



Sierra Club Maryland Chapter
P.O. Box 278
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Committee: Ways and Means

Testimony on: HB 376 "Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program - Establishment"

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 10, 2021

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club submits this testimony in support of HB 376. Access to early childhood education that is centered on nature-based exploration is critical to cultivating the next generation of environmental stewards. Licensing for Outdoor Preschools will help existing nature-based preschools reach children in low income areas and with special education needs. Additionally, we believe that in the future the expansion of this pilot licensing program will encourage the creation of more high quality nature-based outdoor education programs for preschool children and beyond.

Young children benefit from an early start to healthy lifelong habits. Numerous peer reviewed studies point to the improvements in mood and overall health and wellness outcomes. Recent studies show that interactions with nature boost mood in adolescents,¹ support a strengthened immune system,² and improve problem solving, critical thinking and self-discipline³ – all critical for today's youth.

Piloting a licensing program for Outdoor Preschools will support access to nature by underserved communities. Working families need access to high quality full-day education yet currently there are limits on the length of time Outdoor programs can be offered because they cannot be licensed without indoor building space. State vouchers can only be used by licensed providers. Providers cannot access professional development offered by the Maryland State Department of Education if they are not using the licensure program and conversely cannot be vetted for credentials. HB 376 would offer a pathway forward to improving family, student, and teacher experiences with outdoor preschool programs.

For these reasons, the Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly recommends a favorable report on HB 376.

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¹ Zhang Y, Mavoa S, Zhao J, Raphael D, Smith M. The Association between Green Space and Adolescents' Mental Well-Being: A Systematic Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020;17(18):6640. Published 2020 Sep 11. doi:10.3390/ijerph17186640

² Andersen L, Corazon SSS, Stigsdotter UKK. Nature Exposure and Its Effects on Immune System Functioning: A Systematic Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021;18(4):1416. Published 2021 Feb 3. doi:10.3390/ijerph18041416

³ Kuo M, Barnes M, Jordan C. Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship. *Front Psychol*. 2019;10:305. Published 2019 Feb 19. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 70,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.