



## **Comments to the President's Advisory Commission on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics**

KABOOM! is the national non-profit working to end playspace inequity across the country. We are doing this by working with local communities where racially based discrimination created disparities in housing, education, health, transportation, and social services that often led to or accompanied a corresponding lack of safe, quality, and engaging playspaces. Even when policymakers work to address these other disparities, playspace equity is often overlooked and left unaddressed. The negative effects of playspace inequity have long been recognized by educators and public health officials, alongside other social determinants of health, as having negative impacts which can persist into adulthood. These impacts include higher rates of obesity, poor cardiovascular health, poorer academic performance, and worse mental health outcomes than their peers.

None of these negative outcomes should come as a surprise, access to outdoor play has historically been recognized as a critical component of a child's healthy development. For many children in the Hispanic community however, the role of unstructured play and recess has long been overlooked. For too many students, schoolyard playgrounds consist of only a few pieces of equipment that are far beyond their safe and useful life, black asphalt surfaces, and inadequate shade. In many school districts, students may not even have access to outdoor recess because of extreme heat events caused by anthropogenic climate change, which force students to remain indoors, or because their state or district does not have a mandatory recess policy resulting in the deprivation of outdoor play as a form of punitive punishment.

KABOOM! knows first-hand how important access to play in Hispanic school communities can be. Following the shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, community residents asked KABOOM! for help in creating a new playspace that would help honor the children whose lives were lost while also giving students a much-needed playground with safe, modern, and engaging equipment where they can begin to restore joy and normalcy through play. After that initial project, KABOOM! built two additional playspaces and another is slated for construction in December. We have committed to ending playspace inequity in the entire community over the next three years by building a total of twelve playspaces, ensuring that every child will have the ability to play. We believe this effort is worthwhile because the children's sense of playful belonging, in light of that tragedy, is too important to be overlooked or unattended to.

When we committed to doing this work in Uvalde, we heard from parents, teachers, and administrators on how play infrastructure was not a funding priority for the District or the City during the preceding years. KABOOM!

recognizes that students need safe and engaging classrooms, libraries, and gyms. We also believe that a student's appreciation of these other facilities can be better served when play on a playground is incorporated into learning; an idea we feel is too often overlooked in many school districts serving Hispanic students.

For many children, playgrounds are where first friendships are formed, where risks are first taken, where boundaries are first expanded, and where critical peer-to-peer interactions first take place. Without this vital piece of civic infrastructure, the learning process can—and often does—become more challenging and less impactful. That is why the play infrastructure ought to be given the same priority as the other design features located in and around schools.

There must also be policy changes that support play and ensure children can derive the full spectrum of its benefits. These should include the promotion of mandatory recess policies which prohibit the use of recess denial as a response to disruptive behavior. Studies show that denying a child recess does not contribute to better classroom behavior and may, in fact, exacerbate the behavior the teacher was endeavoring to curtail. Outdoor time should also be incorporated into the learning curriculum. Whenever possible, outdoor spaces should be designed to serve both recreational and academic purposes. Outdoor classrooms can provide teachers with learning labs focused on subjects in the life and physical sciences that promote hands-on learning, encourage children to explore STEM fields, or take an active interest in environmental stewardship.

By investing in the infrastructure and the policies that support outdoor play and learning, school districts are giving their students a better chance at leading healthier, more fulfilling, and productive lives. We encourage the Commission to consider these factors as you develop your recommendations on how to improve academic equity and excellence for Hispanic students. Thank you for considering our comments and KABOOM! would be happy to provide members of the Commission with more information.