

Slide 1: Welcome to the Washington Nature Preschool Association's presentation of "Our Advocacy Journey" - we recognize that not everything we experienced along our path to licensing outdoor early learning will be replicable; however, as educators, we also know the power of a story to support and inspire. We hope that, by sharing the story of our journey, you will find something that enables you to thrive on your own advocacy journey.

You should know that WaNPA is an all-volunteer regional collaborative, which was developed to support nature-based and outdoor early childhood education and teachers while working to meet certain goals. One of those goals is a shared commitment to advancing the nature-based early learning movement.

Slide 2: Washington Nature Preschool Association acknowledges that our members live, teach, and operate outdoor and nature-based early learning programs on occupied land. We honor the land itself, as well as the many tribes who are still here thriving and continually seeking to protect the land. We also acknowledge that teaching in, with, and about nature has been practiced by indigenous peoples since time immemorial.

Slide 3: Let's begin with a look at the timeline of events over the past 5 years.

Slide 4: Our path to licensing began with an ever-increasing awareness that the high-quality outdoor early learning programs, which have been offered all around the state since the early 2000s, were not accessible to all children and families. Limited hours and not being eligible for subsidized funding created a gap in access. While there certainly are many programs that find the shorter day (between 3 and 4 hours) to be the right length of time, many outdoor and nature-based programs expressed an interest in hosting full-day programs. So, in the spring of 2016, a group of outdoor preschool educators came together through WaNPA to begin advocating for legislation to license outdoor preschools. No one thought it would happen as quickly as it did, but legislation passed within the first year to fund a 4-year pilot program. Soon after, the Dept of Children Youth and Families put together a team to develop the licensing WACs (which stands for Washington Administrative Code) and the Outdoor Preschool Advisory Group (aka OPAG) was formed.

Over the next couple years the OPAG worked with DCYF to develop the outdoor preschool pilot standards. And the first provisional licenses were issued in fall of 2019. This was an exciting milestone, as it made WA state the first to license outdoor preschools. Next, we worked together on defining outdoor teacher competencies. By January 2020, DCYF had licensed five outdoor preschool programs, and by March 2020 they were processing the applications of eight additional programs.

The pandemic provided many challenges for providers, and the outdoor preschool pilot's progress was impacted as well. In March 2020, any outdoor preschool programs in the pilot had closed in-person services. By the summer, however, some schools began to reopen, noting that outside play was one of DOH's guidelines for Child Care, Youth Development, and Day Camps During the COVID-19 Outbreak.

At this point, the pilot's end was looming just a year away (it officially ends Aug. 1). So, while working to support our community, as we all navigated understanding and creating new norms, we at WaNPA took up the torch again to advocate for DCYF to be permanently authorized to license outdoor, nature-based child care for preschool and school-age children, and two months ago, the bill making it official was signed into law. Over the past 5 years, the number of outdoor and nature-based early learning programs has more than doubled in WA state. Even as some programs were forced to close during the COVID outbreak, new ones emerged. Now there are over 100 programs eligible for licensing in WA state!

Slide 5: To recap: SB 5357 directed the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to establish an outdoor preschool pilot. The goal was to expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs, while investigating the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington's children and families. If you haven't guessed already, the pilot was wildly successful.

Slide 6: And the passage of SB 5151 makes Washington the first state in the country to permanently license outdoor early learning programs and childcare centers.

Slide 7: Now that you have an overview, let's take a look at what worked for us. Some things that you can implement on your own advocacy journey.

Slide 8: First, Take the time to organize. Throughout the advocacy process, the Washington Nature Preschool Association offered a means by which we could connect with others and represent our shared interests. Our combined knowledge and resources ensured that we were able to successfully advocate for the inclusion of many elements of nature-based education that are frequently considered to be essential--from working with fire and tools to climbing trees and exploring around bodies of water, to allowing for composting toilets and even "backcountry toileting" protocols. Having a center gives everyone a place to keep coming back to.

Slide 9: Next, Consider your message. In other words, know your ‘why’ and let that be the place your advocacy is grounded in as you develop your messaging. Also, keep in mind that lawmakers listen to testimony all day long, so having clear talking points is critical.

Slide 10: You need to Know the landscape. If you’re new to advocacy, the legislature can feel especially complex and overwhelming to navigate. For the passage of SB 5357, WaNPA worked with a lobbyist who helped us understand how to make our message resonate, they guided us on who to work with, and helped us understand what to expect throughout the legislative session. Advocating for SB 5151, we did not work with a lobbyist; however, we called in key players to guide the advocacy effort, which included educators, administrators, and other stakeholders from the OPAG, as well as a former legislator who we knew supported the bill. Additionally, we had the benefit of working with DCYF. Although they couldn’t do any actual advocacy, as the writers of the bill, they did help us tremendously in understanding the legislative process and what to expect.

Slide 11: It is important to Leverage your resources. Because Washington was the first state to pass legislation for an outdoor preschool pilot, we had to start from scratch. We relied on research, evidence of waitlists, and expert opinions to support our case for the pilot project.

Advocating for the passage of SB 5151, which made licensing permanent, we partnered with our local chapter of the NAAEE, which is E3 Washington. We reached out to our WaNPA membership, which continues to grow, especially as more educators take learning outdoors. We called on teachers and families, researchers and environmental education supporters, like the WA Trails Association.

In advocating for each bill, we found the people who love and value time outdoors - maybe it’s a connection from their childhood or something they do regularly. Whether in the community, the legislature, or the licensing agency, find those people.

Our advocacy for both the pilot project and for making licensing permanent also benefited from the input of the Natural Start Alliance, which provided consultation based on the development of the Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook. This resource was hugely impactful in the development of Washington’s licensing standards, and those licensing standards should also be a key resource utilized by anyone seeking licensing for outdoor early learning. Another incredible resource available to you now is the Outdoor Preschool Policy Action Framework, which we’ll come back to in a moment.

Slide 12: The last of our ‘take aways’ is Bring in key stakeholders when developing licensing standards. In Washington, our legislation included the development of an Outdoor Preschool Advisory Group. It is critical to provide the opportunity for all interested outdoor preschool stakeholders to have a voice in the development of licensing standards. The state’s collaborative approach supported several positive outcomes. It helped to create an atmosphere of partnership between the licensing agency and those to be licensed; it also provided opportunities for outdoor preschool providers to begin benefitting from a relationship with DCYF through some incredible professional development offerings; and most importantly, it ensured that the licensing standards would be inclusive of the variety of approaches to outdoor and nature-based education represented in our state and in our field.

Slide 13: One more word on leveraging resources - If you are not yet familiar with the Outdoor Preschool Policy Action Framework, please check it out! Willamette Partnership’s Oregon Health & Outdoors Initiative partnered with outdoor early childhood experts across the country to develop this framework. As I already noted, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach to advocacy, so this resource identifies many potential options you can use to start moving your state along the pathway to make outdoor early learning available to everyone!

You can read the framework, which is linked on this session’s webpage, and you can also watch a replay of a Natural Start forum, featuring this amazing new resource, where you’ll hear stories from Velvet Cooley (Mid-Columbia Children’s Council), Alex Brooks (City of Boise Parks and Recreation), and our very own Aliza Yair (the Pilot Program Specialist with Washington Dept of Children, Youth, and Families).

Slide 14: Now, let’s talk about some of the nitty gritty from our experience advocating for licensing. We will share what we learned from navigating the inevitable bumps in the road.

Slide 15: It may seem, because of the relatively quick success with advocating for and achieving licensing in WA, that it was simple. It wasn’t. Sure, there was a certain amount of providence - in some ways the stars definitely aligned: bi-partisan support for the pilot and permanent licensing; agency officials who not only needed no convincing, but sought to create strong partnerships from the start; a strategically situated pandemic highlighting the essential nature of early learning and childcare, as well as the critical need for time outdoors to support physical and mental wellness, both of which put a fine point on the demand for nature-based early learning programs. That stuff is unplannable. However, it wasn’t all sunshine and roses. There will be challenges. So, let’s hear from some of the

educators and administrators who have been on this advocacy journey from the beginning, as they share their experience and with it, hopefully, some hope...

Go to conversation ---->>

Slide 16: Remember, look at what's replicable and try it. Not everything will be easily replicable: Policy will shift and change depending on who's in office. Timing will play a big role (*and none of it is wrong*).

We have to be in it for the long game.

Although we in WA have paused for a moment to celebrate the success and potential implications for the field of early learning, we continue to look forward. Expanding program hours to better suit working families and being able to offer more financial incentives will help outdoor and nature-based early learning programs serve lower-income groups - we are definitely taking a critical step toward equitable access to nature and high-quality education - but we have not solved the issues of equity and access. These are complex issues, rooted in systems intended to perpetuate themselves. So we are committed to continually learning ways to recognize injustice and advocate to ensure the diversity of our communities is fully represented in our natural spaces, and in our nature preschools.

Slide 17: As you prepare to or continue to embark on your own advocacy journey, keep in mind that persistence is the key - there will be personalities to navigate, accommodate, and persuade. There will be moments of providence or serendipity, when it all seems to flow with ease. And no matter what, you just have to keep going.

The links to these resources, which were mentioned throughout the presentation, are available on the session webpage. Thank you so much for joining us to learn about our advocacy journey. We hope you've heard something useful. And we invite you to reach out with any questions. Email us wanaturepa@gmail.com. Thank you again. May you continue to find grounding and joy in nature.