

History of Outdoor Nature-Based Child Care

Outdoor Preschool Pilot

In spring 2017, the Washington Legislature passed SB 5357, “Establishing a pilot project to license outdoor early learning and child care programs.” We are excited by this project - to establish a pilot to analyze current models of outdoor preschools and adapt, when necessary, our licensing regulations to allow for the operation of outdoor early learning programs.

In researching the area of outdoor preschool, the legislature found that while there are upwards of 40 outdoor early learning programs in the state, all operate as part-day programs and are therefore not subject to child care licensing regulations. Many of these programs have expressed an interest in hosting full-day programs and participating in the state’s Early Achievers program.

However, DCYF recognizes that many of our current licensing regulations are specifically geared towards the built, indoor environment. SB 5357 directs DCYF to establish a pilot to analyze current models of outdoor preschools and adapt, when necessary, our licensing regulations to allow for the operation of outdoor early learning programs.

Over the life of this pilot project, ensuring the health and safety of children was our primary concern. Below is a brief outline of the scope of the pilot project:

- **Year 1, beginning July 2017:** recruiting pilot participants; organizing advisory committee; data collection and analysis of participant’s policies, procedures, and practices; developing outdoor setting licensing requirements; training participants staff; portable background check; submitting an annual report.
- **Year 2, beginning July 2018:** pilot full day services based on the outdoor setting licensing requirements; providing ongoing professional development and technical assistance; conducting pre and post compliance monitoring; providing ongoing data collection and analysis; engaging tribal care providers; developing pathway to Early Achievers; submitting an annual report.
- **Year 3, beginning July 2019:** engaging additional pilot participants; providing ongoing professional development and technical assistance; conducting compliance monitoring; providing ongoing data collection and analysis; implementing pathway to Early Achievers; submitting an annual report.
- **Year 4, beginning July 2020:** conducting final monitoring data collection and analysis; final complaint data analysis; providing ongoing professional development and technical assistance; submitting an annual report and developing final pilot recommendations.

Pilot Outcomes

The outdoor preschool pilot ended on Aug. 1, 2021. DCYF has recommended that the Washington State Legislature authorize DCYF to license outdoor, nature-based child care for preschool and school-age children with Senate Bill 5151 of 2021-22. Please see the Resources sidebar for the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Final Report. For up-to-date information on the progress of SB 5151, [view the bill information on the Legislature's website](#).

