



June 13, 2024

Hon. Bernie Sanders, Chair
United States Senate
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Bill Cassidy, Ranking Member
United States Senate
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy,

KABOOM! is the national nonprofit dedicated to ending playspace inequity in communities across the country. We have worked to do this by building over 3,300 playgrounds in every type of community during our 28-year history. We often work with local public school districts in an effort to improve the quality of schoolyard playgrounds. Far too many public schools lack adequate funding to provide their students with the type of playgrounds and outdoor learning spaces their students require. This need is especially acute in historically Black and brown communities which have experienced decades of disinvestment due to past school segregation policies as well as low-income communities whose residents' property taxes are too low to support the kind of educational infrastructure their children deserve.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) children between the ages of 6-17 ought to have 60 minutes of daily physical activity. For every child to meet that minimum standard they must have access to high quality and engaging schoolyard playgrounds. Unfortunately, too many students do not have that opportunity. That lack of adequate schoolyard play equipment not only has a profound negative effect on their short and long-term health outlook, but it has also been shown to have a negative impact on students' academic performance and mental health. According to a 2021 Public Health Advisory issued by the Surgeon General on protecting youth mental health, play was a crucial activity in the promotion and protection of children's good mental health. When children aren't able to engage in those types of activities during the school day, especially when they may be experiencing periods of heightened anxiety or stress, they are less able to focus, more likely to engage in disruptive behaviors, and feel a greater sense of social isolation.

While ensuring high-quality play equipment is available to every student is a priority, investing in the adaptations needed to use it as our climate warms and extreme weather becomes more common is another challenge public school systems across the country are facing.

Climate mitigation and adaptation infrastructure is critically needed in every aspect of our children's educational infrastructure, play included. The removal of metal and plastic play equipment so it can be replaced with wood or other natural materials not only helps make the equipment more usable during warmer temperatures but has the downstream effect of being less extractive of our planet's resources and more sustainably produced. Surfaces, such as cork, should replace rubber surfacing that may contain chemicals that can be harmful to children. They are also more permeable and can be integrated into a localities' water management strategy. Additionally, the installation of natural and manufactured shade elements and community gardens will help keep the temperatures on the playground lower while also improving the immediate area's air quality.

To highlight how important just some of these climate focused adaptations can be, KABOOM! conducted a study comparing two new playgrounds we built in Uvalde, Texas over the past 18 months. One new playground included new shade elements incorporated into the space and the other relied on existing shade structures. The one with added shade saw kids spend 10% more time on the playground than the one that did not include these additional features. KABOOM! is now working with the City of Uvalde to incorporate additional natural shade into more of the playgrounds and public spaces we are helping Uvalde develop.

As important as these outdoor recreational features are, many public schools struggle to access the resources necessary to provide their students appropriate play spaces. One of our partners, the Baltimore City Public Schools, is using some of their remaining American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to undertake some of this work. However, these funds are non-recurring and will soon no longer be available. Another partner, the Oakland Unified School District, has joined with the Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation and KABOOM! to renovate over 25 of their schoolyard playgrounds. This amazing effort was recently highlighted by the Administration during a monthly call with organizations which have made a commitment to help implement the National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. However, not every school district in America has a foundation that is willing to support its efforts to improve the quality of play and children's health and learning outcomes.

This is why KABOOM! hopes this committee will include recommendations to make more resources available to public schools to build, renovate, or adapt their schoolyard play infrastructure. Resources are desperately needed in districts across the country to end the disparities in play access and give every student the opportunity to benefit from the physical activity they'll engage in when given the chance to do so.

We thank the committee for taking the time to examine this important issue and would be happy to provide additional material if requested.

Sincerely,

Lysa Ratliff
CEO