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House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Hearing on *Back to School: Meeting Students' Academic, Social, and Emotional Needs*.

Statement for the Record

Dear Chairman Sablan and Ranking Member Owens:

On behalf of KABOOM!, I would like to thank you for holding this important hearing on *Back to School: Meeting Students' Academic, Social, and Emotional Needs*. The start of the new school year offers us an opportunity to consider what kids need most when at school. At KABOOM!, we believe an important piece to consider is the connection between play and mental health. Safe, accessible, high-quality playgrounds are so critical to the health of communities, oftentimes which are based out of schools.

Unfortunately, playspace inequity has limited access to safe places for many kids across the country. In fact, there are entire zip codes where no schools have playgrounds. Racial segregation, disinvestment and exclusion have denied Black children in particular the essential benefits and simple joys of play for generations. The struggle for access and inclusion in playgrounds, parks and swimming pools has been central to the broader fight for racial justice in America from the early 20th century up to today. This inequity has significant consequences for our kids and takes away the important health, development, and community benefits that come with play.

For the last 25 years, KABOOM! has worked with communities across the country to build kid-designed playspaces that can spark joy and foster a sense of belonging for the kids who are often denied opportunities to thrive. Our work to date has built 17,000 play spaces and impacted the lives of 11.5 million children.

KABOOM! is in the process of expanding our work in ways to address inequity at the systemic level. This year, we launched the 25 in 5 initiative to end playspace inequity. Through this effort, KABOOM! will partner with 25 different partners to address the lack of access to high quality playspaces within their communities. Our first partnerships are in the city of Baltimore, where Mayor Brandon Scott has already allocated \$5 million of the city's American Rescue Plan Act funding to this work. KABOOM! is working with a variety of other public, private, and philanthropic entities to leverage that commitment and accelerate our work to improve 97 playgrounds throughout the city.

Play helps kids create, explore, solve, and imagine, which enhances brain structure and function, builds important creative thinking and problem-solving skills, and contributes to emotional and physical well-being. At KABOOM!, we build on that foundational principle that playspaces are at the heart of childhood. And in our 25 years of experience, we know first-hand the critical physical, social, and emotional benefits that playspaces can provide children and families.



The health and well-being of our kids is deeply connected to the places where they live and play. As the world passes the two and a half year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic, kids, much like adults, need outlets that help them relieve stress and provide social connection more than ever. Spaces where young people can be active, express themselves, connect with friends and neighbors, or just blow off steam are critical, and in some communities they're in short supply.

Supporting the mental health of young people is an important part of our work to increase access to playspaces at KABOOM!, and is even more critical given the troubling effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past two years, [nearly a quarter-million children in the United States lost a caregiver due to the pandemic](#), with youth of color disproportionately impacted. [Rates of anxiety, depression, trauma, loneliness, and suicide have skyrocketed](#), spurring national pediatric groups to [declare a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health](#) and advocate for a range of interventions.

These interventions include increasing funding for mental health resources, integrating mental healthcare into schools, and creating more community-based programs that connect young people to supports and resources. In 2021, the [U.S. Surgeon General issued a youth mental health advisory calling for "whole society" solutions](#) to addressing the sharp rise in the number of young people experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties. Included in the advisory's recommendations was investment in playgrounds and other outdoor recreational spaces. This is just the latest piece of evidence demonstrating why investing in child-friendly neighborhood spaces like parks and playgrounds is an essential part of the solution too. They provide numerous benefits that support mental health, and should be part of a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of the one in five youth who experience mental illness. Research demonstrates how time spent in these spaces is associated with [lower rates of stress, depression, and anxiety](#) and greater life satisfaction.

This hearing is so important to highlight that kids need support now more than ever. We ask that Congress work to ensure that all children have equitable access to the recreation they need to grow up happy and healthy. It will take a collaborative approach to address this growing mental health need across congressional committee jurisdiction, cross-agency work, and partnerships with cities, states and NGOs.