

February 7, 2022

HB0376 — Outdoor Preschool License Pilot Program – Established – SUPPORT

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Washington, and Members of the Ways & Means Committee;

The Maryland Out of School Time Network (MOST) is a statewide organization dedicated to closing opportunity gaps by expanding both the quantity and quality of afterschool and summer learning opportunities for school-aged young people. MOST is one of the fifty statewide networks supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and serves as Maryland's affiliate to the National Afterschool Association.

MOST Network strongly endorses the creation of an Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot Program in Maryland. Beyond providing additional protection to students amid the ongoing pandemic, these outdoor learning environments present a unique opportunity to improve students' physical, social, and emotional well-being at a critical age in their psychological development.

Schools across the country have struggled to maintain covid-related health and safety measures in traditional learning environments. Social distancing is difficult in crowded classrooms and enforcing mask procedures for young children remains a difficult task for even the most diligent of teachers. **An outdoor classroom mitigates these concerns by providing more airflow and space for students and faculty.** Even without the pandemic, young children would stand to benefit substantially from the fresh air, sunlight, and exercise that these learning environments provide.

Yet the most promising aspects of outdoor preschool are its contributions to young students' social and emotional well-being. Early childhood is a time when kids are discovering the most fundamental lessons about themselves and their relationships with others. **In contrast to a traditional learning environment, outdoor learning spaces allow students to interface with the world around them in a way that promotes autonomy, creativity, and problem solving.** When allowed to do so with their peers, this experience can yield valuable lessons about collaboration and risk management.

Such experiences cannot be taken for granted in a time when virtual spaces now dominate students' time both in and out of the classroom. **The pandemic illustrated the revolutionary implications of digital education tools, yet it also reminded us of the value that hands-on, face-to-face instruction will continue to have when educating young people.** The General Assembly would be wise to support the creation of learning environments that makes use of children's natural inclination towards this kind of learning.

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