state.

Children with special needs (and their families) lack equitable access to outdoor preschools and experience disproportionate barriers to getting special services if they wish to attend. Far more supportive infrastructure is in place for children in licensed child care settings. There are a range of



developmental benefits for children with special needs and diverse abilities, and the pilot program can further address how to include all children in outdoor preschools.

Currently, outdoor preschools can only operate for short periods of time before being required to be licensed. But as stated, there is no path to do so. This means that short, part-day outdoor preschools can only be accessed by families with the luxury of attending a 2- or 3-hour program once or twice per week. This denies equitable access for working families who need longer hours of care.

Another respected State department, the Maryland Dept. of Mental Health and Hygiene, already licenses 100% outdoor programs in the summer, without the need for indoor facilities. This aligns in many ways with safety practices that could be in place for outdoor preschools. Given that many outdoor preschools are already licensed by MDH and comply with existing health and safety requirements, this feels like a great place to start with a pilot program. As it stands, the Maryland State Department of Education's Office of Child Care does not acknowledge licensure already in place by their fellow State Dept. for the purpose of year-round outdoor preschool. If health and safety standards are acceptable for hand washing and toileting (even amidst COVID protocol), and camps can obtain state licensure working with the same age of children - why are there additional barriers in place for outdoor preschools through the Office of Child Care? The pilot program through this bill would address these challenges and ensure a path licensure.

We also want to acknowledge the staggering number of childcare programs that have closed since the start of the pandemic (nearly 1,000). Outdoor preschools can provide another high-quality option and build capacity for high quality early learning opportunities. For existing child care programs, they would be able to take families off their waitlists with an expanded outdoor preschool option.

Fortunately, Washington state is the first in the nation to make a path for outdoor nature-based preschools to be licensed. Our *Outdoor Preschool Licensing Advisory Team* has been in close contact to learn more about their progress. **Following a comprehensive 4-year pilot program, their final report concludes that children demonstrated 'kindergarten readiness' that exceeded the state's average for other licensed care programs and found gains that overwhelmingly support the value of outdoor preschools.**

Outdoor Preschools demonstrate an ability to meet rising demand for high quality care, increase capacity to provide enriching early learning opportunities, and address issues of equitable, affordable access to outdoor learning for all children. WA's pilot provided an opportunity for experienced nature-based ECE providers to work alongside state department officials to collaborate on specific protocol that supports evidence-based standards and dually addresses the unique needs of outdoor



preschools. We hope that Maryland will be the second state in the US to embark on an outdoor preschool licensing pilot program and ultimately forge a path for licensing.

I understand some of my colleagues in traditional early childhood education may not yet understand how and why outdoor learning is vital to early childhood education. However, the benefits of nature-based early childhood education and outdoor preschool are evidence-based and well established. What we need to do is ensure that ALL families have safe, equitable access to outdoor preschool if they so choose this form of early childhood pedagogy. House Bill 525 will provide the opportunity for us to work with MSDE's Office of Child Care to determine the regulations that allow for licensure.

I urge you to vote in favor of HB 525 to create a pilot program that will help provide safe, equitable access to outdoor preschool for the children of Maryland.

With Gratitude,

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