

March 24, 2025

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Kaitlin Erpestad and I am the director of Hartley Nature Preschool, a program of the non-profit Hartley Nature Center in Duluth, MN. I have been an educator for almost 20 years and had the honor of starting Hartley Nature Preschool. The preschool is a licensed child care center serving children ages 3-5 with the mission to inspire life-long connections with nature through education, play, and exploration while supporting the whole child's development. The preschool focuses on spending as much time outside as possible every day in nature. This year we are proudly celebrating 10 years of connecting children to nature in Hartley Park! Our program opened in 2014 with 64 children in half day classes and now has a total enrollment of 105 across eight full- and half-day class options.

I am writing today in support of a bold, visionary redesign to Minnesota's child care licensing system. Minnesota's current child care licensing system is filled with repetitive, excessive paperwork and systems, inflexible policies that often do not reflect the reality of working with young children, and inconsistent rule interpretation. As a nature-based program with a mission of taking children outdoors for free play in nature daily, it breaks my heart that this inconsistent rule interpretation gives some home and center based programs the perception that they cannot take children outdoors, cannot play with nature items, or cannot let them participate in age-appropriate risky play, such as climbing low trees. There are decades of research supporting the benefits of time in and interaction with nature, loose parts like sticks, snow, ice, sand, and mud, and risky play like age-appropriate climbing, balancing, running, and so forth. All children deserve access to these benefits every day in their child care program. Their access often depends on how the specific licensor interprets Rule 3. And, if the licensor changes, they may tell a program that they can no longer do activities that had previously been approved with no rationale or route to appeal.

One of the biggest challenges of our current licensing system is the punitive, unsupportive relationship between many licensors and programs. You may already know, but currently licensors drop in unannounced to programs once a year. The license visits often feel punitive, in a "gotcha" type of way that can feel like the licensor is meeting a quota of things a provider is doing wrong instead of acting as a partner in this hard, critical, already undervalued work. License visits can lead to citations for things like having chapstick on the counter, but our current system calls everything from a tube of chapstick to an open bottle of bleach the same "access to hazardous materials." Going forward any new licensing system should include plain language for citations so that families and providers get accurate information that conveys the scope of the infraction, i.e. chapstick vs. bleach, at a given program.

I support transparent, common-sense licensing that ensures basic **health and safety** without burdensome levels of regulation, focuses on current **research-based, developmentally appropriate best practice** in early childhood education, and **partners with child care providers and families**. We love the children in our care and want to offer safe, high-quality, educational, life-changing, loving care and education every day. However, Minnesota's current child care system and the proposed draft 1 and 2 child care licensing standards are pushing high-quality programs to close, delaying the opening of new programs, and pushing talented, passionate, experienced providers out of this career. We have a crisis in child care already in our state; we cannot afford to lose any more providers.

I support SF2135 as a much needed, bold step towards transforming child care licensing in Minnesota. I believe that we can take the best parts of both Rule 3 and draft 2 of the licensing standards and combine them with a visionary, supportive, transformative new system of child care licensing to create the national model for child care licensing. Our state, our families, our providers, and, most of all, our children, deserve nothing less.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to share these insights and invite your committee to reach out with any follow-up questions. I am committed to serving as a resource and advocate as we work together to transform Minnesota's child care system.

Sincerely,

Kaitlin Erpestad

Director, Hartley Nature Preschool
Hartley Nature Center | Duluth, MN