

Working with youth and families to create equitable playspaces despite the pandemic

A CLOSER LOOK AT CO-DEVELOPMENT IN
NORTHFIELD, MINNESOTA; BROWNSVILLE,
TEXAS; AND ROCHESTER, NEW YORK



StriveTogether[®]

Connecting with the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unforeseen challenges for families in every community. In addition to the serious health and economic impacts of the crisis, many kids are cut off from recreation, socializing and play — the very things that help them deal with toxic stress.

KABOOM! and the communities we team up with are adapting to this new reality, recognizing that connection and collaboration — two values we hold dear — are complicated by social distancing and other necessary public health guidelines. Typically, we would engage with communities in person to design, plan and build a customized playspace, with over 200 community members joining for the one-day, in-person playground building event. Given the need to minimize in-person gathering, we have faced a tough question that many social service organizations are dealing with: how do we adjust our community engagement approach to address evolving circumstances, while still meeting the needs of the kids and communities we want to reach?



We recently launched a partnership with StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network members in a multi-city effort to advance playspace equity in Brownsville, Texas; Rochester, N.Y.; and Northfield, Minn., so that when these communities are able to safely reopen, kids will have an amazing playground within reach.

KABOOM! priorities and capabilities align well with StriveTogether and StriveTogether network members. KABOOM! brings a proven project model and a team experienced in community engagement, responsive community design, large-scale volunteer-led planning and project management; StriveTogether network members bring a sophisticated collective impact model that aligns local leaders around a set of specific childhood outcomes and then leverages data to track progress and inform their strategies. Together we share a strong commitment to equity, community leadership and the well-being of children. We also advance our missions in alliance with many of the same city, nonprofit and corporate leaders at the local level.

The three communities were chosen based on the need for a playspace, ability to address playspace equity issues with this project, and preparedness to rally individuals, groups and community leaders for a communitywide, playground-building service event. StriveTogether and its network members are increasingly intentional about how they engage authentically with youth, families and community members most impacted

by racial and ethnic inequities. They believe in co-developing solutions with the community, from setting goals and deciding on solutions to contributing directly to the result. This mindset and approach made it easy for us to pivot our work as the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States began midway through project planning and community engagement efforts.

Each project team has creatively adapted at every step of the process to continue planning and community engagement that responded to evolving public health considerations. There have been, and will continue to be, different strategies for engagement across the three projects — because of different starting positions, slight differences in goals or target populations, and structural differences in access to and use of high-speed internet by local communities. Dissecting how each is adapting to meet unexpected challenges in the COVID-19 era, specifically around prioritizing community engagement in the planning phase, can be instructive to other communities and groups struggling to build or maintain robust community engagement during this difficult time.

ABOVE IMAGE: A child plays at the new kid-designed playspace in Northfield, Minnesota.

COVER IMAGE: Northfield, Minnesota, is home to the first playspace to open as a result of a partnership between KABOOM! and StriveTogether.

DESIGNED BY KIDS

Northfield, Minnesota

Research shows that the kind of active play kids get on playgrounds builds motor skills, coordination, cooperation, creativity, and early reading and language skills — key markers for kindergarten readiness. Northfield Promise is working to increase the percentage of 3-year-old children who are kindergarten ready for reading (from 71%) and math (from 65%).

The planned playground is being built in partnership with Northfield Public Schools at a new early learning center located near Northfield's highest density low-income housing areas. While a mass community service event was not possible this year, the community, Northfield Promise and Northfield Public Schools made a strong case for moving forward with installing the playground in August of this year, to coincide with the center's official opening in September.

With kids home from school this spring, the team was unable to engage them in person to design their dream playground. However, the team sought a variety of different ways to ensure that the voices of kids and parents were actively involved in the design.

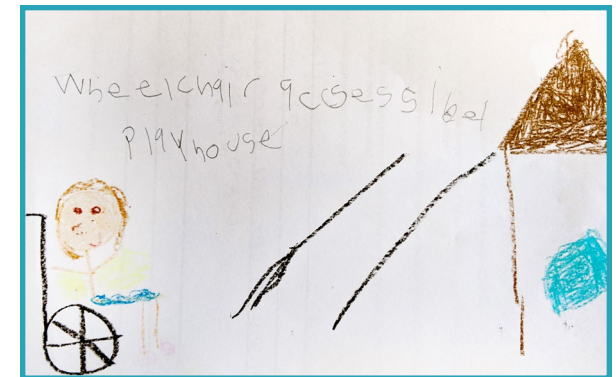
In addition to reaching out via online messaging, the team handed out printed design workbooks with instructions in both English and Spanish at school food distribution sites. Kids were given time to draw their dream playgrounds and share ideas for how they most like to play, and parents brought back completed designs and questionnaires the next time they picked up food. Designs ranged from fantastical — incorporating a moat and wolf's den into a castle-themed playspace — to inclusive — asking for a playhouse where kids in wheelchairs can play with every other kid. Overall, the kids' designs informed the selection of an accessible playspace with ramps so all kids can play side by side, plenty of swings with accessible options and two big sandboxes, though the moat will have to be left to the kids' imaginations

Feedback from the parents was also incredibly important and especially difficult to gather in these circumstances. The project team went broad, giving parents multiple avenues for sharing comments. The most successful strategy was gathering input via Facebook comments and messaging in English and Spanish.

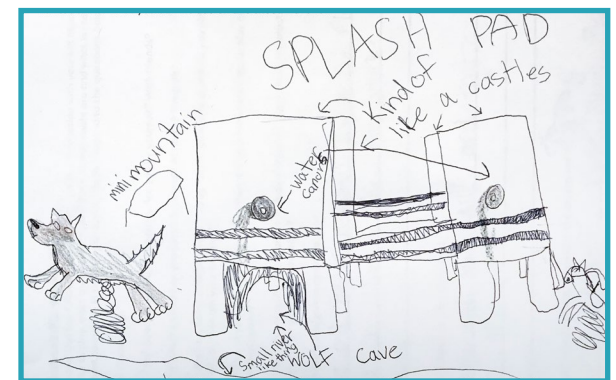


IMAGE ABOVE: The kid-designed playground at the Northfield Community Education Center opened in September 2020.

IMAGES TO RIGHT: Kids from nearby neighborhoods participated in a virtual Design Day, where they generated ideas for creating their dream playground. The new playground, which was designed with inspiration from the kids' drawings, will provide hundreds of kids and their families in Northfield with an amazing playspace that can give hope and enable kids to reach their full potential.



By meeting parents via text messaging and on sites they were already visiting online, the team was able to gather input from a wide coalition of parents. With their comments in mind, areas of shade and seating for parents will be included, along with rubber safety surfacing, inclusive swings and components designed to encourage kindergarten readiness and early literacy skills, like panels promoting letter and pattern recognition, introducing braille and encouraging finger tracing.



While public health concerns prevent volunteers from taking part in the standard KABOOM! hands-on Build Day this year, local partners hope to lead a service day in 2021 to complete final improvements to the playground site, engage the community directly in the transformation of the playspace and celebrate the official opening of all services in the early learning center.

BUILDING EARLY LANGUAGE SKILLS

Brownsville, Texas



In partnership with StriveTogether network member RGV FOCUS, the United Way of Cameron County and the City of Brownsville, we will design this project to support early grade literacy, a key RGV FOCUS collective impact goal for Brownsville kids. Early grade literacy impacts children's future academic and personal success. Children who are not reading proficiently by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school with their peers. Research shows that the kinds of active and social play kids get on a playground can build early language skills. Playground design will include features that encourage social play, caregiver-child interactions and early literacy in both English and Spanish.

Prior to COVID-19, the team had been working toward an April 2020 project kick-off but elected to delay the project amid worsening local health conditions. The longer timeline is expanding opportunities for community and kid input into the final design of the playspace. Standard resident communications by the City of Brownsville have been used, including

email, social media and even a billboard to inform residents of the upcoming project and ways to contribute. As many families have unreliable or no access to high-speed internet at home, the United Way of Southern Cameron County shared information via a mass texting system that can target parents by geography and age of kids. Design ideas and feedback continue to come in, and the lengthened timeframe for community input has enabled the team to seek more equitable input and take the pressure off the need for fast results.

Based on partner and community interest so far, we expect that the playground will incorporate components designed to foster early literacy, such as storytelling panels and bilingual games. The playground will also incorporate PlaySpots, motion-activated sensors situated around the playground that can be coded and re-coded via a Scratch programming interface. Kids from nearby schools will have the ability to code lights, messages and even games to bring the playground to life in new and ever-evolving ways.

IMAGE ABOVE: In Spanish, the idea of working “side by side” is expressed by the word *contigo* — with you. *Contigo* is what RGV FOCUS is all about. The video below shows how this StriveTogether network member is working with youth to design a new playspace.



[Click here to watch video](#)

MAPPING PLAY DESERTS

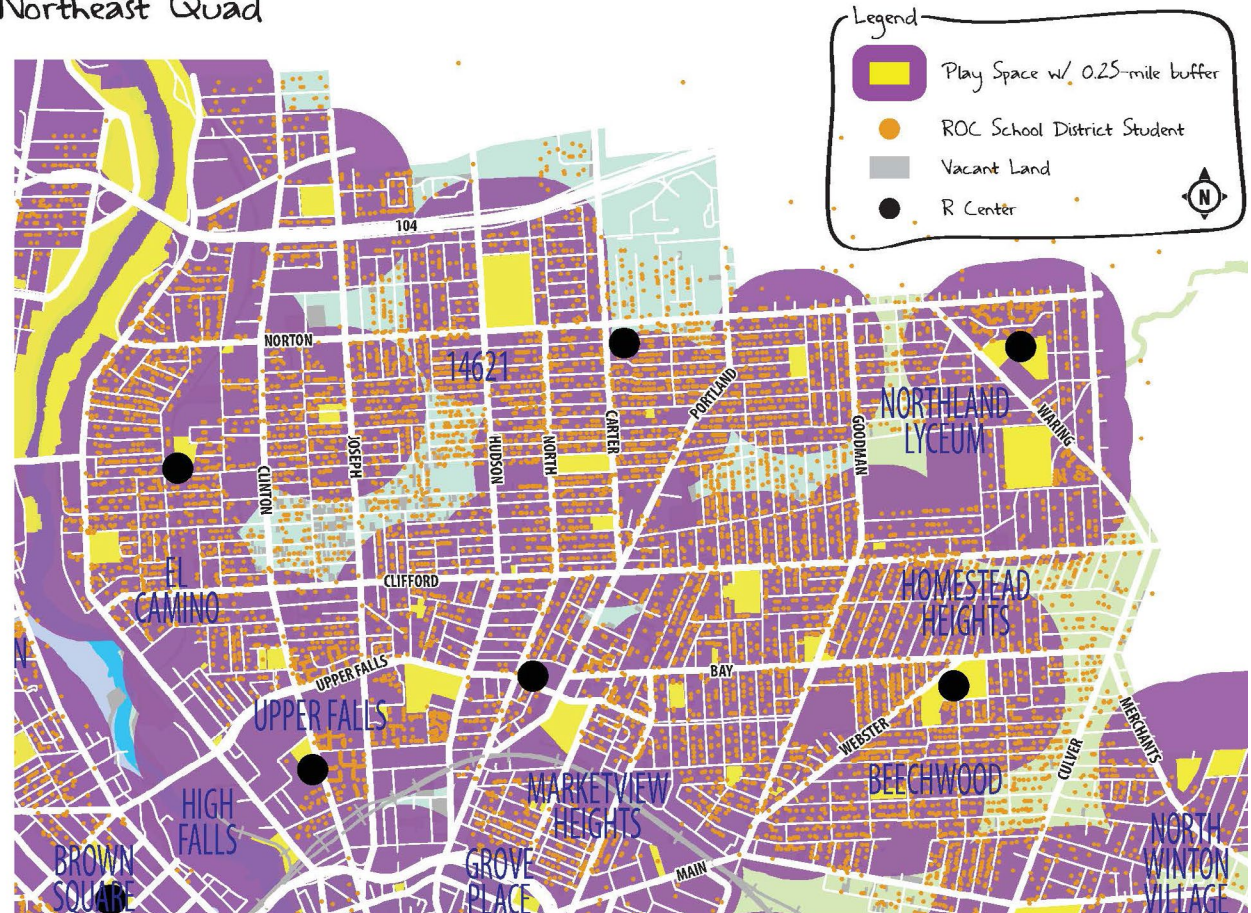
Rochester, New York

ROC the Future partner Common Ground Health has led a mapping project that has identified “play deserts” across Rochester where there are concentrations of kids growing up without access to a playground, park or recreation center within a quarter of a mile walking distance. Working with KABOOM!, they have paired this data with insights from city departments, their staff, youth-serving organizations and, most importantly, local parents and kids to select Grand Avenue Park in the Beechwood neighborhood for a playspace targeted to teens and older youth. **Index scores** for housing stability, education, mobility, economic security, and health and well-being put this neighborhood in the 11th percentile for opportunity compared to other communities in Rochester.

The selection of a teen-focused project for this park was driven by this neighborhood-led playability plan, created in partnership with Common Ground Health. Targeting a space for older youth and teens aligns with ROC the Future’s goal to have 80% of all Rochester high school seniors graduate with their ninth-grade cohort by 2020, supported in part by community building among students and adult advisors. Project partners are recruiting teens to work alongside adult volunteers to design, plan and install an adventure course-style playspace including cargo nets, spiderwalk walls and other elements.

Partners are focused on gathering input and participation from teens in the community and will be mobilizing existing networks to jump-start the conversation during the fall. The groups come from various sources — the City Youth Advisory Council, school district, local schools and nonprofits with teen leadership focus. All engagement will be enabled via computer or a smartphone, as the target group generally has access to platforms and apps on their phones or family phones. Once we gather our preliminary group, we will do further brainstorming with the teens about how to reach their peers.

Northeast Quad



Long before the KABOOM! and StriveTogether opportunity, community partners mapped play deserts to highlight concentrations of kids growing up without access to a playground, park or recreation center.

The orange dots represent students, black dots indicate recreation centers and yellow blocks highlight playspaces.



CONCLUSION

Finding solutions with and in community

Our work with StriveTogether network members in Minnesota, Texas and New York demonstrates how powerful co-development with partners and community can be toward driving equitable, sustainable outcomes for kids. It's a great reminder that community members know what they need and that solutions live with them. This experience reinforces important lessons in working with community members:

1. Co-develop from the start. Don't bring finished plans to the community for sign off or surface-level feedback.
2. Meet community members where they are. Create inclusive outreach and engagement opportunities.
3. Prioritize people over productivity. Build in the extra time needed to collect input from community members most impacted by inequities.

KABOOM! has been able to make such meaningful progress with each community because of the relationships and trust already established by network members by working intentionally and authentically with youth and families in the community. In building trust, they've created the muscle to adapt in an ever-changing world.

Case study by Jenny DeMarco, senior partnership manager, foundations and initiatives, at KABOOM!



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Every child. Cradle to career.

StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: help every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with nearly 70 communities across the country, StriveTogether provides resources, best practices and processes to give every child every chance for success. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network reaches more than 12 million students, including more than 6 million children of color, and has partners in 30 states and Washington, D.C.

125 East Ninth Street
Second Floor
Cincinnati, OH 45202

513.929.1150

StriveTogether.org

332 South Michigan
Avenue
Ninth Floor
Chicago, IL 60604

