



WHERE CHILDREN & NATURE MEET

New Outdoor Classroom and Stroller Accessible Trail Open at Belfast Area Children's Center

In 2024, Coastal Mountains Land Trust began meeting with the teachers at the Belfast Area Children's Center (BACC) to see how we could help them expand nature-based learning through our *Learning Landscapes** program. BACC already had an incredible asset on its property — an adjacent forest and wetland that led to a peaceful pond and connected directly with the Hills to Sea Trail. One teacher, Anne Dreesen, who recognized the profound benefits of outdoor learning, hand-built a pavilion as a home base to help bring her students outside more often.

The woods there are truly magical. On one of the Land Trust's first visits, a beaver glided across the pond. Its dam held the water at a perfect height, creating a thriving habitat full of wonder for young explorers.

BACC provides year-round childcare for children as young as 6 weeks. With such young learners, teachers had little time to plan, design, and build an outdoor learning space, and guiding an entire class of toddlers to the site posed a real challenge — that's where our partnership came in. Trails, preserves, and outdoor access are what we, as a Land Trust, know best — and we were excited to support the effort.

Working side by side with the teachers, we outlined a shared vision for the space: a stroller accessible trail that looped down to the water, an outdoor privy, pavilion upgrades, and a platform for kids to step-up and see the pond over the tall reeds. Together, we raised

funds through both the BACC and Coastal Mountains networks. Erin Amadon of Town 4 Trails was hired to design and build the trail, and volunteers from the Hills to Sea Trail Coalition generously contributed their time, skills, and materials to create stump circles and install hooks, benches, and seat storage at the pavilion — transforming the area into a true outdoor classroom.

Now, the space is ready for students, and a dream more than 20 years in the making has finally come to life. With these improvements, BACC can now offer a summer camp program for the first time.

It's remarkable what can happen when a community unites around a shared vision — and it's remarkable how regular access to the outdoors can make a difference in a child's life. Thank you to the many people — teachers, administrators, neighbors, donors, volunteers, and contractors — who made this project, and seeing those cheeky beavers at work, possible.

FOOTNOTE

* *Learning Landscapes* is a Coastal Mountains Land Trust program that seeks to (1) conserve land or secure access to land adjacent to schools to be used for outdoor learning, (2) build outdoor classrooms on the school and/or preserve property and provide trails, signage, and infrastructure to create safe and accessible outdoor learning environments, and (3) provide educators with the mentoring and resources needed for effectively teaching outdoors.