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**2/24/23**

Early Childhood and Human Services Committee

**RE: Support HB 2717 Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot Bill**

Dear Honorable Early Childhood and Human Services Committee:

My name is Melissa Stern and I am a parent who resides in Multnomah County, Portland, Oregon.

I am writing to urge you to support House Bill 2717 to establish an Outdoor Preschool Bill. This bill has support in counties across Oregon and can increase childcare capacity and access for families! Outdoor preschools offer unique physical, cognitive, and social development benefits unique from a traditional indoor environment. Yet many families lack access to outdoor and nature-based experiences, and these inequities often fall across socioeconomic and racial lines. Licensing outdoor preschools is a simple way for the state to increase capacity and create more equitable and accessible childcare options for all families. 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 HB 2717 Outdoor Preschool Licensure 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 resources such as Early Intervention or Early Learning Division Expansion Grants. Licensing is required for families to use state scholarship funds to attend outdoor preschool (such as Preschool Promise or Preschool for All). 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 Oregon;
- Outdoor preschool licensure promotes PreK-12 environmental literacy and supports goals of the Oregon “No Child Left Inside” Act of 2009. It was a recommendation identified in the *Governor’s Task Force for the Outdoors 2020 Framework for Action*. It builds off the strength of Outdoor School, and relates to the Oregon Environmental Literacy Plan, Oregon Natural Resources Education Program, Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights and Raise Up Oregon: A Statewide Early Learning System Plan; and

- HB 2717 is part of the comprehensive Children's Agenda, with broad support across the entire state of Oregon and with many organizations

*All of my children attended an outdoor forest school for their preschool years, providing them the unique opportunity to connect with the natural world and enabling them to become stewards of this earth. Together with their classmates they ran through streams, observed nature, and were free to utilize their critical thinking skills to interact with nature in an organic and autonomous way. Even today as they've grown older, the skills they practiced in forest school have provided them with an attitude of self reliance and confidence in their daily lives.*

*In a time when children are starved for green spaces and outside time. Forest schools provide an opportunity to foster a connection to the natural spaces available to everyone, regardless of their financial means. During the pandemic closures in 2020 and 2021, my youngest was lucky enough to have almost no interruption in their education because of outdoor classrooms. If programs like these had been more widely available during this time, many more children would have continued to receive the learning and social connection they needed in their crucial preschool years. We consider ourselves very lucky to have had access to Wildwood Nature School.*

*It is my sincere hope that lawmakers **support this bill and widen access for outdoor education**, cultivating a lifelong passion in future generations to care for the planet.*

Sincerely,

Melissa Stern

Portland, OR