



# ENDING PLAYSPACE INEQUITIES FOR BALTIMORE'S KIDS

Findings from a Playspace Infrastructure Assessment





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# FOREWORD

## How do you calibrate institutional injustice?

Given generations of structural racism here in Baltimore and across our nation, how do you quantify degrees of inequity and what yardstick to use in measuring the harm done to our most vulnerable communities — i.e., low-income communities of color? More importantly, how do you decide where limited resources can be applied most effectively and efficiently? And finally, can we agree that providing support and opportunity for our young people is our top priority?

At Baltimore City Public Schools, one of the pillars of our Blueprint for Success is the concept of student wholeness. Successful schools provide opportunities for students to explore their interests, with enriching activities both in and outside of the classroom. They also create positive cultures where students have the confidence to explore those opportunities. Recent research has also shown that social and emotional learning and “noncognitive” skills are important for student success. In early childhood in particular, playgrounds are an important space where kids can go to build these essential skills.

To state it more simply, children need a safe place to play.

## How do we ensure that every child in Baltimore has access to a great playground?

While that doesn't seem like too much to ask, far too many children in Baltimore — particularly children of color — have been denied a safe place to play and all the benefits that go along with it. Like many aspects of societal inequity, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the importance of play into high relief. Feelings of isolation and anxiety are increasing — particularly among young children — and opportunities for joy and just blowing off steam in a safe environment are greatly

reduced. What is abundantly clear now, perhaps more than ever before, is the value of spaces where kids can safely engage in physical activity, build social and emotional skills, and feel like they have a space where they truly belong.

If the value of these spaces and the need for investment is not in dispute, the question becomes: **how do we ensure that every child in Baltimore has access to a great playground?**

To help answer this question City Schools looked to KABOOM!, a longstanding partner and national expert in playspace equity. Together with KABOOM!, we identified where the need for playspaces is greatest, while uncovering the systemic inequities along racial or economic lines that engendered that need.

## Foreward cont.

**What we found was that almost 40 elementary school playgrounds were not fit for play and therefore, not fit for our kids.** In addition, these playgrounds were located at elementary schools with more children of color from low-income families than the system as a whole.

This assessment of need is an important first step in the process of providing access to quality, inspiring places to play for every child in our city. We are now better equipped to view this situation through an equity lens, to prioritize both the need and the best method for securing investments to support this essential aspect of our student wholeness agenda.

Our children need a safe place to play. We invite you to join us in providing for this most basic of human needs.

Sincerely,



Sonja Brookins Santelises, Ed.D.  
Chief Executive Officer, Baltimore City Public  
School System



# INTRODUCTION

In most U.S. cities, racialized disinvestment has created disparities in access to recreational spaces and the critical benefits they provide. Historic and modern patterns of disinvestment can lead to playspace inequity — a systemic lack of access to quality playspaces along racial and economic lines.

According to a 2011 report by Active Living Research in Los Angeles, CA, lower-income and mostly racial and ethnic minority neighborhoods tend to have fewer parks, green spaces and resources for physical activity.<sup>1</sup> Other research shows that parks in neighborhoods of color are half the size and serve nearly five times more people per acre when compared to parks in majority-white neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup>

An urgent first step to tackle this challenge is to understand the nature and scope of the problem: where is the lack of access to quality spaces for play most acute?

KABOOM! started by exploring this very question in partnership with Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS).

## Playspace Equity

The ability for every kid to have **access** to, and a **sense of belonging** to incredible places to play.

# BALTIMORE: A CASE STUDY

There is a history of systemic racism that has plagued the political, economic and social policies of Baltimore throughout the twentieth century. In 1910, Baltimore City enacted legislation that promoted the racial segregation of neighborhoods. Housing developments and neighborhoods set up restrictive covenants that refused the admittance of Jews and blacks.<sup>3</sup>

Although Baltimore was the first city to desegregate public schools following the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling, given the racially divided neighborhoods of Baltimore, the majority of schools remained unaffected. Today, the city is still largely segregated with a pattern commonly referred to as the “Butterfly Effect.”<sup>4</sup> There continues to be stunning disparity in economic opportunity, life expectancy and annual income in a stretch across Baltimore neighborhoods just nine miles in length

A landmark 2012 study of capital funding needs in BCPSS showed that it will take **\$2.5 billion** to bring its facilities up to minimally acceptable standards.<sup>5</sup> What exactly is behind this gap?

When compared to jurisdictions outside the city, BCPSS receives a similar level of capital funding from state authorities — around \$50 million each year for modernization and renovation. The major difference lies in local funding, which is derived from local taxes. Even though surrounding school systems serve a comparable number of students, Baltimore City receives hundreds of millions less in capital funds each year because its tax base is significantly smaller.

The story of why Baltimore and other post-industrial cities saw dramatic declines in their tax bases in the second half of the 20th century is well-documented. Segregation, industrial decline, white flight and further waves of disinvestment and depopulation slashed the financial and political capital of urban centers.<sup>6</sup> **The result is that scarce resources force city leaders to make what seem like impossible choices about where to invest in the infrastructure of childhood.**

## Baltimore: A Case Study cont.

Of the \$2.5 billion deficit, \$290.6 million is related to correctable educational adequacy deficiencies that contribute to functional equity districtwide. These costs only cover basic repairs to existing facilities and do not account for new construction, programmatic changes, addressing capacity issues, etc.<sup>7</sup>

KABOOM! and BCPSS have forged a multi-year partnership to address playspace inequities and meet the needs of kids in Baltimore. Playspace inequity shows up as either a lack of playspace access (no playspace exists for kids) or a lack of playspace quality (existing playspace needs considerable improvement). Without access to inspiring, quality playspaces, we are denying kids a fundamental part of childhood.

Together with a community of families, educators and administrators, we developed a common understanding of where playspace inequity exists and co-created a plan of action for replacing existing playspaces in need of repair within a reasonable and ambitious timeline.

Because BCPSS must focus its limited capital dollars on emergency repairs and critical maintenance, non-emergency school improvements, such as playspace replacement, are continually deferred.<sup>8</sup> By identifying the need for playspaces through this assessment, KABOOM! and BCPSS now know the outside funding needed to address this inequity. Closing the overall capital funding gap is a significant undertaking, but our analysis shows it would take only \$5.7 million in additional investment to ensure that every kid going to a public elementary school in Baltimore City has access to a safe, high-quality place to play.

Our collective goal is to ensure that the highest-need schools are prioritized so that every student in Baltimore has a safe, high-quality place to play where they learn.<sup>9</sup>

# DATA COLLECTION

## DATA-GUIDED APPROACH

KABOOM! and BCPSS committed to a data-guided approach to understand which elementary schools need new playgrounds. Below we describe the process and data points we included to recommend which schools should be prioritized. The analysis focuses on the following questions:

- Which elementary schools have playgrounds that need to be replaced?
- What are the racial and socio-economic demographics of each school community?
- Do other data points (e.g. enrollment) indicate a higher need for a new or updated playspace at particular schools?
- Do school principals demonstrate interest/capacity to participate in a community build?

## PLAYSPACE ASSESSMENT

In November 2019, KABOOM! invested in assessing play infrastructure at 71 BCPSS playspaces, across 54 elementary and elementary/middle schools (17 schools have more than one playspace). The assessment focused on the physical attributes of the playspaces and surrounding areas, and evaluating and rating the condition of various playground components, including:

- Site attributes (such as fencing, surfacing, and ADA access)
- Play components (such as swings and slides)
- Other site amenities/non-play components (such as seating areas)
- School gardens, if present. Site attributes (such as fencing, surfacing, and ADA access)
- Play components (such as swings and slides)
- Other site amenities/non-play components (such as seating areas)
- School gardens, if present.

# METHODOLOGY

## IDENTIFYING PLAYSPACE NEED AT SCALE

In partnership with BCPSS, KABOOM! developed a model for summarizing the play assessment information collected across the 54 elementary school sites. The model creates a score for each playspace based upon three factors: site attributes, play components, and non-play components. After analyzing the play assessment data using this model, **31 elementary schools (with 39 playspaces) surfaced with ‘unacceptable’ or ‘borderline’ conditions.** These are the strongest candidates for playspace replacement and playground improvement needs across the BCPSS system. In other words, over 12,000 kids attending BCPSS schools do not have quality places to play.

## ADDITIONAL DATA POINTS TO PRIORITIZE SCHOOLS IN THE NEAR-TERM

With 31 elementary schools lacking a quality playspace, BCPSS and KABOOM! augmented the play assessment with other data points in order to prioritize the timing of partnership with individual schools based on urgency of need, readiness, and a school’s interest in receiving a new playspace. With these considerations in mind, BCPSS and KABOOM! added three additional data points, **creating an overall index that combines play infrastructure needs with other important readiness factors.**

## ADDITIONAL DATA POINTS

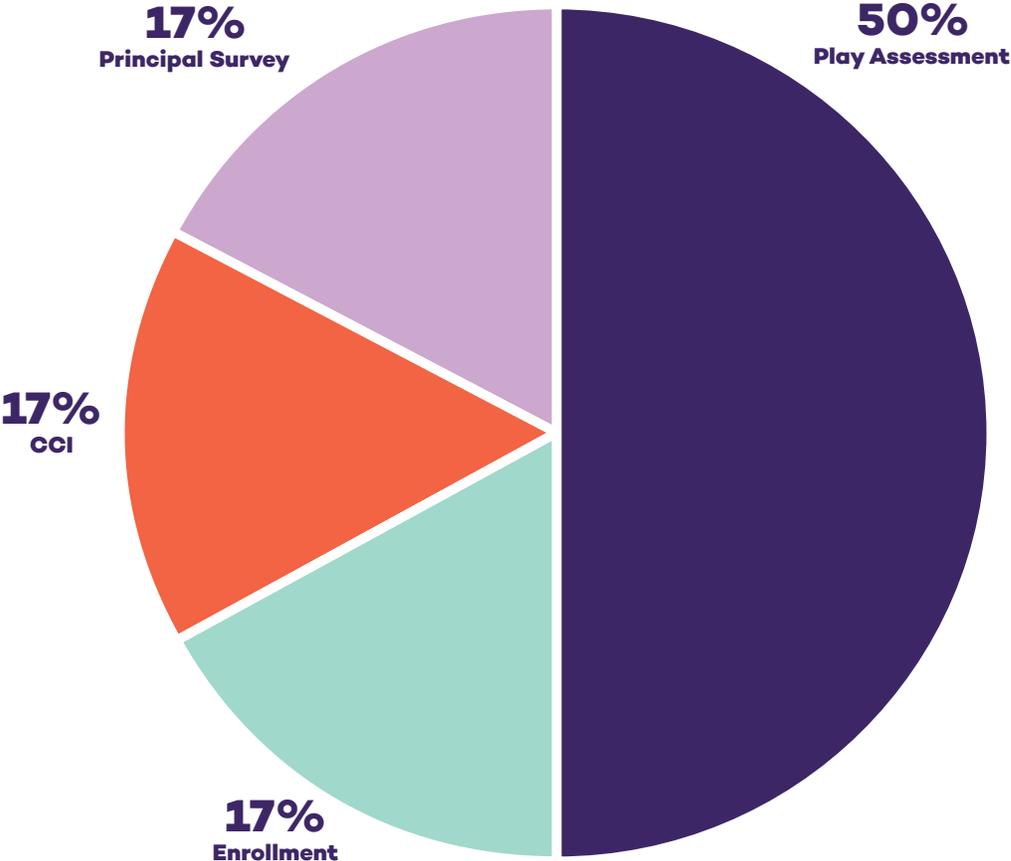
- **A survey to principals at all 31 schools identified for critical playspace improvements.** The survey addressed the principal’s perspective on the condition of the playspace, age appropriateness of the play components, playspace size appropriateness for the student body, and interest in participating in a BCPSS and KABOOM! playspace build project, among other factors. The survey had an 87% response rate (27 out of 31 schools).
- **Enrollment.** BCPSS and KABOOM! included enrollment information for each school. Schools with higher enrollment indicate a greater need and those with lower enrollments indicate a lesser need.
- **Community Conditions Index (CCI).** BCPSS and KABOOM! included the Community Conditions Index score for each school.

# Methodology cont.

## CRAFTING AN OVERALL INDEX TO PRIORITIZE NEED

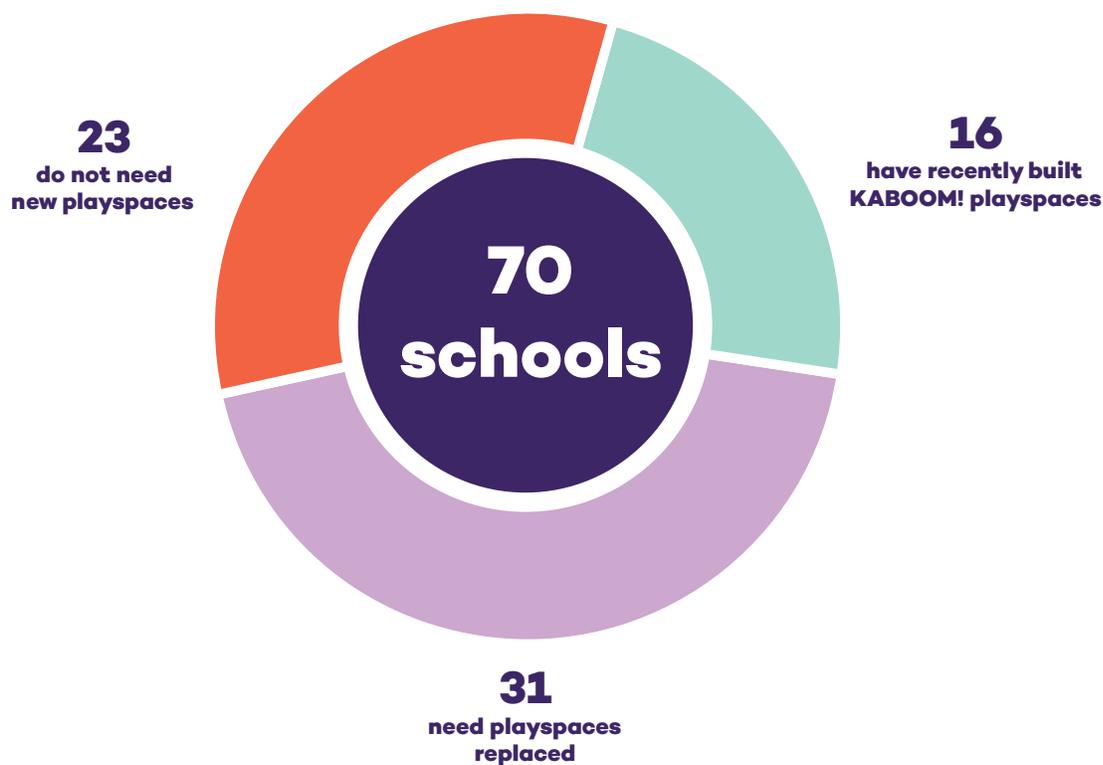
Using the **four data points above**, BCPSS and KABOOM! created a weighted index that combines data points into one score for each school. The graphic below provides an illustration of how the data points come together

## INDEX TO PRIORITIZE PLAYSPACE BUILDS ACROSS BCPSS



# RESULTS

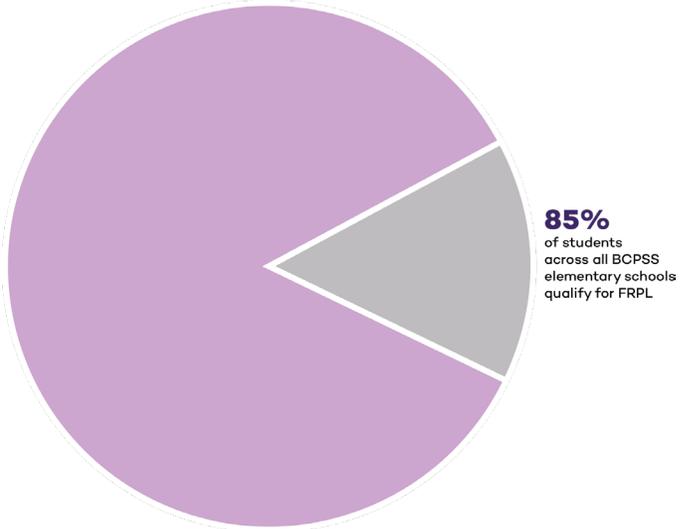
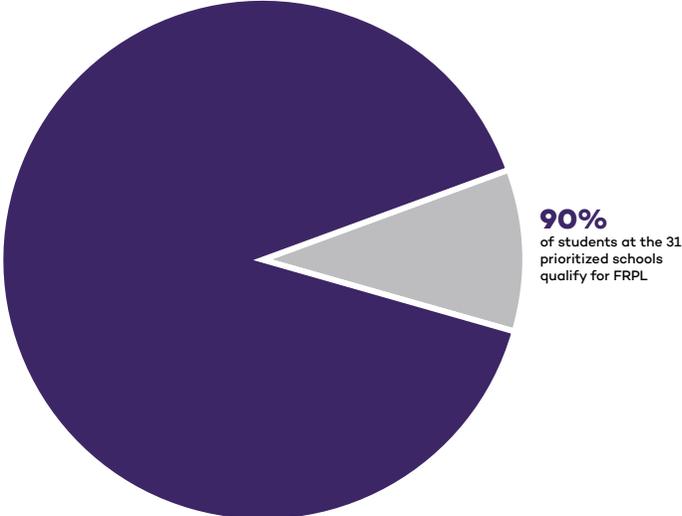
At the time of the assessment in 2019, 16 elementary schools within the system already have KABOOM! playgrounds. Of the remaining 54 elementary schools which were assessed, the playspace infrastructure assessment found that more than 50% of playgrounds at elementary schools surveyed are in need of improvements and replacement.



The assessment also found that elementary schools prioritized as needing new playspaces have approximately 6% more Black students and approximately 5% more students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) than the average across all BCPSS elementary schools. In a comparison of the 31 schools that needed playspace replacements to BCPSS as a whole, schools that need playground improvement have more Black students and have higher FRPL rates.

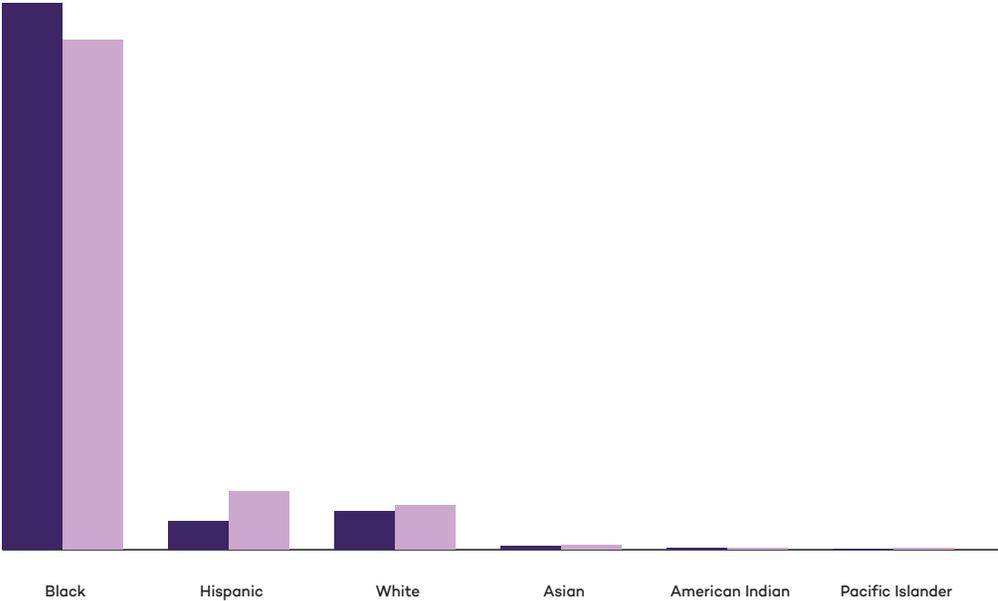
# Results cont.

## BCPSS SCHOOLS NEEDING NEW PLAYGROUNDS VS. BCPSS AVERAGE



# Results cont.

If we look specifically at the 15 playspaces in the most urgent need of replacement, the student bodies of those schools include nearly 8% more African-American students than all of the elementary schools across the system. And finally, 92% of students at those schools are eligible for FRPL, as compared to 85% FRPL across all of the system's elementary schools.



# NEXT STEPS

The Playspace Infrastructure Assessment results demonstrate the urgent need to prioritize playspaces in Baltimore neighborhoods that have been left behind for decades. And Baltimore is not unique — this work signals the need in major cities across the United States to understand and prioritize the development and revitalization of playspaces.

In 2020, with support from community and funding partners, BCPSS and KABOOM! worked together with five school communities from the playspace assessment to address their playspace infrastructure needs.

To achieve playspace equity for every BCPSS elementary school student, **we must secure \$5.7 million from committed partners**, who are dedicated to equity and justice for Baltimore kids and communities, and supporting social, health and learning outcomes for a vibrant childhood and future.

**The goal is that by the end of 2025, BCPSS and KABOOM! will address the playspace inequity issue in elementary schools entirely**, by building and refurbishing playspaces in 25 elementary schools that reflect the playspace desires and dreams of kids and families through deep community engagement, and coming together to invest in our kids' futures.

# List of 25 Elementary Schools with Playspaces in Need of Improvement

Schools listed in bold completed newly-built playspaces by the end of 2020.

KABOOM! is seeking partnerships to raise \$5.7 million to build new playspaces at the following schools.

Abbottston Elementary

Belmont Elementary

Cecil Elementary

Charles C. Barrister Elementary

Curtis Bay Elementary & Middle

Dickey Hill Elementary & Middle

Dr. Bernard Harris Elementary

Dr. N. A. Pitts-Ashburton Elementary & Middle

**Edgecombe Circle Elementary**

Edgewood Elementary

Franklin Sq Elementary & Middle

**Furman Templeton Prep Elementary**

Gardenville Elementary

Garrett Heights Elementary & Middle

Gwynns Falls Elementary

**Hamilton Elementary & Middle**

Hazelwood Elementary & Middle

Hilton Elementary

James McHenry Elementary & Middle

Lockerman Bundy Elementary

Mary Ann Winterling Elementary

Morrell Park Elementary & Middle

Mt. Washington Elementary & Middle

Rosemont Elementary & Middle

**Sandtown-Winchester Elementary & Middle**

T. Jefferson Elementary & Middle

Westport Elementary & Middle

**William Paca Elementary**

Woodhome Elementary & Middle

Yorkwood Elementary



*A new playground at Hamilton Elementary & Middle School, built in September 2020.*

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