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**3/02/23**

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 Heather Sears and I am a community member and parent who resides in Jackson County, Gold Hill, 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 organisations

My son is 6 years old and has attended numerous outdoor education classes with Freckled Fawn Nature School. What I knew as normal schooling growing up in Alaska wouldn’t be a possibility without our local outdoor school. He has had the opportunity to learn about nature and grow socially and emotionally in a supportive and educational environment. The education he has received through Freckled Fawn Nature School over the years is something he still remembers and uses today and builds upon each year. We will continue to take education courses with our local outdoor school and cannot wait for our daughter (4 years old this summer) to be able to participate and have the same opportunity to be a part of this excellent hands-on education. Not every child learns the same way, outdoor schools recognize that and teach in a way that allows every student to feel valued, heard and important.

I urge our lawmakers to vote in support of this bill, and I truly believe we would be doing our children a disservice if lawmakers did not.

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,

*Heather Sears*

Heather Sears  
Gold Hill, Oregon