

Friday, February 10, 2023

Ways and Means Committee

RE: Support HB525 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot bill!

Dear Honorable Ways and Means Committee:

My name is Monique Lewis and I am a parent who resides in Calvert County, Huntingtown, 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.

This issue is incredibly important to our community. As it stands, childcare, let alone early childhood education is incredibly difficult to find. Waitlists are long and options are limited. When parents are working long hours at their jobs to afford care, one worry is the type of care their child is receiving. Luckily, I was able to get a spot at a nature preschool for my daughter. She is very spirited child who would not do well in an environment that is considered traditional by the state. The negative consequences would have been overwhelming for her self-esteem, her learning, and her happiness. At the school she is at now, Little Bugs Nature Preschool, she is learning to count using leaves while on a walk. She has excelled beyond measure and skips as she goes inside. Every single day she wants to go to school and every single day I have peace dropping her off, leaving me the mental and emotional capacity to work full-time and provide back to the Maryland economy.

This is not a light issue for our family, this was the deciding factor to stay in Maryland rather than move. As most parents want to ensure they are making decisions that are best for their families, especially within the proximity to Washington, D.C. is it a strategic decision that benefits the State of Maryland to have more inclusive approaches towards the education of our children. There are countless academic peer-reviewed journal articles with proof of the benefits of outdoor education for children and the fact that this is such a limited option for Maryland's families, I strongly encourage you to pass this bill. Passing this bill would have such significant impacts on our communities, our families, and our youth. I urge you to learn more about the educational benefits and the positive impact on our kids' mental health solely from the experience of a nature school. Passing this bill would allow access for thousands of families and kids. This is an opportunity for Maryland to be on center stage for the country, leading the way for early education. There is no negative output from passing this bill, only positives for the citizens of Maryland. This has been such a positive experience for my daughter and I wish this for every child. Please make the right decision and pass this 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!

Sincerely,

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