
Date 2/28/23

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 McKenzie Hilmer, I'm an Autism Specialist and Behavioral therapist in Jackson County, Medford, Oregon. I am also the parent of a child who attends an outdoor school (Freckled Fawn) in Southern 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

As a former Special education teacher and a current advocate/therapist for those with exceptionalities, I cannot tell you enough how important it is that ALL children get the opportunity to spend time outdoors. Current research supports the benefits of outdoor learning and play for children on the Autism Spectrum, this was included in a 2019 report published in an Elsevier Health & Place Journal. One of the biggest takeaways from this article was that those with Autism were able to safely

explore their sensory systems in nature by using gross motor skills which helped them with sensory integration. By having a calm or relaxed sensory system a student with Autism can truly begin to open themselves up to more learning and social opportunities. As a former Autism Specialist for Southern Oregon Education Service District (SOESD) I was assigned to help support many students on the Autism Spectrum across multiple school districts. One thing I was consistently doing for these school districts, was creating a sensory-calming room on campus. While creating these rooms we often used recordings of rain, running water, or wind. We also had different variations of shifting lights and calming visual images such as waves, forests, and other outdoor nature pictures. These rooms were used to help calm the sensory system of overwhelmed students. They were highly successful in schools and many students personally thanked me for creating a safe calming environment for them to go take a sensory break. In an outdoor school or program, all of those elements of a calming room are literally right there. Also if the sensory environment becomes too overwhelming outdoors, it can be easily mitigated by creating a quiet space in a den/shelter, hammock, or a sitting spot. I cannot emphasize enough how vitally important it is to the future of our children that they have the opportunity to attend and be part of an outdoor program sometime in their lives. Children's mental health conditions are not only skyrocketing but the correlation between mental health issues in children and their technology usage (social media) is devastating! PLEASE THINK OF FUTURE GENERATIONS AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH, AND VOTE IN SUPPORT OF THIS BILL!

Please help us champion more childcare capacity and access by supporting the Outdoor Preschool Licensure bill and urging your fellow lawmakers to do the same!

Sincerely,

McKenzie Hilmer
Certified Autism Specialist
Medford, Oregon