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## **Natural Playscape in Merrill**

### **Subscriber Submission!**

Staff at the [Head Start/Early Childhood](#) program in [Merrill](#) saw the value of play in nature. On field trips to the woods, they noticed wonder and enthusiasm as students ran up and down hills, turned over rocks, explored, and discovered. Children who struggled with behaviors that impeded learning in the classroom asked questions, demonstrated persistence, used more vocabulary, and smiled.

Three years ago, the program began acquiring funds to make this an everyday occurrence for their students--low-income and special needs 3- to 5-year-olds. With the support of 28 public, private, and non-profit donors, Teacher Joan Krohn [dedicated](#) a natural playscape on the school grounds last month.

The children named it "The Secret Path."

"These schools help make exchange a truly thrilling one for international students, the student body, and the community at large," a statement from the council reads.

Here they explore the natural world and their senses in a pumpkin patch and among trees, shrubs, and perennials. They learn sorting and self-confidence in a boulder field. A bridge teaches visual and motor skills. They enjoy a masonry "gathering circle," outdoor musical instruments, and a water trough perfect for dam-building. By engaging students more fully, The Secret Path also offers increased opportunities for negotiation, language building, and imaginative play.

As Krohn writes: "Hey, it's heavy", "Let me try", "Together", "No, put it in the truck." This is the sound of creative problem solving. A group of Head Start/Early Childhood students are working to get a big rock to the top of a dirt hill. If you look closely you see the scientific process, math skills, creativity, and team building. This is learning through play.

*This story was submitted by a DPI-ConnectEd subscriber! We are looking for your news of exciting programs, promising practices, initiatives that could benefit from publicity, or your questions about working with Wisconsin students. E-mail just a sentence or two to [benson.gardner@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:benson.gardner@dpi.wi.gov), with "Story Idea" in the subject line.*