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MAYOR

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HB 525

February 15, 2023

TO: Members of the Ways and Means Committee
FROM: Nina Themelis, Interim Director of Government Relations
RE: House Bill 525 – Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program - Establishment
POSITION: SUPPORT

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Members of the Committee, please be advised that the Baltimore City Administration (BCA) **supports** House Bill (HB) 525.

This very important legislation aligns with the City’s mission to create a healthy and green Baltimore.

We witness the significant positive effects of outdoor preschool experiences in the children we serve everyday. When children are given the time, space and permission to learn and play outdoors, their confidence, social and communicative skills, motivation and concentration, and understanding of and connectedness to nature, strengthen. Even their immune systems are strengthened by contact with mud, soil, water and exposure to all weather!

Free, unstructured, and natural play in nature is of high importance because it is a continuous process of learning. Studies show that children in Forest Preschools are well prepared for kindergarten, individual learning processes are enhanced, and gained abilities can be transferred to the classroom. Nature-based preschools foster the skills and values that lead to environmental literacy, which supports goals of the K-12 Environmental Literacy Standards required for graduation in Maryland.

We are incredibly lucky to play, explore, and breathe under the healthy forest canopy of Gwynns Falls Leakin Park. We have watched residents who visited the park over the last two years become increasingly aware of the benefits of the outdoors, perhaps one of the silver linings of the otherwise devastating pandemic. They are often inspired by our student’s harmonious exploration and curiosity for the natural world. Unfortunately, children from low-income communities and those with special needs do not always have equitable access to parks, much less the benefits of nature-based early childcare because immersive outdoor preschools currently cannot be licensed. Our forest preschool program currently has a waiting list of over one hundred families. These families come from all over the city, and they are a reminder of all of those who could benefit from forest preschools in their communities. With all of Baltimore’s beautiful parks, that is an exorbitant amount of potential.

Outdoor preschools promote the mission and the three guiding pillars of Baltimore City Recreation and Parks — healthy recreation, conservation, and social equity.

We respectfully request a favorable report on House Bill 525.