



A RACE EQUITY JOURNEY

The Path to our Playspace Equity Commitment



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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 4 |
| Our History..... | 5 |
| The problem of Playspace Inequity Persists..... | 7 |
| From the Implicit to the Explicit: Our Path to Naming Race..... | 9 |
| The Journey Begins: Adding Equity to Diversity and Inclusion..... | 12 |
| Obtaining the Tools for Change..... | 16 |
| Evolving: Our Vision for Our Future..... | 17 |
| Conclusion..... | 23 |
| References..... | 24 |



INTRODUCTION

This paper details our past, ongoing, and planned efforts to advance a vision we call **playspace equity**. While this paper is grounded in our path toward centering our work in equity, we acknowledge that many organizations with myriad missions are on a similar journey, and we hope to honor those already walking this path. We are grateful for the trailblazers who continue to inspire and support us in this work—people and organizations who have not only embraced an explicit commitment to racial equity, but also have been open about the challenges they’ve faced and what they’ve learned. Anyone embarking on a similar journey knows this work is difficult and multifaceted, and our experience has been no different. We view the path toward playspace equity as a racial equity issue. And we have weathered missteps, resurfaced traumas and brought forward tough conversations while navigating the innumerable complexities of pursuing a racial equity approach.



The information in this document reflects many vantage points and was compiled through the meticulous review of data, reports, email and detailed conversations with those directly involved in these efforts. We aim to paint the picture of our journey in a respectful, factual and vulnerable way. Ultimately, the reflection may not represent any one person’s unique experience.

Still, we have continued, understanding that this work is urgent, mission-critical and life-long in nature. We do not purport to have all the answers. We are learning and growing together along the way. We hope that through sharing the lessons we learned, and are continuing to learn, we can encourage others to join us along the path of racial equity.

Playspace equity

The ability for every kid to have access to incredible places to play.



OUR HISTORY

On a hot July day in 1995, Iesha and Clendon Elmore went looking for a place to play in their Washington, D.C. neighborhood. With no playground in sight, they turned to a nearby abandoned car and climbed in. Faulty locks trapped the two children inside and, tragically, they died from heat exhaustion. A front-page article in the Washington Post detailing the heartbreaking incident put the consequences of a major societal failure—a lack of safe places to play—in stark relief.


“Neighbors will tell you there’s no doubt that neglect killed the Elmore children, but it wasn’t the neglect of a distracted parent or an indifferent community that doesn’t watch its own. They say it is years of neglect by the city, the federal government and the media, which wait for tragedies to occur before they promise renewal and then move on, leaving people to get along the best way they can” (O’Neal Parker, 1995).

This tragedy represents the worst case scenario of what can happen when kids don’t have safe places to play. Resident and mother, Dennen Williams, was clear when

asked why Iesha and Clendon died: *“Look at this,”* she said, gesturing past vacant apartments and crumbling brick walls. *‘What is there to do around here? Where is there to play?’”* (O’Neal Parker, 1995). The tragedy was representative of a systemic failure.

All too often, tragedies like these are met with empty promises. As resident Kim Sims summed it up, *“There’s always talk and promises after a tragedy.... But come back in a month. It’ll be the same condition”* (O’Neal Parker, 1995).

This story is an important one, as it reflects the reality in too many communities across the country, where public space and civic infrastructure have been neglected for decades and kids are denied opportunities to be safe and thrive. This reality also too often discourages people from gathering with their neighbors in accessible spaces that offer a sense of belonging and communion.



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The Washington Post article sparked a young man named Darell Hammond to take action – not to create an organization, but to partner with communities to address an urgent problem. A few short months later, the first KABOOM! playground was built in the Congress Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C., not far from where Iesha and Clendon lived.

Through this initial project, Darell witnessed firsthand that a playground could be a space for kids and communities to dream and feel hope. He also recognized the power of volunteers and community coming together to achieve a common goal.

In primarily Black and Brown neighborhoods across the United States that have been subjected to chronic disinvestment, kids miss out on having places to play where they live, at their schools and throughout their communities – things that families who don't face the same barriers take for granted. And, like Iesha and Clendon, many of them isolate their play to indoor spaces

or, when venturing outside, abandoned buildings, vehicles or empty lots that put them in danger in search of what every kid needs: a safe place to play.

KABOOM! was born out of an effort to bridge divides and amplify the collective power of communities to show kids how much they matter and keep them safe in the activity most natural to them—playing. Since then, we have not wavered from our commitment to increase access to quality playspaces with a focus on communities experiencing disinvestment. Along the way, we have built over 3,300 playspaces, in each case seeking to bring people together in common purpose, elevate the importance of play, and respond to the unique needs of communities.

We're proud of this work, but we also recognize that our approach has fallen short in addressing a key root cause of why some kids have access to great playspaces and some don't: systemic racism.

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The Problem of Playspace Inequity Persists

The manifestations of disinvestment that Ilesha and Clendon faced in 1995 still exist in communities across the nation. Neither race nor zip code should dictate whether a kid has a safe place to play. But the reality is that structural and institutional racism operated when we started our work, and they continue to shape who has access to the resources every kid needs today.

When a string of court cases in the middle of the 20th century and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended legal segregation of parks and playgrounds, what followed was similar to what happened with schools: violent resistance to desegregation of

parks and playgrounds, white flight to suburban enclaves, slashing of park budgets, privatization of public space and the closing of playgrounds. Decades of accelerated disinvestment followed, resulting in the significant disparities we see in access to playspaces today.

This playspace inequity contributes to disparate recreational outcomes for kids based on their race and their families' socio-economic situation. Less than a quarter of youth ages 6-17 participate in the daily recommended 60 minutes of active play (CDC, 2020). In fact, kids today are getting less active play than any previous generation, with sedentary time replacing time spent soaking up the benefits of play (KABOOM!, n.d.a). Compounding this national trend are significant racial and economic disparities: kids of color and kids

When we speak about racism, it is important to differentiate the various ways this can manifest in society. *Structural racism* refers to the ways in which our society, across its systems, has both legitimized and normalized the routine privilege and power of White people resulting in poor and worsening outcomes for people of color, whereas *institutional racism* refers to the discriminatory practices and policies based on race that exist within our institutions (schools, government agencies, corporations, etc.). In comparison, individual racism refers to interpersonal actions that involve racist comments or views (Lawrence & Keleher, 2004).

whose families are economically challenged tend to get less recreational physical activity than White kids or kids from families that are economically secure, and they are more likely to live in neighborhoods that lack resources, safety and aesthetic appeal that promote play and other physical activity (Active Living Research, 2014).

Community members cannot enjoy neighborhood parks if they face barriers to access and activities. In communities of color and neighborhoods where families with low income live, these challenges are compounded by “historic land use regulations and public investment policies [that] limited people’s access to amenities and opportunities” (Eldridge, Burrowes, & Spauster, 2019). As a result, the Urban Institute reports that persistent disparities exist in the size, maintenance, stewardship and programming of urban parks (Eldridge, Burrowes, & Spauster, 2019). The first National Study of Neighborhood Parks found that neighborhoods facing economic challenges had, on average, smaller parks, less programming and more litter (Cohen, Han, Derosé, et al. 2016).

A similar story plays out in schools. For example, in Philadelphia, two-thirds of public elementary schools do not have playgrounds (Feldman, 2019). As Nina Feldman writes in her article for WHYY News, “The monkey bars and jungle gyms commonplace at suburban schools tend to be missing in neighborhoods with high rates of concentrated poverty, and areas with

the fewest playgrounds tend to be areas predominantly home to communities of color” (Feldman, 2019).

Disparities also exist throughout neighborhoods where kids live. In New York City, home to 2,067 public playgrounds, 8% of these sites were deemed “unacceptable” in regards to safety and sanitation based on a 2018 review by NYC Parks (Stringer, 2019). Another 25% of playgrounds had at least one hazardous feature that required urgent attention, in some cases presenting the chance of slight to moderate injury and in others the chance of debilitating or life-threatening injury (Stringer, 2019).

Our work has also demonstrated that systems problems demand systems solutions. Progress can be made on playspace access through partnerships with public and private sector organizations who are focused on alleviating the debilitating effects of poverty and racism. We have witnessed the transformation that is possible when multiple stakeholders target the root of the problem with a bold vision

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that goes beyond a single playground. This is particularly true when municipal systems are at the table, because they have an outsized influence on playspace access. We don't have all the answers, but we do know that our future as a nation is in jeopardy if we are not creating opportunities for everyone to advance.

Angela Glover Blackwell's article, *The Curb Cut Effect*, states: "There's an ingrained societal suspicion that intentionally supporting one group hurts another. That equity is a zero-sum game. In fact, when the nation targets support where it is needed most—when we create the circumstances that allow those who have been left behind to participate and contribute fully — everyone wins" (Blackwell, 2017). **Equity is for everyone and when we all come together our impact stands to be that much greater.**

From the Implicit to the Explicit: Our Path to Naming Race

With increasing clarity in the past several years, we have realized that building sustainable change in communities with the highest need requires an explicit acknowledgment of the role of systemic racism in determining access and opportunity. We have redefined our mission accordingly as making progress toward building playspace equity.

The event that brought this necessity to light most poignantly was the building of our 3,000th playground in 2017. The project took us back to Congress Heights, in Southeast D.C.'s Ward 8, not far from where we built our very first playground in 1995. Our 3,000th playground project forced us to ask how much had really changed since we built our first playground 22 years earlier.


Across the span of decades, disinvestment continues to have a negative impact on Ward 8 residents, where today 99.2% of residents are people of color, primarily African-American (Enterprise Community Partners, 2017). Ward 8 has a passionate network of nonprofits that build responsive programs centered in community need; however, that network and its best intentions alone cannot account for and adequately address longstanding structural barriers. A comparative analysis of key data points from 1990 and 2017 visibly demonstrates the

areas where opportunity in this community has stagnated over the last three decades (Enterprise Community Partners, 2017).

Admittedly, it is beyond our ability to remove these systemic barriers by ourselves, but KABOOM! does wield significant financial resources and influence on project decisions within the communities where we work. We also have the authority and responsibility to evaluate our impact and change our approach accordingly. The 3,000th build was an important milestone in our work because it put the barriers that exist between our vision and the current reality into high relief, prompting us to ask uncomfortable but important questions to guide future efforts. We began to ask ourselves how we could make a lasting impact if we did not further our commitment to understand the historical and contemporary factors that have led to the disinvestment faced by so many communities of color and that perpetuate disparities in access to play.

In Washington, D.C., where KABOOM! is headquartered, 47% of the Black population (Zippel, 2016) and over one-third of D.C.'s kids live east of the Anacostia River in Wards 7 and 8 (D.C. Office of Planning, 2010a). In fact, 92% of all residents living east of the river are Black (Zippel, 2016). When overlain with data on parks and playspaces we uncover a troubling disparity. In 2012, only 20% of the city's playgrounds could be found east of the river (Kairys, 2012). Furthermore, research completed by the Active Kids, Healthy

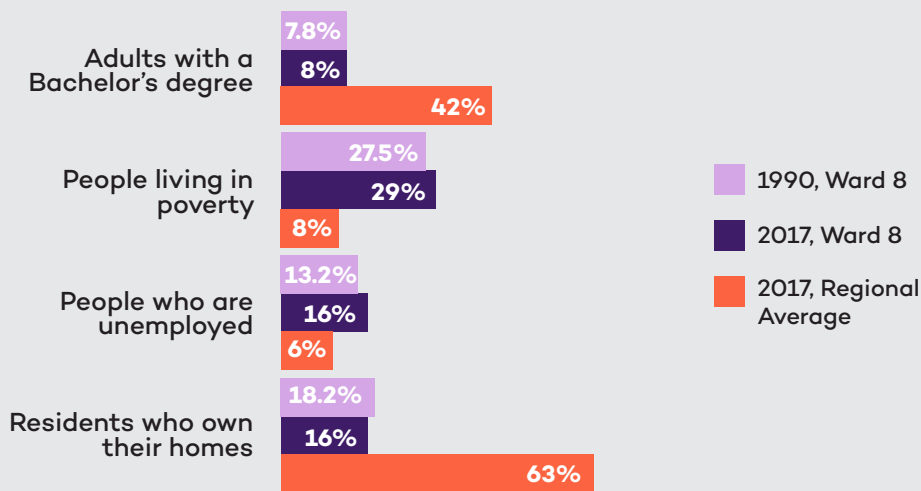
We envision a reality where every kid, regardless of race, zip code and family income, has access to high-quality playspaces that address the unique history and needs of their community. To achieve this vision, we must amplify the strength of communities and fearlessly call out the historical and systemic racism that has created the conditions we all want to change.



Community initiative in 2017 indicated that neighborhoods east of the Anacostia are home to the greatest concentrations of “physical activity deserts” (Sturdivant, 2016). These areas, defined as urban spaces where “it is difficult to find a safe, affordable place to engage in physical activity” are most prevalent east of the river, with Ward 7 leading the way (Sturdivant, 2016).

In an effort to address similar disparities across the country, we moved to make an explicit commitment to racial equity,

Key Opportunity Measures over Time: Washington, D.C.'s Ward 8 vs. Regional Average



Sources: D.C. Office of Planning, (2010b); Enterprise Community Partners (2017)

as well as exploring any necessary shifts to our approach required to become a better partner to the communities we aim to support. The persistent, complex and interrelated disparities we see in communities are rooted in structural racism and its manifestations. In short, playspace equity is a racial equity issue. With a laser focus, and in partnership with others dedicated to rooting out structural racism, we intend to advance sustainable and documented change; as we've experienced what happens when communities come together to prioritize kids and work to create a different way forward.

A growing number of organizations across all sectors are now seeking to address inequity caused by chronic disinvestment, often with a particular focus on disparities by race. Yet, when people come together to find

solutions, access to safe playspaces is not usually included as an equity problem to be addressed. For good reason, experts often focus on access to quality food in neighborhoods considered "food deserts", crumbling school buildings and school systems that lead to high drop-out rates, lack of healthcare and high percentages of people dying from preventable diseases, inadequate internet access, unsafe water systems, lack of access to public transportation, and the like.

Yet our experience has shown that access to childhood play must be included among the critical issues that determine whether kids gain a foothold on a future of promise. Childhood is a crucial window when cognitive, social, emotional, physical and other essential skills develop. Decades of research shows that play is a central

factor in determining the course of a child's development and future life outcomes (KABOOM!, n.d.b). In Play Matters, a document released by KABOOM!, we examined the data and presented the case for the transformative power of play (KABOOM!, n.d.b).

All kids need balanced and active play every day to grow up healthy. The benefits are widespread. 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 well-being (KABOOM!, n.d.c). Physical play contributes to the development of gross motor skills, control, coordination, and strength (KABOOM!, n.d.c). Play brings friends together and families together, teaching kids how to interact as part of a group, resolving conflicts, and strengthening bonds (KABOOM!, n.d.c). Play also helps regulate the body's stress response (KABOOM!, n.d.c). When kids and communities experience a disaster or traumatic event, play can help them cope with the stress of lost homes, lost loved ones, lost routine and lost normalcy (KABOOM!, n.d.c). In the presence of childhood adversity, play becomes even more important (American Academy of

Pediatrics, 2018). As noted by the American Academy of Pediatrics, "It could be argued that active play is so central to child development that it should be included in the very definition of childhood" (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012).

The Journey Begins: Adding Equity to Diversity and Inclusion

Although returning to Ward 8 for our 3,000th playground build served as a key moment in prompting us to think differently about the intersection of equity and our work, at the time, KABOOM! was already taking steps toward building a more inclusive workplace. Just over a year prior to the 3,000th build, two staff members spearheaded an effort to broaden our internal diversity and inclusion resources. Addressing diversity and inclusion topics head-on catalyzed a groundswell of interest from staff in conversations about racial equity. By June of 2017, following several months of ongoing discussions, a formal Diversity and Inclusion Task Force was launched. The Task Force hosted a variety of well-attended events and brown bag discussions. Some of these discussions were focused on topics in the news media, specifically the rash of unarmed Black men being shot by police. These staff-led efforts contributed to sparking an interest in racial equity discussions, a critical step in creating a space for KABOOM! staff to learn and

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grow – especially once KABOOM! solidified the plan to refine a strategy for taking a racial equity approach to our work.

Following our 3,000th build, we recognized that before we could be effective champions for equitable access to playspaces and facilitate lasting change, we had to look at ourselves, unpack our methods and critically evaluate if our work in any way was contributing to these disparities, or at least failing to consider them and thereby allowing them to persist. In a series of strategic efforts to kick off our racial equity work, we had support from thought leaders in the field of racial equity to help educate our team, evaluate our processes and arm ourselves with tools for change.

BUILD A SHARED CONTEXT

The first task was ensuring our team had a shared understanding of the historical conditions that created the issues we were trying to address. To achieve this, we invited Racial Equity Institute (REI), an alliance of trainers, organizers and institutional leaders, to help ground our entire staff in how racial inequity and exclusion undergirds the history and principles of this country. Together we learned about the groundwater metaphor – language REI uses to explain the extent to which our racially structured society is the root cause of racial inequity. REI goes on to explain that “the metaphor is based on three observations: 1) racial inequity looks the same across systems; 2) socio-economic difference does not explain the racial inequity; and 3) inequities are caused by

systems regardless of people’s culture and behavior” (Racial Equity Institute, n.d.). These realities help us see how racism pervades our culture, institutions and policies and is the very foundation on which the United States was built. “In other words, we have a ‘groundwater’ problem, and we need ‘groundwater’ solutions. Starting from there, we begin to unlock transformative change” (Racial Equity Institute, n.d.). The two-day, immersive experience was both devastating and enlightening, as facilitators wove together the extensive policies and decisions from the beginning of our country’s history that intentionally and systematically prevented communities of color from gaining wealth, power and access to opportunity.

The training provided our teams with a common understanding on race and racial equity, but it also left some people feeling overwhelmed, exposed and vulnerable.

UNDERTAKE AN ACCOUNTABILITY ASSESSMENT

Equally as critical as building a shared understanding, we needed to be better informed about how our policies, practices, language and work might flow from or contribute to the inequities we were making a commitment to address. In tandem with the REI training, we collaborated with JustPartners and its Race Matters Institute, an equity-centered consultancy, to lead an in-depth audit of our internal and external policies, practices, reports and visuals through a racial equity lens. The resulting report offered helpful guidance on our strengths and areas for growth.

According to the JustPartners report, among our strengths were:

- An explicit commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion across programs and materials.
- Formal written policies and protocols that provide essential structure to avoid the slippery slope of implicit bias when it comes to decision-making and outcomes.
- Collection and reporting of some disaggregated data by race and ethnicity.
- Materials that highlight the structural factors that produce inequities in access to playspaces.
- Strong partnerships derived from a respect for the communities with whom we partner.
- Outward-facing framing of our work indicating a shared fate and interdependence.

The report also uncovered some important areas for growth as we move toward a fully race-informed organization. Many of these insights address the internal processes, norms and culture that need to be adapted to ensure equity across the board. Universal implementation of these principles requires a commitment to significant and ongoing work across all functional areas, and in some cases a complete overhaul of organizational tactics and policies.

The foundational recommendations are outlined below.

Systematic Implementation of Disaggregated Data

Equity work is strengthened when concrete data points are available to illustrate how groups are differently situated. From an internal perspective, disaggregated data serves to identify trends in areas like hiring practices, employee retention, salary and compensation, learning and development and vendor selection. Such metrics can be used to ensure there is no disparate treatment across groups. The data helps to uncover the structural indicators that create barriers to individual achievements (Race Matters Institute of JustPartners, Inc., 2019b).

Strategies for use of disaggregated data also need to be applied externally to understand the unique factors that create challenges for communities with which we work. Carefully collecting and tracking metrics through the full life cycle of our work, not just at the beginning or conclusion of projects, will allow us to set intended outcomes and measure our work more consistently and rigorously to create a deeper impact. Ultimately, this disaggregated data will help us target our work in the areas with the greatest playspace inequities and inform how we might tailor our approach with community partners to drive better long-term outcomes.

Consistent Use of the Racial Equity Impact Analysis Tool

Everyone makes decisions – small and large – every day, and each decision should be informed by racial equity. JustPartners recommended use of a Racial Equity Impact Analysis (REIA) tool throughout the organization to support this effort. The REIA tool functions as a set of questions to apply to any existing or proposed document, policy, strategy, decision or goal. Applying the tool can ensure that the output in question seeks to reduce disparities by considering how different racial groups may be affected. Having a concrete process in place that allows staff to consider racial equity in their day-to-day work helps connect concepts at the systems level to more immediate decision-making (Race Matters Institute of JustPartners, Inc., 2019c).

Comprehensive Application of Race-Informed Messaging

Structural racism is complex. It requires clear language grounded in a structural lens in order to communicate more powerfully and effectively. We must have a shared understanding of what racism looks like, where it comes from, and how to undo it, including understanding the context of a place and how racial history has contributed to the realities we witness today (Race Matters Institute of JustPartners, Inc., 2019d).

While we are now aware of the types of structural factors that have led to

the disparities we witness today, each community has lived those factors in contextualized ways. We can gain context through the process of backmapping, taking one specific indicator of inequity, in our case playspaces, and identifying contributing factors and how they interact to lead to the present result (Race Matters Institute of JustPartners, Inc., 2019b). This complex and critical work provides individual community context so we can avoid a one-size-fits-all solution to addressing playspace inequity.

Implementation of Organization-Wide Racial Equity Performance Measurement

Accountability is a critical factor in this work to ensure that meaningful equity-focused action is being taken. Therefore, it is critical that organizations track their performance. This is no different for racial equity-focused work. By periodically tracking our performance across key metrics, we can identify changes over time, determine areas that need additional focus and celebrate achievements.

Obtaining the Tools for Change

On the heels of the equity audit, we held our annual staff retreat, Play Academy, at the beginning of 2019. This annual event brings our entire staff from across the country together to reflect on our achievements and prepare for the year ahead. It represented an opportunity to transition from what we had learned about the external landscape to a focus on our internal practices. The content of our retreat was focused on racial equity and addressing the learnings from the audit conducted by JustPartners. The team from JustPartners joined us to lead a series of customized workshops that would allow us to put audit recommendations into practice, and they shared tools to support the process of implementing a racial equity strategy. Many people were still processing the impact of the Racial Equity Institute training and grappling with questions about our strategic direction and focus on racial equity.

The retreat, which had always been playful and acted as a moment to reset and unify us in our work, created a tension across staff that influenced our actions for the following year. Not only were we analyzing content that was new to some, while ever-present and incredibly painful to others, but we also invited external guests into the space who exacerbated the pain – one who had shared offensive views on social media, and another who, through a well-intentioned presentation, repeatedly displayed violent

and racist imagery and propaganda from our country's past and present as a way to spark dialogue and insights about how to move toward racial equity.

The retreat placed a great burden on staff, and months were spent navigating the hurt caused as a result of decisions made by leadership to include these guests. It also illuminated the disparate burden carried by people of color on staff who experience racism in their daily lives and are called upon to explain the impacts of racism (at great emotional toll to them) for the benefit of their White colleagues, who make up almost 60% of the organization. These inflection points at Play Academy demonstrated that a true commitment to a racial equity approach would require concrete steps toward building an internal environment at KABOOM! where all staff are supported and equipped to succeed. Although Play Academy had an intended emphasis on our external impact, it clearly showed the need to simultaneously focus on our internal work.

Determining how to chart our path forward has been complex. News events and internal experiences have prompted KABOOM! to conduct difficult conversations about structural racism. These discussions have required an immense amount of vulnerability on the part of participants, at times triggering painful associations resulting in critical feedback. We have made mistakes and we will inevitably make more. Still, our commitment to this journey remains firm.

Evolving: Our Vision for our Future

We recognize that our strategic plans must center our work on the elimination of inequities in access to quality playspaces caused by historic disinvestment in communities, which disproportionately affect kids and communities of color. To eliminate these inequities, we must not only identify and work to address disparities by race in access to high-quality playspaces, but also deepen our ability to be responsive to the communities with which we work.

Every single area of KABOOM! has been affected by what we are learning through our racial equity journey. The staff training, equity audit, and the necessity to navigate new and difficult experiences tested our commitment to this work in ways we could never have anticipated. These learnings became a road map for change at every level of the organization. Though we had expected to make internal and external policy adjustments, as well as approach our efforts in a much different way, we had not initially realized there would be a necessity to shift our organizational model overall. This was only revealed to us after we began to execute against our learnings and the audit recommendations.

ADDRESSING THE EQUITY AUDIT

Following months of evaluation, we collected a large body of reports, assessments and

recommendations. We identified significant changes necessary to advance our mission of playspace equity. In response to recommendations from the JustPartners equity audit, KABOOM! took foundational steps in the path toward a race-informed approach.

Let Disaggregated Data Lead

We are actively using disaggregated data for much more of our work and taking steps to apply a data-informed approach across all departments, processes and measures, both internal and external. For example, internally, the KABOOM! Talent Management department is actively using disaggregated data to assess hiring practices, turnover, salary and compensation benefits, and other metrics. Meanwhile, several cross-team programmatic efforts in Maryland, Michigan, New York and California have or are in the process of employing disaggregated data to identify playspace need at a more granular level in an effort to build more responsive strategies for our work in those communities.

Universally Apply the REIA tool

Use of the tool has been adopted by several teams, and KABOOM! is supporting the effort by developing a policy and procedure to implement the tool across the organization. Our Project Management team has leveraged the REIA tool to comprehensively assess all job descriptions and interview questions, ensuring our engagement with job candidates is

grounded in equity. In tandem, we have begun applying the REIA tool by conducting more extensive research into the business practices, stated mission, qualifications and leadership makeup when selecting vendors for office events and projects. These changes have led to collaborating with a more diverse population of providers with stated commitments to driving positive community impact through their work.

Align Organizational Messaging With an Equity-Informed Approach

We overhauled our organizational messaging to incorporate race-informed best practices. We now aim to describe our intended outcomes, the root causes of playspace inequity, our role as an organization, the people and communities we team up with and more, using a race equity lens. Traditionally, messaging about communities facing poverty, disinvestment, and other structural barriers casts communities as powerless and deficient. Defining communities in terms of everything they don't have is not only offensive and disempowering, it also acts to limit the world of what is possible when we work together. If we describe our role merely as a savior to needy communities, we ignore the deep wealth of knowledge, experience, and local power that exists in every neighborhood. The process of shifting this model is continuous and requires nuance, but our overarching framework is to put people and assets first when describing the problem at hand and how, together, we intend to solve it.

REORIENTING OUR CENTER

The audit recommendations provided us with immediate steps to begin to put our intentions into action, and yet we knew that the outcomes we were driving toward meant there were fundamental adaptations in our approach that would be necessary.

For more than twenty years, KABOOM! has operated on a model intended to guarantee efficiency and accountability for each playground we have built. While this method has served us well, we acknowledge that it was unintentionally excluding us from working in some of the communities that had experienced the most disinvestment and limiting the impact of our work. As a result, we have begun to reorient our strategy toward an impact-driven model grounded in racial equity in the following ways:

Prioritize Racial Equity Objectives Through a Data-Informed Approach

We are investing in our ability to identify disparities in access to high-quality playspaces across entire school, park and other municipal systems; cities; and regions so that we can prioritize our work in ways that maximize our ability to address these disparities at scale. For example, we are working with the school district in a major city on a district-wide assessment of its playspace infrastructure with input from community members on how they feel about the current state of their school playspaces and what they want for their school. We will be using this assessment to prioritize

where we will build multiple projects with the school district this year and into the future, with the goal of rallying support to solve the playspace infrastructure challenge across the entire school district. We are also committed to sharing out any key learnings we gain from the assessment.

We are also using more holistic data to gain a better understanding of the communities with which we work. We recognized that the metrics we have historically used to describe communities did not paint an accurate picture. Median household income and the rates students enrolled in free and reduced-price lunch are problematic in that they fail to address structural issues, like the level of investment in a community. To remedy this challenge, we implemented the Opportunity 360 measures powered by Enterprise Community Partners as a required framework for assessment of our community partners (Enterprise Community Partners, 2017). The framework applies index values between 1 and 100 for a series of measures including mobility, housing stability, education, health and well-being, and economic security. The values for a specific location are then compared against state, regional and national percentiles. The result is a broader understanding of what each community experiences. Beginning in 2019, this measure was implemented as a standard procedure across the organization, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how our communities are situated when compared to state, regional and national averages.

We are also investing in our ability to measure the outcomes of our work across an entire municipal system or region – outcomes that our partners have prioritized, from childhood health and well-being to community cohesion and neighborhood safety. Instead of building playspace infrastructure through individual project opportunities, this strategy will allow us to work toward improvements across entire school districts, park districts and public housing systems, or across entire cities or regions, thereby addressing the disparities in access to high-quality playspaces at scale.

We have also created and filled a new Measurement and Evaluation Director position to enable us to systematically use data to advance our racial equity objectives.

Prioritize Our Responsiveness to Communities

For over 20 years, we have prided ourselves on our commitment to community building, but we have recognized that we can and should do more. Key among the shifts we are making is to deepen our efforts to ensure that communities are at the center of our work. We enlisted the support of Lyndon Valicenti from Daylight, a community capacity-building firm, as well as Paola Aguirre Serrano, from the urban design and research firm Borderless, to reassess our community engagement approach with an emphasis on listening to and learning from communities as equal partners who hold power in decision making to drive the outcomes they seek.

Historically, KABOOM! has wielded considerable authority over community partners in setting expectations and managing project deliverables. We have often used a one-size-fits-all approach with community partners. This has benefited some and hindered others, resulting in varying degrees of success. Knowing that each community partner brings a different set of assets, goals, needs and history, it's our job to understand and adapt our approach accordingly. We are currently piloting a new approach to community engagement and plan to publish our learnings.

Alongside our community engagement approach, one of the first steps we have taken toward being more responsive to communities is to expand the portfolio of play infrastructure that we can build to address the diverse goals of the communities with whom we work. A traditional playground, for example, serving kids ages 2-12, may not suit the preferences of all communities. To address this, we invested in extensive research and development which has resulted in our ability to build playspaces that appeal to older youth, including multi-sport courts and adventure courses that mimic the Ninja Warrior experience. We are also building: environmentally resilient playspaces; intergenerational playspaces; Play Everywhere playspaces integrated into sidewalks, bus stops, and other everyday places; and larger-scale, custom playspaces that serve as destinations in communities

that have experienced disinvestment.

These changes in our strategic approach are, in turn, leading to evolutions in our funding partnerships, brand, and approach to organizational learning.

Evolve Our Funding Partnerships

Historically, KABOOM! has been successful at finding funding partners, primarily from the corporate sector, and then identifying child-serving community partners who align with the funding partner's priorities. This approach unintentionally reinforces the power dynamic between funders and communities. For example, for most of our history, we have allowed funders to select their community partners. Although we always want to leverage the deep community knowledge and involvement that funders may have, we also want to make sure that limited resources are deployed in ways that are most likely to address disparities in access to playspaces and are most responsive to community needs. We should not minimize our expertise and ability to influence in positive ways the power dynamic between funders and communities.

To this end, we have begun to experiment with partners who align with us on intended outcomes and are flexible about how we engage communities and volunteers through our work. Through our partnerships with the Colorado Health Foundation and the Rebuild Texas Fund, communities are given the flexibility to select from our broadened

portfolio of play infrastructure offerings as opposed to being directed toward a specific offering, such as a standard playground. In each case, communities are encouraged to pick the option that best suits the individual goals of kids in their community. These two partnerships alone will yield one multi-sport court, two adventure courses, 11 creative play products and 24 custom playgrounds by the end of 2020.

We are also working to remove barriers to participation for communities with significant resource constraints. Typically, we have required our community partners to raise almost 10% of the cost of a project, in addition to preparing the identified playground site for construction, procuring food and beverages for all volunteers, securing tools, and more. These expectations can become major hurdles for communities that may be facing an array of challenges. Beginning in 2019 and continuing through 2020, the Colorado Health Foundation has partnered with us to pilot a new approach to the fundraising requirement in 16 different communities across the state of Colorado. Through the pilot, communities are invited to set their own fundraising goals and to determine what the funds they raise would be used for, whether this means increasing the capital budget, providing for programming at their new playspace, or planning for long-term maintenance. To date, we have seen a spike in interest from communities in taking on a playspace project. Through data collection in post-project surveys, we also learned that over


half of the communities we have partnered with thus far would not have been able to complete the project had it not been for flexibility on the fundraising component.

Evolve Our Brand

As our strategy and work evolve, our brand needs to keep pace with these changes, but not outpace the change. To ensure that our brand matches the trajectory of our work and enhances our efforts to build support for our mission with myriad audiences, we partnered with Purpose Agency to conduct a comprehensive brand refresh. We recently launched our new brand, which includes an updated mission statement, an updated logo and visual identity, and a new race-informed communications framework (with ongoing support from JustPartners) that explicitly highlight our focus on ending playspace inequity. Just as our strategy is not static, our brand will continue to evolve as our work advances.

Learn and Grow as a Race-Informed Organization

When focusing on racial equity, it is particularly important to demonstrate a commitment to ensuring staff have the resources they need and an environment that fosters transparency, learning and growth. This is not an easy task and is everyone's responsibility. It also requires dedicated leadership, which is why we created two new roles – Vice President of Strategy Alignment and Implementation



as well as Director of Strategy – that are focused on organizational learning as we pursue our mission. In addition, we have expanded the purview of our Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to include an explicit focus on equity. In early 2019, the Task Force became our Diversity Equity and Inclusion Network, whose primary purpose is to facilitate opportunities for learning and growth around equity topics while serving as an outlet and resource for staff as we continue our racial equity journey. This internal work continues and will always need to respond to the needs of the staff and individuals who are committed to advancing our mission to end playspace inequity.

The evolution of our organization is fundamental and necessary. Our ability to advance our mission relies on this shift. It won't happen overnight – as our friends from JustPartners remind us, this is urgent, everyday, lifelong work. But the changes we have made to date are critical, as they lay the groundwork for ending playspace inequity by addressing the racial disparities in access to high-quality playspaces.



CONCLUSION

Sparked by passionate staff members committed to change and our recognition of the need and opportunity to do much more to advance our mission, KABOOM! has embraced the understanding that we cannot end playspace inequity without focusing on racial equity in our work.

Through a critical and challenging self-assessment, we have analyzed the ways we work internally and the ways we engage with partners and communities. The result has been an organization-wide commitment to doing the urgent, lifelong work of racial equity, which means working differently. The path so far has been difficult and, even with over a year of focused work under our belt, the path forward isn't straightforward or seamless. We definitely do not have all the answers.

Some questions are, and will be, ever-present. How do we prioritize our work? How do we continue to evolve our strategic direction while still leveraging the best of how we've operated? How do we slow down to reflect, align our work, and move at the pace of community trust, while maintaining our reputation as an organization known for making positive change happen quickly? We continue to wrestle with these and other questions, and the work ahead is immense. Our hope is that by bettering ourselves, we can be better partners to the communities with which we work and get closer to ending playspace inequity. It is our mission, and it is mission-critical because we believe play is a fundamental human right for every kid, and every community.

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