



Playbook for Playspace Equity

Increasing Equitable Access to Great Courts and
Fields in Southeast Michigan & Western New York

Welcome!



Welcome, and thanks for reading this Playbook on the current state of courts and fields in Southeast Michigan and Western New York and the steps you can take to provide equitable access to places to play for kids throughout these regions. This is a big challenge, but one that is solvable if everyone joins forces to tackle it together. This report itself is a great example of the power of collaboration.

The Playbook is an outgrowth of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation's focus on promoting active lifestyles through access to safe spaces that get kids physically active, KABOOM!'s mission to end playspace inequity, and our work together since 2017 to build 71 playspaces across the regions through the Foundation's Built to Play initiative. KABOOM! produced this Playbook in partnership with the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program and Sports Facilities Companies, leaders in the field who have provided unparalleled expertise.

Through this team effort, the Playbook includes comprehensive research to better understand the need for courts and fields in Southeast Michigan and Western New York. It includes a thorough analysis of existing playspaces and the gaps that exist, informed by the input of youth and other stakeholders in the two regions.

Building on the findings, the Playbook offers a roadmap for filling the gaps in access to courts and fields at the regional and local levels, with specific recommendations for community leaders, philanthropists, corporations, sports teams, and government.

It is up to everyone to make playspace equity a reality. While the analysis in this Playbook focuses on Southeast Michigan and Western New York, the findings and recommendations are intended to help communities and regions across the country work toward equitable access to courts and fields. We hope this Playbook sparks meaningful conversations and purposeful action in your community to give our kids what they want and need.

Yes, playspaces produce a range of positive outcomes, from healthier kids to stronger communities. And, at the end of the day, our collective success will be measured by the smiles and laughter coming from the new places to play that our kids had dreamed of.

It's time to get to work... together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Egner'.

David Egner, President & CEO
Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lysa'.

Lysa Ratliff, CEO
KABOOM!

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KABOOM! is a national nonprofit committed to ending playspace inequity. Since 1996, KABOOM! has partnered with kids and communities to create or transform more than 17,000 playspaces.

Project Play is an initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program. Project Play develops, applies, and shares knowledge that helps stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

The Sports Facilities Companies, which was founded in 2003 and is comprised of Sports Facilities Advisory, Sports Facilities Development, and Sports Facilities Management, has become the United States' most trusted resource for communities seeking to plan, fund, develop, and/or operate sports, recreation, entertainment, and wellness facilities.

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is dedicated to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York.

Thanks to **Curry Consulting Company**, a strategy consulting firm dedicated to helping clients fulfill their commitments to social change, for supporting the development of the framework, research, and analysis that undergirds this report.

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**Kids and Communities
Win When We Invest in
Courts and Fields**

Section

01



Kids and Communities Win When We Invest in Courts and Fields

Many of us may recall the “good old days” of free play with friends in a neighborhood park, choosing sides for sports or games and playing until the streetlights turned on. Looking back, we realize that experience helped us grow fast and strong, become creative problem-solvers, make friends, and build strong ties with our neighbors. However, those “good old days” never existed for many communities.

Even then, the quality and quantity of playspaces differed between the haves and have-nots. But now, with historic levels of wealth inequity and decades of disinvestment in urban and rural areas, it is more difficult than ever in much of the United States for children to access safe, quality playspaces.

Play is essential to every child’s ability to thrive and develop, and kids can’t get the play they need if they do not have quality spaces for play. Beyond helping fulfil our responsibility to meet children’s basic needs, building and improving courts, fields, and other playspaces offers additional advantages to both kids and communities.

More and better playspaces can place a region ahead of the curve when families and businesses choose their locations, thus expanding the tax base, enhancing local reputation, and starting a virtuous cycle of economic development. In addition to fueling local economies, playspaces connect neighbors and cultivate communities that are more likely to unite around sustaining the health and welfare of everyone who lives there.

In this report, we cover the 16 counties¹ in Southeast Michigan (SEMI) and Western New York (WNY) that are the primary focus of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, which has led the way on playspace infrastructure through its Built to Play initiative and other efforts. But the local and regional gameplans included in this report are applicable to any community that seeks to improve access to courts and fields.



1. The counties included in this report are: Southeast Michigan - Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, and Wayne; Western New York - Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Monroe, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming

Wide-Ranging Benefits of Sports and Play

Play is a critical part of childhood and essential to every child's ability to thrive and develop.

Sports and other active play results in multiple types of benefits for children.²



Play Transforms Kids

Play can transform kids from sedentary to physically and mentally active and from solitary to socially active. Kids who play have healthier bodies, more resilient and creative minds, stronger social connections, and increased emotional well-being.



Play Transforms Families

Play brings friends and families together, helping everyone to interact, resolve conflicts, and strengthen bonds. Research shows the more time a family spends playing together, the greater sense of family well-being.



Play Transforms Neighborhoods

Playspaces are valuable assets that contribute to a thriving local community by increasing foot traffic for small businesses, attracting and retaining families, and creating opportunities for people from all walks of life to meet and interact with each other.

SEMI and WNY combined are home to more than 1.5 million school-age children. Aspen Institute's State of Play studies³ show that almost 1.3 million of these kids are at risk of suffering the ill effects of inactivity and failing to gain the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of play.⁴

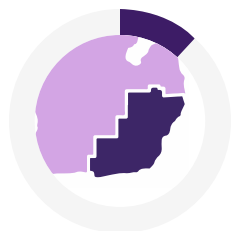


2. KABOOM!, *Play Matters – Giving Kids the Childhood They Deserve* (2013)

3. The Aspen Institute, *State of Play Southeast Michigan*, *State of Play Western New York*, and *State of Play Rochester and the Finger Lakes* (2017)

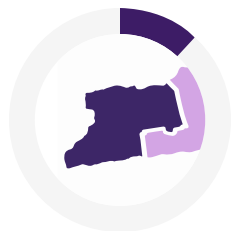
4. The *State of Play* studies included some counties in Western New York that are not in the scope of this analysis. These counties are in the Finger Lakes region and include Livingston, Ontario, Wayne, Seneca, and Yates.

The Inactivity Epidemic in Southeast Michigan & Western New York



Southeast Michigan

Of the estimated **1.1 million** youth in the seven counties of Southeast Michigan, only **13%** are getting the CDC-recommended one hour of daily activity.



Western New York

Of the estimated **500,000 youth** in the nine counties of Western New York, only **15%** are getting the CDC-recommended one hour of daily activity.

In addition, the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the capacity of schools, parks, and other child-serving institutions to provide opportunities to play has increased that inactivity, especially in BIPOC and low-income communities.⁵

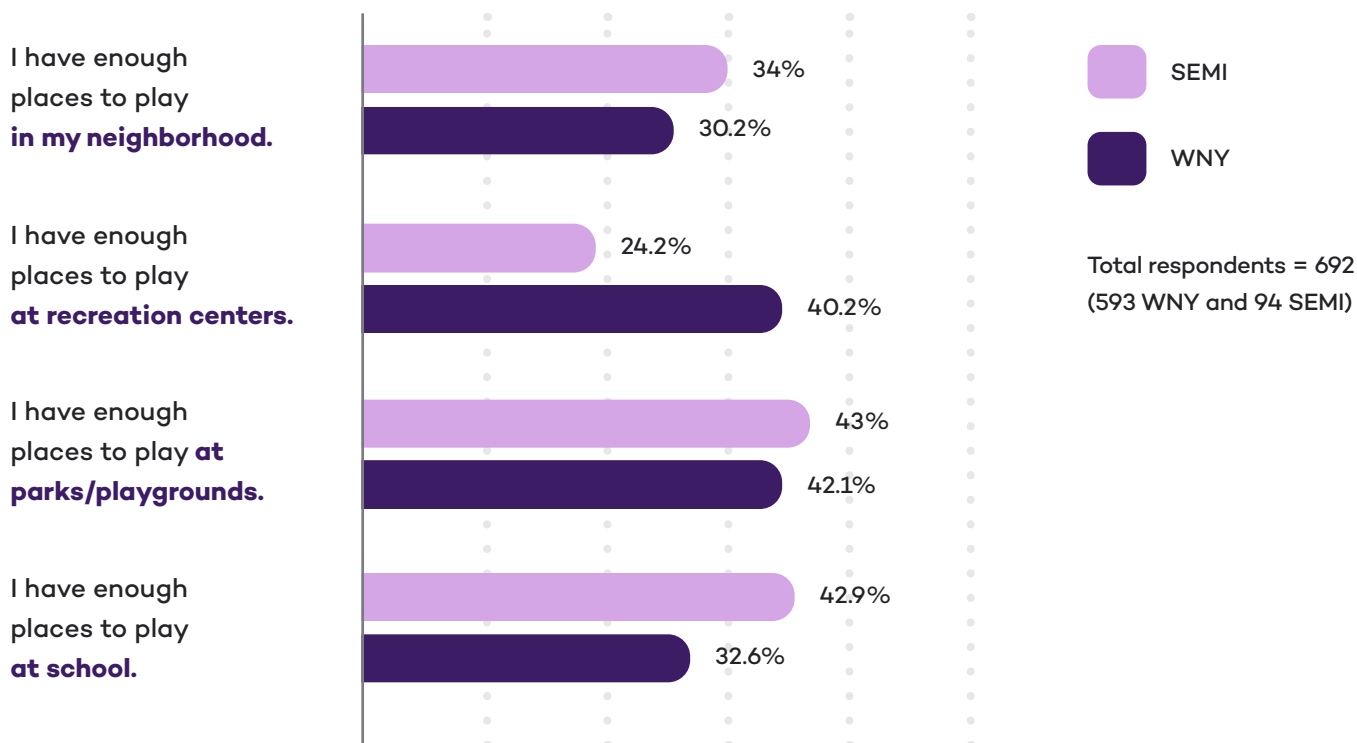
SEMI and WNY are no different from much of the rest of the United States in their need for more and improved playspaces. Any child can see that, and a large percentage of them do.



5. Neville RD, Lakes KD, Hopkins WG, et al., JAMA Pediatrics, *Global Changes in Child and Adolescent Physical Activity During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2022)

Kids Know They Don't Have Enough Places to Play

The majority of kids do not feel they have enough places to play that don't need improvement.



Communities within each of the regions know it, too.

Spotlight

Communities Are Demanding More Places to Play

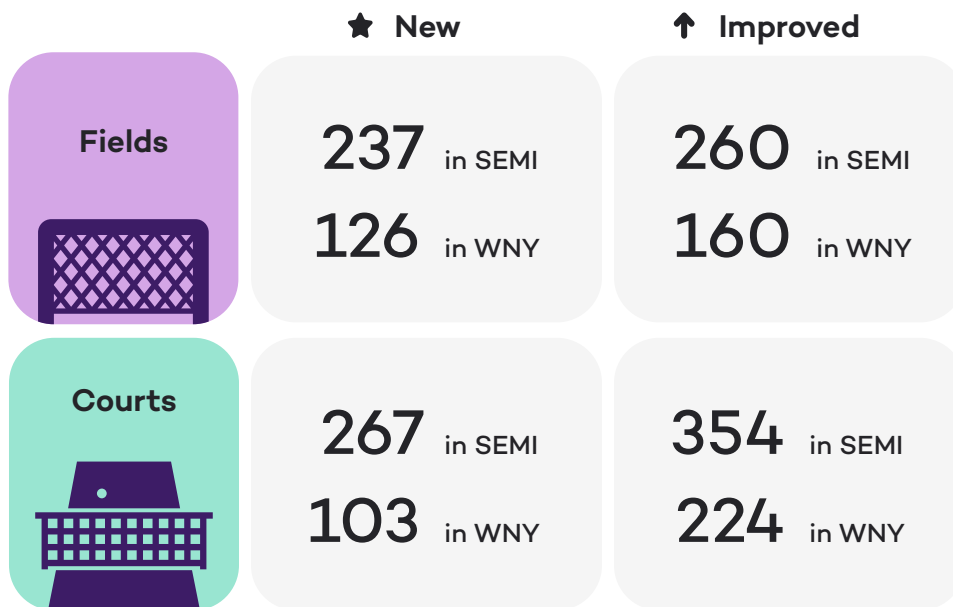
Why courts and fields? Communities in the two regions have frequently requested multi-use courts and fields, which can accommodate sports sampling. New and improved courts and fields help to counter the overall trend of declining sports participation, especially for kids from lower-income households, who are increasingly priced out of pay-to-play youth sports organizations.⁶ In a national survey of more than 10,000 youth coaches of all levels, 80% reported they did not have the facility space needed to coach their sport, and 55% said they do not have safe places to practice.⁷

6. Aspen Institute, *State of Play 2022* (2022)

7. Anderson-Butcher, D. & Bates, S., *National Coach Survey final report*. The Ohio State University Initiative, Columbus, OH (2022)

The numbers speak for themselves. SEMI and WNY each need a significant number of new courts and fields, as well as improvements to existing courts and fields.

More Courts and Fields are Needed



This is particularly true in communities that have been cut off from investment: simply ensuring that kids have equitable access to quality playspaces accounts for almost half of the overall need for new or improved courts and fields. As detailed in the regional research approach included in Section 2 below, we calculated this equity gap by capturing the number and location of existing courts and fields across the regions, applying national benchmarks at the county level, and doing a deeper dive to assess court and field access in select counties at the census tract level to determine what is needed to achieve equity.

Inequitable Access Must Be Addressed

Asset Type	Total Needed	Equity Gap	Equity Percent
Fields	363	119	33%
Courts	370	235	64%
Total	733	354	48%

Our goal cannot just be to increase the raw number of playspaces within the regions. We must do so equitably, closing the gap between the haves and have-nots. In fact, a rich-get-richer approach to playspace development is likely to have the opposite of the intended effect, widening access gaps and social divisions rather than reducing or eliminating them.

It is not lost on us that addressing significant needs in playspace development also means significant funding needs.

★ New Courts & Fields Needed

Asset Type	SEMI		WNY		Total	
	#	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Fields	237	\$63,421,200	126	\$33,717,600	363	\$97,138,800
Courts	267	\$21,375,753	103	\$8,246,077	370	\$29,621,830
Total	504	\$84,796,953	229	\$41,963,677	733	\$126,760,630

\$267,600 per field | \$80,059 per court

↑ Improved Courts & Fields Needed

Asset Type	SEMI		WNY		Total	
	#	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Fields	260	\$20,872,800	164	\$13,165,920	424	\$34,038,720
Courts	354	\$8,502,266	224	\$5,379,965	578	\$13,882,231
Total	614	\$29,375,066	388	\$18,545,885	1,002	\$47,920,951

\$80,280 per field | \$24,017 per court

Total Investment Needed

Asset Type	SEMI	WNY	Total
	\$	\$	\$
Fields	\$84,294,000	\$46,883,520	\$131,177,520
Courts	\$29,878,019	\$13,626,042	\$43,504,061
Total	\$114,172,019	\$60,509,562	\$174,681,581

What It Takes to Solve the Problem

But this is a solvable problem, if the large resources needed can be directed to address it. By following the same three steps that shaped our analysis — listening to kids, marshaling data, and engaging stakeholders — communities can mobilize supporters, sway decision-makers, scale the hard work necessary to eliminate playspace inequity, and provide every kid with quality courts and fields.

Kids will be happier and healthier, and communities will be stronger. Clearly, \$174.6 million across SEMI and WNY is a big investment. But the return on investment is much greater. In fact, studies show that similar investments in parks provide up to a 7-to-1 return on investment in economic value, not even factoring in the financial value of other proven benefits to physical and mental health, neighborhood safety, and community cohesion/pride benefits.

The ROI of Play

Economic & Environmental Values



An economic value and benchmarking study⁸ of the park system in Dallas completed by the City of Dallas Department of Parks and Recreation, HR&A Advisors, Verdunity, and the Trust for Public Land found that **every year**, despite investing approximately 40% less than its regional and national peer cities, Dallas Parks return \$678 million to the local economy, a **7:1 return on public investment (ROI)** which could be even higher if investment were increased in line with its peer cities. The quantified economic drivers included real estate, tourism, and environmental value. New real estate development and increased property values in neighborhoods adjacent to parks accounted for more than half the total economic value — \$345 million per year out of a total of \$678 million. Environmental value included flood mitigation and other green infrastructure benefits.

Physical Health Value



Increasing child activity levels with quality playspaces can result in a lifetime of health value, reducing healthcare costs and increasing productivity. Obesity and related diseases such as heart disease and diabetes cost billions of dollars each year in healthcare. A team of researchers led by Bruce Y. Lee at City University of New York estimates national healthcare cost and productivity savings due to an increase in child physical activity levels in the following way — “If 50% of children would exercise, the number of obese and overweight youth would decrease by 4.18%, averting \$8.1 billion in direct medical costs and \$13.8 billion in lost productivity. Increasing the proportion of children who exercised to 75% would avert \$16.6 billion and \$23.6 billion, respectively.”⁹

Other Values



- Active play on quality playspaces has mental health benefits for children and families resulting in the reduction of mental health care costs and increasing productivity.¹⁰
- Increase in community safety from vibrant community spaces include an increase in commerce¹¹ and reduction in the cost of crime.¹²
- Improved child health through active play increases attendance and focus in the classroom, resulting in higher lifetime earning potential.¹³

8. HR&A Advisors, Inc., *Economic Value and Benchmarking Study of the Dallas Park System* (2016). Benchmarked peer cities included regional peers Austin, Houston, San Antonio, and San Diego; economic competitor peers Atlanta, Denver, and Phoenix; and aspirational peers Chicago, Minneapolis, Portland, and Seattle.

9. Bruce Y. Lee et al., *Modeling The Economic And Health Impact Of Increasing Children's Physical Activity In The United States*, Health Affairs (2017)

10. Cohen, M., et al., The Urban Institute, *The Health Benefits of Parks and Their Economic Impact Literature Review* (2022)

11. Trust for Public Land, *The Economic Benefits of BREC Parks* (2023)

12. Shepley, M. et al., *The Impact of Green Space on Violent Crime in Urban Environments: An Evidence Synthesis*, Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health (2019)

13. *Attendance Works*, which is a nonprofit that focuses on reducing chronic student absence, has multiple [resources](#) on the link between attendance and academic performance.

Solving a problem of this scale is not easy. But this Playbook equips you with the guidance needed to tackle big challenges. To set you up for success, the Playbook includes:

- **Pre-Game Prep:** a detailed regional analysis that asks kids what they want, assesses what courts and fields are needed, and engages stakeholders in envisioning what's possible
- **The Regional Gameplan:** a high-level strategic framework for achieving playspace equity in each region
- **The Local Gameplan:** insights for applying the regional analysis and gameplan at the community level
- **Keeping Score:** ideas for how to measure short-term progress and long-term outcomes from this work

Now that you know what the Playbook contains, let's delve deeply into how our plays develop on actual courts and fields.



The Playbook

Section

02



2A Pre-Game Prep:

Understanding the Regional Challenge We Face

How We Got Here

In 2017, the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation (RCWJRF) and the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program talked to hundreds of youth and other community stakeholders to inform the *State of Play* reports for SEMI and WNY. The *State of Play* reports¹⁴ showed that while free play is integral to kids' healthy development and physical literacy, many kids lack access to places for free play, such as playgrounds, skateparks, courts or fields.



14. The Aspen Institute, *State of Play Southeast Michigan*, *State of Play Western New York*, and *State of Play Rochester and the Finger Lakes* (2017)

Sport for All, Play for Life

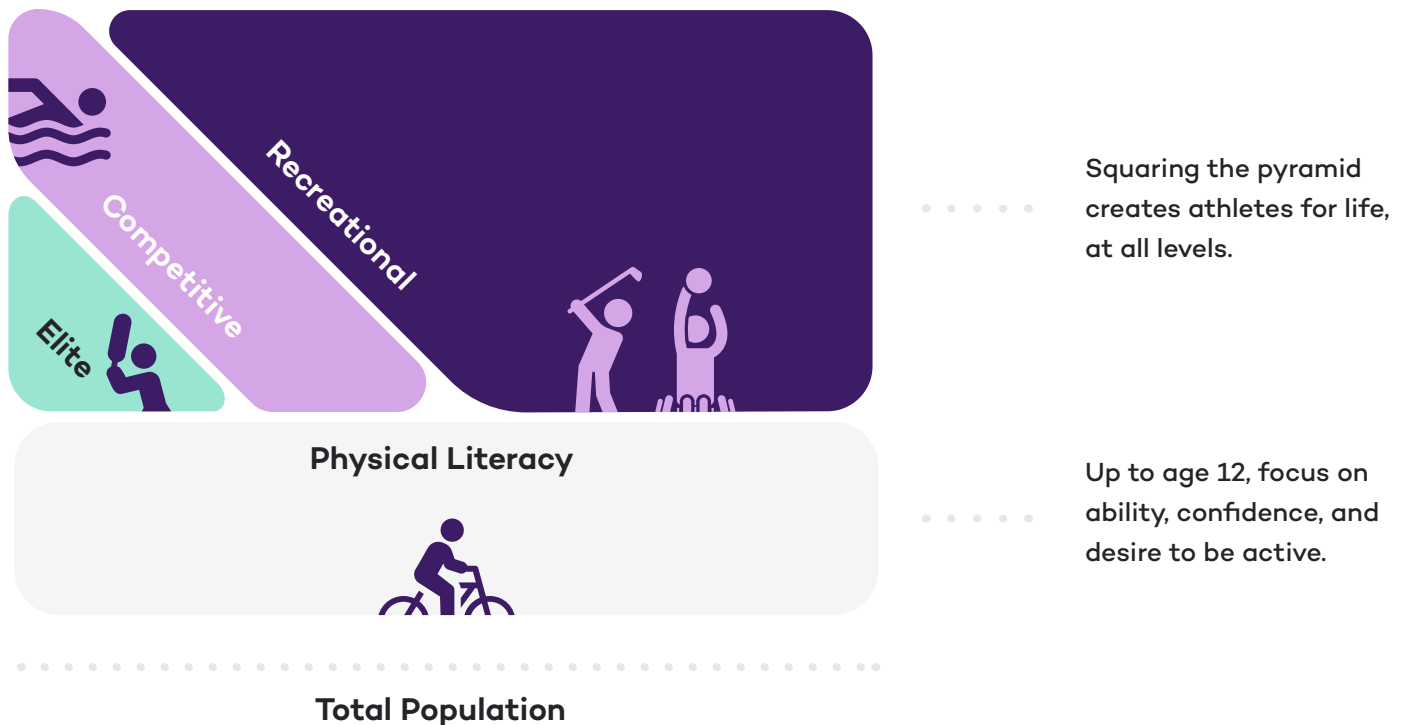
The greatest gaps occur where young people need access the most — in historically disinvested urban and rural areas.

These regional State of Play reports prompted investment in many aspects of play, including:

- Establishing *Project Play* initiatives at the Greater Buffalo Community Foundation and the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan
- Developing the *Built to Play* initiative that has engaged funders, youth-serving agencies, and communities in giving kids across 16 counties of SEMI and WNY equitable access to quality skateparks, playgrounds, and other playspaces

These efforts promoting kid-directed active play have introduced kids in the regions to a lifetime of recreation, physical activity, and the related benefits. RCWJRF, with its *Built to Play* partners KABOOM! and The Skatepark Project, commissioned leading global design, planning, and research firm Gehl to conduct an assessment to understand the outcomes of these investments. The Gehl report, which includes findings and recommendations for community advocates, civic leaders, and funders, highlights the many benefits that come from community-driven playspaces.¹⁵

Broad Access Leads to Sustained Participation¹⁶



15. Gehl, *Built to Play – Understanding the Outcomes of Playspaces and Skateparks* (2023)

16. The Aspen Institute, *Project Play. Sport for All Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game* (2015)

Built to Play Outcomes

In the years since those 2017 studies, communities within the two regions have built 20 new skateparks and 71 new playspaces.

Active

The vast majority of kids observed in Built to Play spaces were physically active, and guardians are already starting to see their kids engage in more free play outside in the space since the projects have opened.

Social

The spaces serve essential social functions for kids of all ages, who gather with friends and meet new ones, too. Adults also report social benefits — from parents meeting each other, to elders “staying young.”

Adventurous

Inventive design features are most popular, according to a survey of project leads. Kids embrace the challenge of obstacle courses and ramps, and invent their own tales, inspired by nature and whimsical play equipment.

Equity-Focused

Kids from BIPOC, rural, and low-income areas and households benefited especially — often visiting with greater frequency, making more friends, and feeling more attached and connected to the spaces.

Catalytic

Projects have led to local ripple effects — making people more proud to live in their communities, fostering stewardship, and creating a unifying platform for public life, and community and economic development.

Integrated

The process forged cross-sector partnerships among non-profits, government agencies, and community advocates — relationships being used to drive wider efforts to prioritize play and kids in communities.

Even with such encouraging advances, kids and communities spoke up that they needed more and better courts and fields, especially to enable free play of a wide range of sports. This desire for courts and fields dovetailed with a concerning trend of declining youth participation in sports.

Playbook Overview

In 2022, RCWJRF enlisted its Built to Play partner KABOOM! to conduct a comprehensive research project, in collaboration with the Aspen Institute and The Sports Facilities Companies (SFC), to better understand the use of, and need for, playspaces for youth in the two regions, especially courts and fields.

This Playbook focuses on that need for new and improved courts and fields. It assesses and analyzes access to quality courts and fields in SEMI and WNY and recommends how to address the challenge of playspace inequity at the regional and local levels.

Building on years of experience working with kids and playspaces, the KABOOM!-led research team designed a three-phased approach:

- Establish a foundational understanding of what kids want
- Assess the gap in courts and fields needed in light of the goal to correct playspace inequity
- Analyze the interests and needs of key stakeholder groups to help marshal the resources necessary to address the challenge of playspace inequity at the scale it exists in the two regions

Research Phases

Our research highlights the difficulty involved in providing kids equitable access, yet also indicates that playspace inequity is a solvable problem. The research findings and recommendations shared here map a collective path forward.

We have geared this Playbook as a guide to marshalling the leadership and engagement of community stakeholders, government officials, and private-sector partners that will be required to achieve playspace equity. The Playbook includes a regional strategic framework as well as guidance on how communities can develop a plan, prioritize investments, and ensure the success of each playspace from its conception, through design, build, and sustainable maintenance and programming. Although the analysis focuses on SEMI and WNY, the findings and recommendations are intended to help any community or region that seeks to address inequity in access to courts and fields.



How do kids want to play?

Aspen Institute developed a youth survey and conducted focus groups to analyze sports preferences, participation, and other factors.



What courts and fields are needed?

SFC assessed need for courts and fields by mapping existing facilities and estimated needed improvements, informed by local leaders.



What is the sustainable model?

A landscape analysis of key stakeholders such as funders, equipment providers, and other private and government partners was conducted to understand level of interest and potential engagement.

Regional Research Approach

We grounded our research in two essential starting points outlined in the following graphics — the 8 Key Plays for youth sports from the Aspen Institute (particularly the first 5 because of their relevance to courts and fields) and a set of additional guiding principles for play infrastructure projects.

Aspen's 8 Key Plays¹⁷

	The 8 Plays: Aspen Institute Project Play	Courts & Fields Connection (our commentary)
#1 ?	Ask Kids What They Want	Project was designed to understand the needs and desires of local youth.
#2	Reintroduce Free Play	Research and recommendations prioritize free play and recreational usage.
#3	Encourage Sport Sampling	Recommendations include multi-use courts and fields spaces for traditional and non-traditional sports sampling.
#4	Revitalize In-Town Leagues	Local leagues need increased access to quality courts and fields for play.
#5	Think Small	Research and recommendations prioritize cost-effective use of neighborhood spaces geared toward free play and recreational usage.
#6	Design for Development	
#7	Train All Coaches	
#8	Emphasize Prevention	

17. The Aspen Institute, *Project Play, Sport for All Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game* (2015)

Guiding Principles

1. **Start from a Foundation of Racial Equity** — Race underpins much of the inequity in playspaces today, including remnants of official and unofficial redlining policies and other forces that have led to significant under-investment in communities on the basis of race. Starting from a foundation of racial equity enables us to actively address race-based disinvestment that communities have faced.
2. **Prioritize Overlooked Communities** — Resources often flow to the same communities that already have more than their peers. Our analysis is geared to lift up communities, from dense urban neighborhoods to hard-to-reach rural communities, that have historically been overlooked when it comes to investment.
3. **Focus On Public Use and Free Play By Kids and Teens** — Municipal park systems are often in a bind. Tight budgets pressure them to rent out the courts and fields they have to pay-to-play youth sports organizations that preference the haves over the have-nots. To make matters worse, sometimes the only opportunity for park systems to create new playspaces is to have the capital costs funded by these same youth sports organizations, which then get the right to use the playspaces to the exclusion of the public. This monetization of public playspaces makes the gap in access to courts and fields even wider. **To counter this challenge, our analysis focuses on adding and improving playspaces that remain open, free, and accessible.**
4. **Root Work in Youth and Community Voice and Leadership** — Sustainable change is possible only if the solutions come from the community, are led by the community, and are responsive to their needs. It is essential to amplify the voices and leadership of youth, particularly when an issue — like access to places to play — affects children so directly. Our analysis builds on the Built to Play initiative, which has elevated the voice and leadership of youth and the broader community in building public playspaces.
5. **Utilize Green Infrastructure** — Infrastructure projects like courts and fields have an opportunity and a responsibility to contribute to the environment in ways that benefit the health and wellbeing of kids and communities. The same communities that suffer the most from playspace inequity are also the most likely to suffer from environmental degradation. Our analysis prioritizes design choices that can help reduce heat islands and improve air quality and storm water management in communities that have borne the brunt of environmental injustices.
6. **Account for Sustainability and Maintenance Needs** — We've all seen beautiful playspaces fall into disrepair because the resources aren't available to maintain these places over the long haul. This is particularly true in communities that have been cut off from investment. **Our analysis accounts for maintenance costs upfront and elevates the importance of planning to sustain these playspaces far into the future.**
7. **Emphasize Economic Development** — It is easy to see how playspaces can benefit kids and families. Addressing playspace inequity is also a powerful tool for spurring economic development, from increased foot traffic for small businesses to neighborhood revitalization. Our analysis offers an approach for assessing and communicating this expected broader return on an investment in courts and fields to stakeholders who may not otherwise prioritize children or play.

Step 1 — Ask Kids What They Want

Following Aspen's lead, our research began where it should, with Key Play #1 — asking kids what they want. To ground the research in the lived experiences of youth, the Aspen Institute led focus groups and surveyed kids through schools and local community organizations in each region to better understand their perspectives and needs. Three themes clearly emerged:

Theme 1: Kids want to play a multitude of sports.

Kids in both the survey and focus groups listed many different types of sports that they play and are interested in trying.

Kids Want to Play a Multitude of Sports

Southeast Michigan		Western New York	
Top 5 Sports to Try		Top 5 Sports to Try	
Basketball	35.1%	Boxing	19.5%
Soccer	21.3%	Skating	16.5%
Volleyball	19.2%	Horseback Riding	16.1%
Dance/Step	18.1%	Fencing	14%
Skating	18.1%	Lacrosse	13.6%

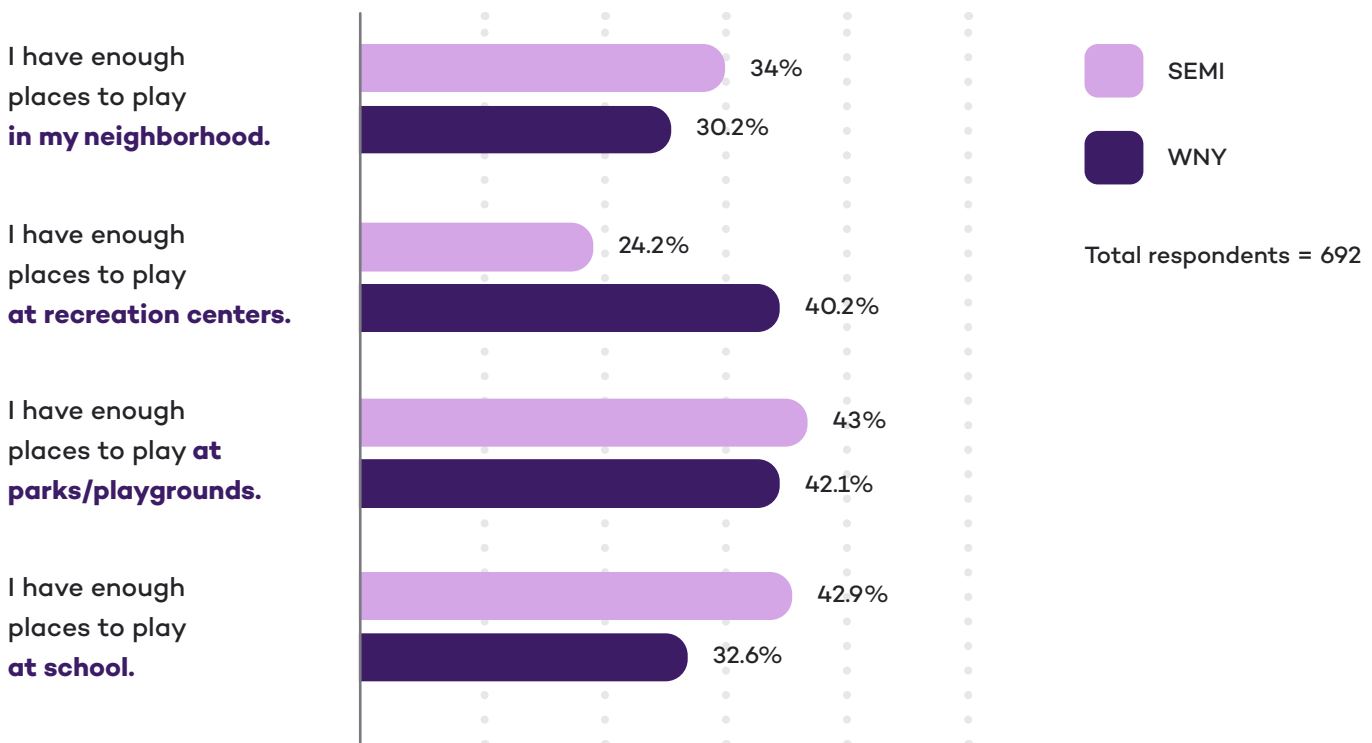
To meet kids' needs, courts and fields should accommodate multiple sports and activities. As seen in many indoor gyms, a basketball court can also contain markings for volleyball. But it can also work for small-sided soccer and other sports not typically seen on a court. Grass fields can be used for baseball, football, soccer, lacrosse, archery, and more. Accommodating as many sports as possible increases the likelihood that children will find an activity they love that can lead to a lifetime of physical activity.

Theme 2: Most kids do not feel they have enough quality places to play today.

A clear majority of kids surveyed do not think they have enough quality places to play at school, at the park, or at a recreation center.

Kids Know They Don't Have Enough Places to Play

The majority of kids do not feel they have enough places to play that don't need improvement.



Spotlight

Focus Group Quotes:

“If I want to play sports, I have to drive to another town because there is nothing where I live.”

“It would be great if there were more places to play in my neighborhood as I have to go to school to be able to play.”

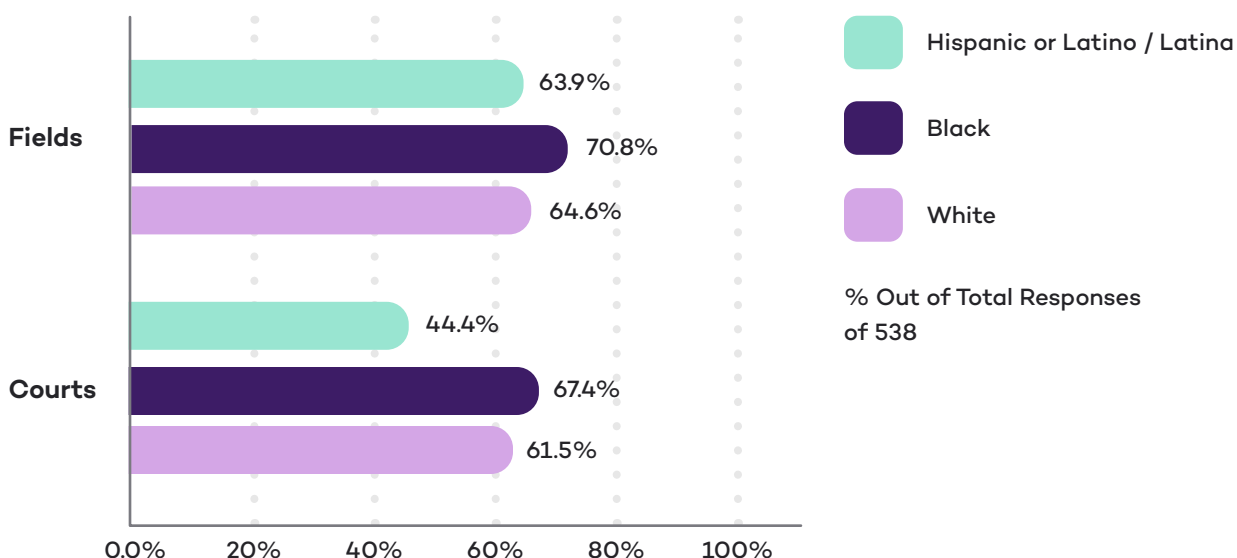
It may be tempting to dismiss the quotations above as simply reflecting a child's tendency to continually ask for more; rather, the quotations reveal children's awareness that their communities are lacking in comparison to other communities.

Theme 3: Kids want more courts and fields.

Kids spoke up loudly and clearly. They want more courts and fields. This is particularly true for Black children, who were more likely than their peers to identify the need.

Kids Want More Courts and Fields

What type of spaces do you want in your neighborhood?



Knowing that kids want more courts and fields, the next question is “How many courts and fields, of which types, located where, will correct playspace inequity?”

Step 2 — Determine What Courts and Fields Are Needed

We developed a four-step process to understand the number of courts and fields in the regions and the gap between existing assets and those needed to reach playspace equity.

1. **Capture the number of existing public courts and fields.** Led by the expertise of SFC, we grounded our regional research in a strong understanding of the current courts and fields in each county. To identify a comprehensive set of public park assets, SFC collected data on court and field locations, type, and number from local leaders across each region, prior reports that inventoried courts and fields, and SFC’s own independent research.

SFC validated data through interviews of local officials and satellite imagery. The result was a list of public courts and fields by county and location. Based on experience in other regions, the team estimated that roughly 30% of the existing facilities would need repairs.

Existing Courts and Fields



Region	Type	Total Existing Assets	Estimated Assets Needing Improvements
SEMI	Fields	879	260
	Courts	1,194	354
WNY	Fields	572	164
	Courts	787	224
Total	Fields	1,451	424
	Courts	1,981	578

2. **Apply national benchmarks at county level.** With the analysis of existing assets complete, we applied the national standard for county-level benchmarking from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) to better understand regional needs. With its network of more than 60,000 parks and recreation professionals and community advocates, NRPA is the leading nonprofit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant, and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation.

For each type of recreation asset, like courts and fields, NRPA breaks down its county benchmarks by county population. For our analysis, we used the benchmarks for counties under 1 million residents, which was the best proxy for regions that are a mix of urban, suburban, and rural counties.

The NRPA benchmarks look at the number of residents per court or field in a county. The lower the number of residents per court or field, the better the county is doing and, therefore, the higher the percentile it is in.

NRPA Benchmark for Residents Per Asset¹⁸

Asset	75 th Percentile	50 th Percentile	25 th Percentile
 Outdoor Courts	3,846	6,768	12,358
 Multi-purpose Rectangular Fields	4,852	8,732	22,989



NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

★ 75th Percentile

To select the appropriate NRPA benchmark percentile by which to assess the 16 counties in SEMI and WNY, we turned to the definitive source on how the nation as a whole is doing when it comes to public parks. In its most recent Infrastructure Report Card¹⁹, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the United States a grade of D+ for public parks, with New York and Michigan faring a bit better.

ASCE Infrastructure Grade



Public Parks



New York



Michigan

Because the nation as a whole scores so poorly on public parks infrastructure, we determined that the appropriate NRPA benchmark to apply was not the 50th percentile, which would essentially equate to a D+ — the average grade for the entire country. Instead, we chose NRPA's 75th percentile, which we equate to roughly a B+, or very good.

18. National Recreation & Park Association, *NRPA Park Metrics* (2023)

19. American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), *Infrastructure Report Card* (2021)

NRPA 75th Percentile Benchmarks²⁰

Asset	75 th Percentile	50 th Percentile	25 th Percentile
Outdoor Courts	3,846	6,768	12,358
Multi-purpose Rectangular Fields	4,852	8,732	22,989

Applying the 75th percentile benchmarks of 3,846 residents per court and 4,852 residents per field, we identified a preliminary gap of 135 courts and 244 fields across the regions.

Gap in Courts and Fields Using NRPA Benchmarks²¹

Region	Type	Total Existing Assets	National Benchmark Gap
SEMI	Fields	879	162
	Courts	1,194	133
WNY	Fields	572	82
	Courts	787	2
Total	Fields	1,451	244
	Courts	1,981	135

Though equipped with rigorously researched data, we dug deeper to determine additional layers of entrenched playspace inequity that we would need to overcome.

3. **Apply equity analysis to further identify additional gaps.** The national benchmarks at the county level are not granular enough to paint the full picture of what's needed to address inequitable access to courts and fields. Even if a county meets the benchmarks in the aggregate, it may fall short on equity. An abundance of courts and fields in the more affluent part of a county may raise the overall total number of facilities in a county but mask access gaps in the disinvested areas.

To better understand the equity implications within a county, we further analyzed select counties at the census tract level to more accurately determine the number, type, and location of facilities needed to achieve equity. KABOOM! has developed the Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI), an in-depth model for predicting inequitable access to playspaces at the census tract level that compiles 21 indicators, covering population characteristics, inequity factors, park access, and

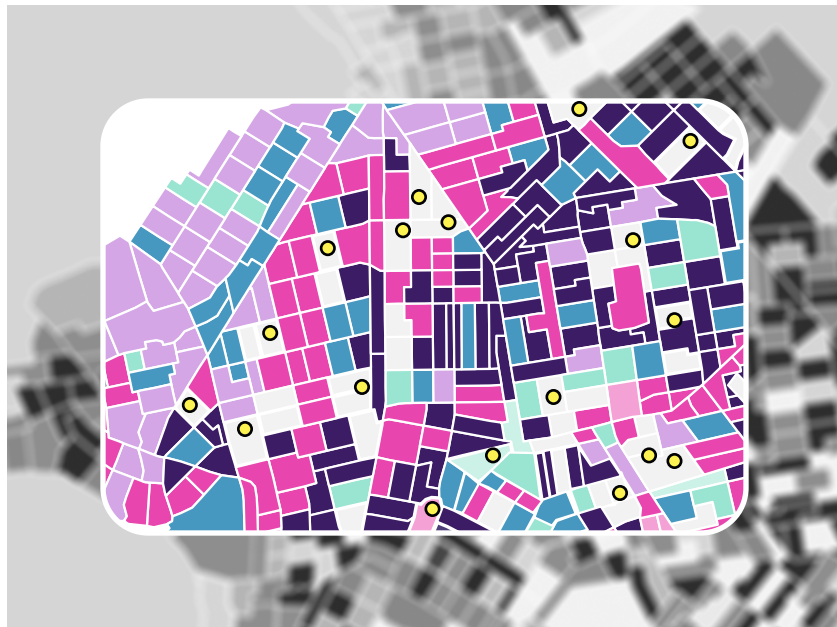
20. National Recreation & Park Association, *NRPA Park Metrics* (2023)

21. Gap calculation based on National Recreation & Park Association's 75th percentile benchmark for outdoor courts and fields.

the built environment. PIPI is increasingly being used as an analysis and planning tool by municipalities across the country that want to address inequitable access to playspaces. For example, KABOOM! worked with the City of Rochester and Common Ground Health on a citywide playspace equity assessment using PIPI as the foundation for the analysis, which the City can now use to prioritize equity-oriented investments in future playspaces as part of its comprehensive planning.

To streamline analysis at the regional level, we used two key components of PIPI — income levels and racial demographics — to develop bivariate county maps. These maps exposed the extent of court and field gaps in census tracts that were lower income and had higher BIPOC populations.

Bivariate Map Showing Equity Gap



In other words, the courts and fields were not distributed evenly throughout the county, as shown in the map above, with the dark purple areas indicating a high concentration of both BIPOC population and people living below the poverty line. To address inequitable distribution of courts and fields, additional investment is required in the overlooked parts of the county.

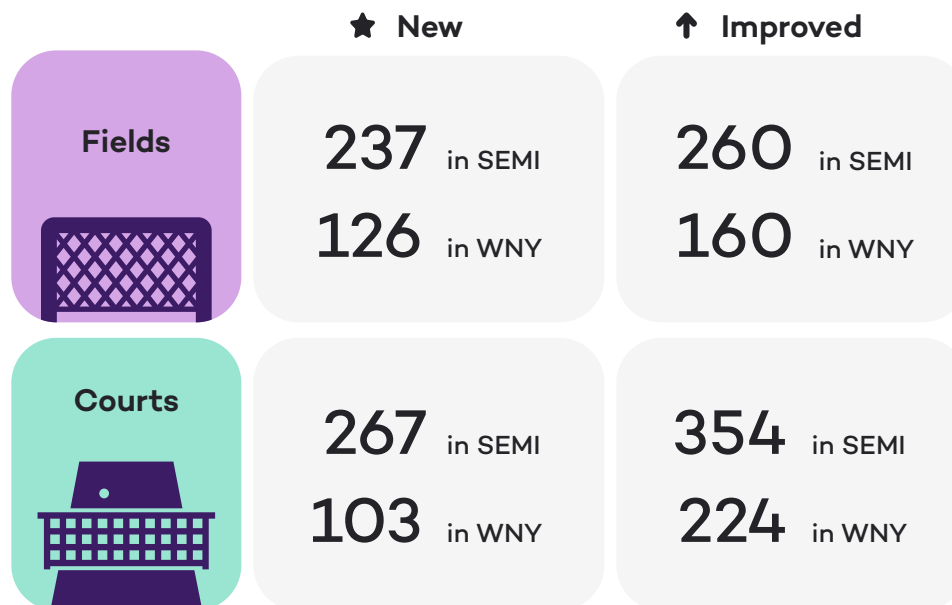
Based on this bivariate analysis, we calculated and applied an additional factor of 18% to quantify this gap in equitable access to courts and fields. Combining the national benchmark analysis with this equity analysis yields the total number of new courts and fields needed to ensure equitable access.

Total Equity Gap

Region	Type	Total Existing Assets	National Benchmark Gap	+Equity Analysis Gap	Total New Assets Needed
SEMI	Fields	879	162	75	237
	Courts	1,194	133	134	267
WNY	Fields	572	82	44	126
	Courts	787	2	101	103
Total	Fields	1,451	244	119	363
	Courts	1,981	135	235	370

In addition, our analysis factored in SFC's estimate that approximately 30% of existing courts and fields need improvements, which would cost roughly 30% of a new capital project.

Total Courts and Fields Needed



Set on the number of facilities to build or improve, we turned our attention to costs.

4. **Estimate costs for new and improved courts and fields.** Estimating costs for the required new and improved courts and fields led us to determine the total capital investment necessary to reach playspace equity in the regions. With our Guiding Principles in mind, particularly the prioritization of free play and green infrastructure, we landed on the lowest cost options for courts and fields.

Cost Options for Courts and Fields

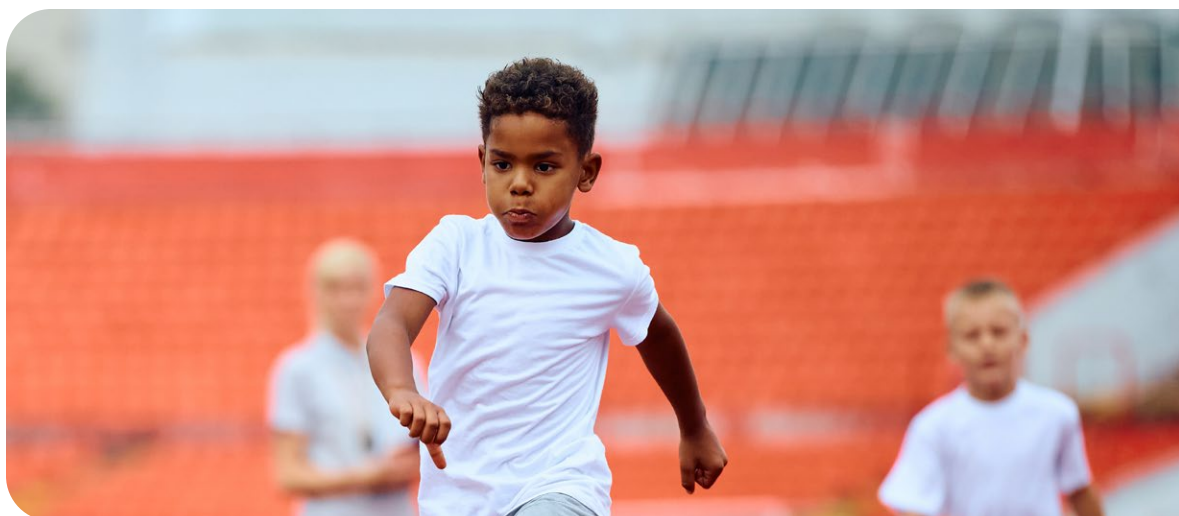
Multipurpose Rectangular Fields

Field Type	Level 1: Natural Grass, Recreational	Level 2: Natural Grass, Competitive	Level 3: Synthetic Turf, Competitive
Cost of Development	\$267,600	\$939,250	\$1,859,754
Annual Operational Maintenance	\$13,698	\$27,603	\$14,603

Outdoor Courts

Outdoor Courts	Level 1: Concrete Pad, Recreational	Level 2: Concrete Pad, Enhanced	Level 3: Sport Court, Upgraded
Cost of Development	\$80,059	\$112,016	\$195,193
Annual Operational Maintenance	\$1,539	\$1,924	\$3,079

The overall capital cost to achieve equitable access to courts and fields in the regions includes SFC's estimate of approximately 30% of existing courts and fields needing improvements, with each of those costing roughly 30% of a new facility.



Total Capital Investment Needed for New and Improved Courts and Fields

The table below summarizes the overall capital cost for new and improved courts and fields in the regions, totaling \$174.6 million.

★ New Courts & Fields Needed

Asset Type	SEMI		WNY		Total	
	#	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Fields	237	\$63,421,200	126	\$33,717,600	363	\$97,138,800
Courts	267	\$21,375,753	103	\$8,246,077	370	\$29,621,830
Total	504	\$84,796,953	229	\$41,963,677	733	\$126,760,630

\$267,600 per field | \$80,059 per court

↑ Improved Courts & Fields Needed

Asset Type	SEMI		WNY		Total	
	#	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Fields	260	\$20,872,800	164	\$13,165,920	424	\$34,038,720
Courts	354	\$8,502,266	224	\$5,379,965	578	\$13,882,231
Total	614	\$29,375,066	388	\$18,545,885	1,002	\$47,920,951

\$80,280 per field | \$24,017 per court

Total Investment Needed

Asset Type	SEMI	WNY	Total
	\$	\$	\$
Fields	\$84,294,000	\$46,883,520	\$131,177,520
Courts	\$29,878,019	\$13,626,042	\$43,504,061
Total	\$114,172,019	\$60,509,562	\$174,681,581

Another crucial element of cost is an understanding of annual maintenance needs to ensure long-term sustainability and quality of the playspace. SFC estimated an annual maintenance cost of 2% of the total new cost for courts and 5% of the total new cost for fields.

✂ Annual Maintenance Costs

Asset Type	SEMI		WNY		Total	
	#	\$	#	\$	#	\$
Fields	497	\$6,807,906	304	\$3,973,790	801	\$10,781,696
Courts	621	\$955,719	327	\$503,253	948	\$1,458,972
Total	1,118	\$7,763,625	631	\$4,477,043	1,749	\$12,240,668

\$13,698 per field | \$1,539 per court

Having calculated the total capital and maintenance costs, we then used those figures to inform the development of a Regional Gameplan.

Step 3 — Engage Stakeholders to Envision What's Possible

We know that any effort to address the regional challenge of playspace inequity will require the leadership and engagement of many stakeholders. For this analysis, we focused on better understanding the potential for funding partners, gauging their interest and requirements to be part of a region-wide collaborative funding effort.

Research included interviews with funder representatives from local, regional, and national philanthropic institutions, local and national corporate funders, local sports teams, national sports leagues, and government representatives. We supplemented interview findings with secondary research including a review of potential funder websites, annual reports, GuideStar profiles, tax forms, and other available background information on giving approach and interests. We completed a Foundation Center scan on possible interested national, regional, state, and local philanthropic foundations.

The key questions we worked to answer included:

- *What existing funding priorities and goals align with playspace equity?*
- *What interest might funders have in contributing to an initiative like regional courts and fields development?*
- *If interested, what would be the possible funder role and requirements?*

The two key findings from the research are:

- **Finding #1:** Local and national funders are interested in supporting a regional effort to achieve playspace equity with courts and fields.
- **Finding #2:** Multiple funder segments will need to be engaged in different ways depending on their requirements and goals.

Finding #1: Local, state, regional, and national funders are interested in supporting a regional effort to achieve playspace equity with courts and fields.

The majority of funders saw the issue of playspace inequity and its ties to their priorities in equity, health, youth, education, economic development, neighborhood strengthening, community safety, community building, or sports as resonant and compelling. Local, regional, and state funders and teams see quality playspaces for kids as aligning with their approach and priorities. National funders with some ties to the regions, such as corporate funders with a local presence, were interested in being part of a regional effort. There is also the potential to bring national philanthropic funder dollars into the regions as part of a demonstration project that will prove replicable outcomes for other communities. All funder types had precedence and comfort with being part of a collaborative funding effort.

Finding #2: Multiple funder segments will need to be engaged in different ways depending on their requirements and goals.

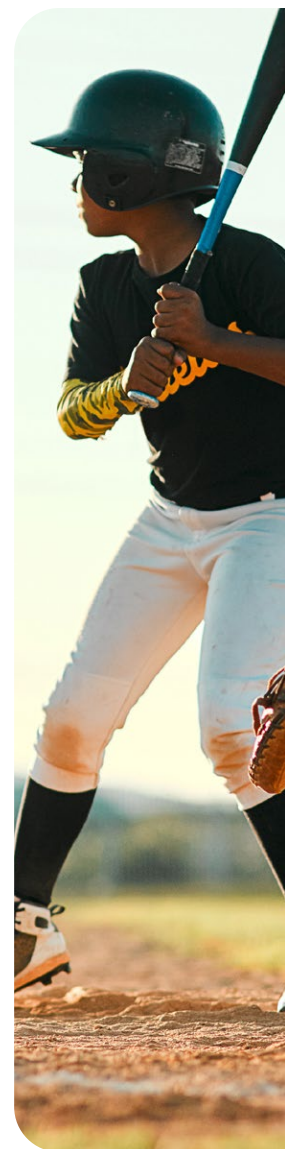
Each funder segment type has unique interests and requirements which would need to be managed carefully in a regional funding campaign.

Considerations by Funder Type



Philanthropists — Local, regional, and national institutional and individual philanthropists who donate or grant to achieve social impact objectives.

- Most require direct alignment with donor issue priorities such as health, disabilities, economic development, equity, social justice, youth, play, safety, sports, and geographic focus.
- Southeast Michigan and the Rochester, NY area have a larger pool of institutional philanthropic funds for supporting places to play than the Buffalo, NY area.
- Institutional donors typically require local community leadership in the project, research basis for planned outcomes, and a measurement and evaluation plan for reporting.
- Philanthropists vary widely in their interest in public recognition for their gifts, such as naming rights.
- Local community foundation partners can be a supportive intermediary for individual donors.





Corporations — Local, regional, and national corporate donors including corporate foundation grants, corporate social responsibility investments, and marketing budgets.

- The relevant types of corporations interested here include sports and athletic retailers, youth brands, health companies, those corporations with a local employee base, and others.
- The issue needs to align with business and social priorities, such as sports, health, children, and community development.
- Corporations typically require alignment with business objectives and employee engagement. Corporations desire clearly defined benefits packages for funding, such as employee engagement events and plans for branding exposure. Types of support include sponsorships and grants. To maximize the potential with corporate funders, an account management strategy that is frequently engaged with the corporate staff can be necessary.



Sports Leagues and Teams — Local professional sports teams and national leagues.

- Most are interested in supporting multi-sport, active kid efforts vs. their specific sport only. Some specific connection to their sport (growing players and/or fans or event) is helpful.
- Major sports teams throughout the region have invested in new courts and fields for kids, with NHL street hockey and NFL flag gaining momentum.
- National leagues typically defer to local teams for investment considerations.
- Leagues and teams typically have lower direct philanthropy budgets than philanthropists or corporations but can offer value in media exposure and brand connection with their corporate sponsors.
- Players may be relevant as donors on a case-by-case basis, but often require a personal connection to the local community such as their hometown. Players may be more helpful in attending events, engaging in activations on the courts or fields, and helping to create media moments.

Spotlight

Representative Funder Quotes:



"It will be important to show how this model could be scaled in other geographies (to engage national funders)."



"We would consider a project like this as part of our overall community development efforts."



"This will get the most momentum if local employees are involved."



"We want to see kids playing our sport and will support efforts like this that get kids out for active play."

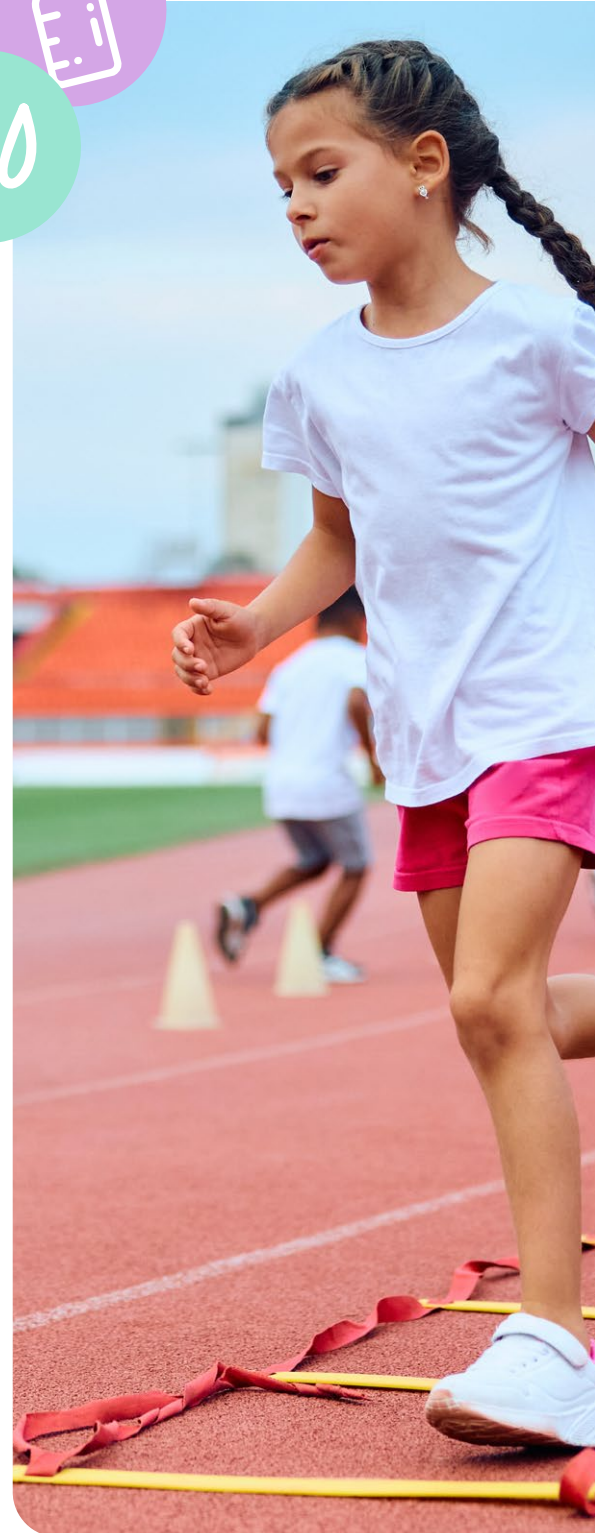


"We have precedent in working in a collaborative way and would be happy to be involved in something like this moving forward."

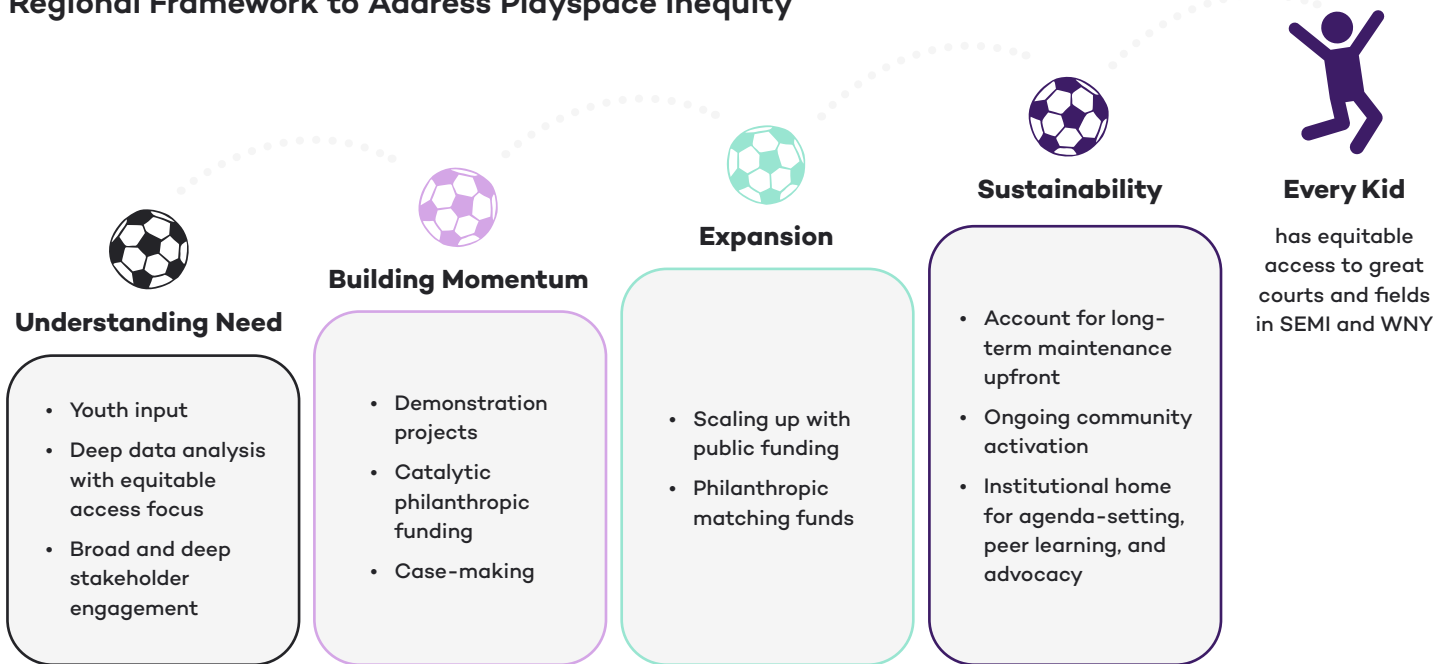
2B The Regional Gameplan: Charting a Course to Playspace Equity

Once we understood what kids want, what courts and fields are needed, and the interest of potential funder stakeholders, we developed the regional and local gameplans.

Achieving playspace equity is possible, but it will not happen overnight. Decades of disinvestment created and entrenched the current state of inequitable access to courts and fields, and it will take a long-term collective effort in the regions to correct it. In this section of the Playbook, we present an overarching regional framework for addressing playspace inequity.



Regional Framework to Address Playspace Inequity



Step 1 — Understanding Need

Our analysis of the need for new and improved courts and fields across the regions provides a solid foundation, but it is only a start toward understanding the full depth of need. Regional stakeholders should consider more granular assessments of the locations and quality of existing courts and fields, analyze equity at the local level throughout the regions, and seek extensive input on what youth, families, and communities need and want.



Step 2 — Building Momentum

Leveraging these inputs and analyses, stakeholders in the regions must demonstrate that the desired change is possible and will yield important outcomes. We recommend conducting one or more demonstration projects that engage youth and a wide range of stakeholders from community, nonprofit, philanthropic, corporate, and public sectors to make the case for larger-scale investment regionwide. In a smaller, more rural county, one court or field project may be enough to engage all of the local stakeholders necessary to create a strong proof point for your region-wide efforts. In larger suburban or urban counties, multiple court or field projects may be necessary to demonstrate community will and the need to reach similar neighborhoods throughout your region. Regardless of location, executing a demonstration project well will take effective collaboration between community members and a parks department that proactively seeks their input and engagement during the full lifecycle of the project.



Recipe for Successful Demonstration Projects



Any demonstration project likely will need catalytic philanthropic funding to create a compelling proof point that conveys the vision and results to a broader group of funder stakeholders, including multiple levels of government.

Step 3 — Expansion

With a strong demonstration project phase completed, you are ready to expand your courts and/or fields work. The broader scope requires significantly more funding; the unparalleled resources of government may be the only source that can meet the necessary amount of funding.

Your early wins during the demonstration project phase are key to making the case that public funding should address the remaining need for courts and/or fields across the regions. Leverage the outcomes you've achieved and the relationships you've built through each demonstration project to gain large-scale public funding.

Even with government funding, philanthropic support still plays an important role. Matching dollars from foundations, corporations, and high-net-worth individuals makes it easier for government to justify and prioritize your work, and many government funding programs often require a private match.

Remember, the goal is to solve playspace inequity at the scale it exists across your region, so be bold in making the case for cross-sector investment.

Step 4 — Sustainability

Investing in courts and fields at scale across the regions will put SEMI and WNY on the map as leaders in family-focused infrastructure, as homes to the many child-focused community benefits that come from access to playspaces. To maintain that reputation and reality, the regions must account for long-term maintenance costs upfront.

But maintenance budgets alone don't guarantee success. Sustainability depends in large part on cultivating actively engaged communities that love and care for these playspaces. Therefore, sustainability plans should include volunteer clean-up days and similar programs. The regions will need to continue putting community first in the maintenance of courts and fields.

Momentum can dissipate and disappear in the wake of changing priorities of key stakeholders, especially government decision-makers. The regions should consider creating institutions to serve as the perpetual voice and agenda-setter for investment in playspace equity. In addition to keeping government focused on providing great playspaces, these institutions can facilitate sharing, learning, and celebration of moves toward playspace equity among stakeholders across the regions, positioning every community for success.



Regional Gameplan Checklist

Step 1 — Understanding Need

- ☐ Assess location and quality of existing courts and fields
- ☐ Conduct equity analysis to identify access gaps
- ☐ Gather extensive feedback on what youth, families, and communities need and want

Step 2 — Building Momentum

- ☐ Identify and secure catalytic philanthropic funding
- ☐ Build one or more demonstration projects
- ☐ Engage youth and a wide range of stakeholders to help make the case for region-wide investment
- ☐ Document each proof point you create through a demonstration project

Step 3 — Expansion

- ☐ Use the outcomes you've achieved during the demonstration project phase to make the case for addressing the need for courts and fields at the scale the need exists across your region
- ☐ Identify and advocate for government funding to replicate work done during the demonstration project phase
- ☐ Identify and secure matching funds from philanthropic sources

Step 4 — Sustainability

- ☐ Determine the cost for long-term maintenance
- ☐ Include the cost of long-term maintenance in your fundraising goals and plans upfront
- ☐ Identify and secure funding for long-term maintenance
- ☐ Continue to cultivate active youth and community engagement, including organizing clean-up days
- ☐ Consider creating an institutional home to serve as the ongoing voice and agenda-setter for playspace equity in your region
- ☐ Share lessons learned along the way and celebrate progress



2C The Local Gameplan: *Applying the Playbook at the Community Level*

Action at the regional level must be matched with more localized action at the county level. What follows are recommended steps for translating the Regional Gameplan into a relevant Local Gameplan.

Step 1 — Understanding Need

First, use this report as a conversation-starter with your community to understand local need and context. Collect input from youth, their families, and the broader community to ensure that any investment is what the community wants and supports.

Map out the key partners in your community who must be in the game. Value your community's time by offering multiple ways to provide feedback, from community meetings and surveys to focus groups hosted by local community-based organizations or institutions, such as schools or libraries. Prioritize those opportunities that make it easy, and even fun, for youth to participate.

Good data enables good planning and decision-making. Make sure the data on the location and condition of your community's existing courts and fields are up to date.

Then dive into a deep equity analysis to identify and understand gaps in access that are rooted in longstanding disinvestment in overlooked communities. Consider applying the KABOOM! Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI) across your community to uncover gaps at the census tract level.

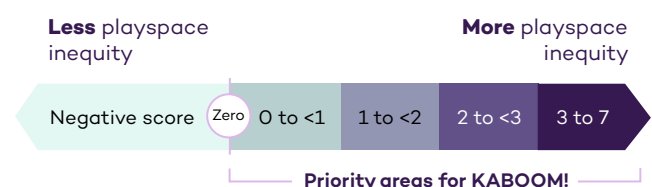
KABOOM! developed the Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI) to help estimate where playspace inequity is most likely occurring.

PIPI scores highlight trends in playspace inequity, allowing KABOOM! and its partners to make data-informed choices for more equitable investments in building and modernizing playspaces.

Understanding PIPI Scores — The overall PIPI score is a single value that is calculated for every census tract* in the United States using 21 different publicly available data points. The overall PIPI score is a value between negative 7.0 (-7.0) and positive 7.0, where a score of 0 represents the average level of playspace equity across the entire United States. Census tracts highlighted in shades of purple (PIPI scores between 1 and 7) are the most likely to be experiencing playspace inequity — with the darker hues of purple representing areas that lack adequate playspaces and therefore present better opportunities for playspace investment. Negative PIPI scores (highlighted in shades of mint green) are census tracts with less opportunity for investment because there is less estimated playspace inequity.






**Census tracts are neighborhood-level boundaries widely used for the collection of demographic information in the United States.*



What makes up a PIPI Score?

The indicators are broken down into three categories: population characteristics, park and built environment characteristics, and indicators associated with historic and ongoing inequities.

Population Characteristics	Park & Built Environmental Characteristics	Inequity Indicators
		
Percent of BIPOC (non-white) population	Percent of area covered by parks	Excessive owner housing costs
Income	Number of parks	Unemployment rate
Population under 18 years of age	Means of transportation for commuting	Percent of children receiving public benefits
Language isolation	Number of schools	Life expectancy at birth
Children under 18 with disability	Pedestrian road network density	Excessive renter housing costs
Residential properties with 2+ units	Vehicles per occupied housing unit	HUD subsidized housing units
	Traffic proximity and volume	
	Children with low access to healthy food	
	Households without computer/internet	



After taking these steps to gain a detailed understanding of the need in your community, you will be prepared to prioritize the actions your community should take.

Step 2 — Building Momentum

The problem of inequitable access to courts and fields is solvable. To achieve this goal, multiple stakeholders across many areas are needed for planning, analysis, building and improving assets, and maintaining them for the long term. The good news is that there are many interested stakeholders who want to pursue this important work.

Taking the deeper understanding of need you've developed, rally stakeholders to build demonstration projects that will help make the case for larger-scale investment countywide.



Local Community Members and Community-Based Organizations

The community at large is the most important stakeholder group, starting with youth. Anything you build must address the needs of children, families, and the broader community, while aligning with community leadership. Ensure that youth, community members, and the organizations that represent them drive each project at each stage of this work.

Interests and Needs:

- **Start with locations that need it most.** Trust among partners is critical. Communities that have borne the brunt of disinvestment feel overlooked for a reason — they watch resources frequently flow in to improve other communities, but endlessly wait for the same in their own. Prioritizing locations that experience the biggest inequities can go a long way toward building trust.
- **Remember that talk is cheap.** Overlooked communities are often on the receiving end of listening sessions or public input meetings that lead only to unfulfilled promises. Look for quick, tangible wins to demonstrate the change you propose is desirable and possible.
- **Honor the community's agenda.** When investment does flow to overlooked communities, there is a risk that it will come at the expense of the community that is already there. Every community needs great courts and fields, but a key question is who will get to use them and for what purpose. Guard against new courts and fields becoming primarily a destination for people from outside the community by prioritizing the uses that youth and families in the community want for their neighborhood.

Approaches to Engage:

- **Engage youth and other community members early, often, and in multiple ways.** Create multiple opportunities for youth and other community members to drive the decision-making process at every stage, from selecting the first sites and suggesting designs for each new court or field to planning for how to activate and maintain their new playspace. The process must fit the busy schedules of youth and other community members and consider factors that might challenge their engagement in meetings or surveys, such as unavailability of transportation or childcare or conflicts with school events.
- **Secure funding upfront for any demonstration project.** Avoid wasting the community's time on selecting and designing a playspace that will never be built. You may have the best of intentions

in seeking community input, but a surefire way to destroy trust and end collaborations is to make empty promises.

- **Don't stop when the ribbon is cut.** Active and vibrant community spaces rely on active and engaged youth and other residents. If done well, the design-and-build process will elevate the leadership of the broader community and generate a sense of community ownership in the newly built playspace. That lets you double down. Ensure that there are many opportunities for youth and other community members to continue making decisions and taking leadership over how the new playspace is used and maintained.



Philanthropists

Philanthropists are critical to the effort because they have the resources and flexibility to give catalytic funding to initiatives that promise to achieve meaningful outcomes that they care about. It is important to recognize that philanthropists come in many stripes. Some write checks from their kitchen table while others run robust organizations with expert staff. Some focus on local or regional needs, while others have a national scope. Each type of funder is a possible champion for your playspace project, but they likely differ in what may convince them to support your project.

Interests and Needs:

- **Start with purpose.** Whether it is an individual's personal convictions or a foundation's mission statement and strategic priorities, philanthropists are looking for opportunities to fund efforts that they care about.
- **Find the right approach.** Some philanthropists will fund any type of effort that fits their mission, but others have a strong point of view on the types of activities they support. Some provide general operating support for organizations that align with their mission, while others only support specific programs or projects. Some support a wide range of activities, while others focus on research, direct service to individuals, or community engagement.
- **Emphasize outcomes.** Regardless of type, funders want to see results from their investment. For example, funders primarily interested in education may want to understand how their courts and fields investment is linked to student behavior and other academic outcomes.

Approaches to Engage:

- **Do your research.** Make sure you have a clear grasp of a potential funder's mission, preferred approach, and intended outcomes. Cast a wide net, because playspace development can align with a broad swath of funders thanks to the range of kid, family, and community outcomes — including environmental or “green” impacts — that come from investment in playspaces. Beyond mission alignment, look for funders who prioritize community engagement and leadership, especially youth-led efforts. Also be mindful of a funder's geographic focus. Local and regional funders may be easier to identify, but you should also explore national funders who may be interested in supporting local or regional pilots that show potential to scale nationally.

- **Promote collaboration.** Likely you will need multiple funders at the table to raise the resources needed for any demonstration project. Seek out funders who are interested in collaborating with each other and create space in your plans to let multiple funders join forces. Consider ways to recognize the contributions of multiple funders on the same projects.
- **Prioritize measurement and evaluation.** Particularly for foundations and other institutional funders, you will need to track progress and measure the outcomes of your work. Many organizations funded by philanthropy view measurement and evaluation as a burden imposed by funders that diverts resources from the real work. But you need to flip the script. Planning for this evaluative work upfront and doing it well lets you demonstrate outcomes that will set you up for success in attracting more and bigger funding down the road.
- **Elevate the role of community foundations.** Our two regions benefit from strong community foundations that have deep connections with stakeholders throughout our regions and, due to Project Play, also have a deep understanding of the importance of playspace equity. Seek out the expertise of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, and the Rochester Area Community Foundation, which have impressive track records in marshaling funding for important projects.



Companies

Beyond private philanthropy, local and regional businesses and national corporations can be a terrific source of financial and in-kind support. Every company handles its philanthropic work differently, with possible connection points to all aspects of a business, including employee engagement, corporate citizenship and social responsibility, Environmental Social & Governance (ESG), marketing, and government affairs. In addition, small businesses are often community members themselves.

Interests and Needs:

- **Start with business purpose.** Although many companies fully embrace a social mission, at the end of the day, their bottom line is paramount. Companies look for philanthropic opportunities that help drive business results.
- **Make support visible.** Companies understand that their reputation is a key driver of business success and how they give back to their community matters. As a result, companies tend to be more interested than private philanthropy in how recipients publicly recognize their contributions. The more tangible the work, the easier it is to demonstrate support.
- **Find the right place.** Companies often weigh multiple factors in determining if a certain location is the right place for it to invest. For example, is there a large customer base nearby? Is it close to where employees live or work? Is it in a priority district for the government affairs team? Is it in a recognizable place that will resonate with stakeholders in other parts of the country? And, for small local businesses, do they have a special personal attachment to the location?

Approaches to Engage:

- **Go beyond philanthropic research.** Yes, it is important to understand a company's philanthropic priorities. But to secure funding for your projects, you must gain a deep understanding of a company's business. Learn about its key products, services, and markets. For example, try to connect with companies that cater to families or impact the health and wellbeing of kids. Consider the local businesses where youth and families congregate.
- **Provide value through sponsorship.** A new playspace has huge advantages when it comes to recognizing company contributions. The ribbon-cutting is a magnet for local media, and public signage provides ongoing acknowledgment of support. However, you will need to navigate some complications. If you get multiple funders to support a project, you must balance recognition across all of your supporters. Companies may have strong opinions on who should speak at the playspace opening, how their logos show up in relation to other businesses, or how many employees from each company get to volunteer. This is particularly true if your sponsors compete with each other. Local businesses may be more willing to collaborate with other funders, but you should still put in the effort to understand and navigate any possible tensions with other potential funders. Also be careful not to overdo company sponsorship signage on the playspace. There is a fine line between grateful support and tacky advertising.
- **Identify meaningful business metrics.** Just like private philanthropy, company funders take interest in knowing whether their investment had a positive impact in the community. In addition, companies may take interest in metrics that tie more directly to their business, such as foot traffic (which may be particularly important for small local retail businesses), earned media reach, or social media impressions. Track business metrics that enhance your efforts to attract additional support, and collaborate with your business partners, who likely have much larger marketing and communications budgets at their disposal, to outperform on these metrics.





Sports Leagues & Teams

Sports leagues and teams are natural allies for building new courts and fields. The more kids who play, the easier it is to build a fan base. Although major league sports teams and leagues tend to have small philanthropic budgets, they have the power to unlock much larger contributions from their sponsors, corporate partners, and existing fan base. Sports leagues and teams act as funders much in the same way that large corporations do, but with the bonus of providing a unique halo. If your local team and the heroes on its roster endorse your work, local fans are primed to follow their lead. “If Community-Effort ABC is good enough for my favorite team, then Community-Effort ABC is good enough for me.”

Interests and Needs:

- **Build the fan base.** Teams rely on an engaged fan base to fill seats at stadiums and arenas, watch games from their couch, and buy merchandise. Fans want their team to win, but they also want to know that the team and its players support their community. Use that equation to your advantage in how you present your opportunity to the teams.
- **Get involved on a tight schedule.** Teams are eager to get their management and players out into the community, but their schedules are packed most of the year. Players are fully booked from preseason through postseason.
- **Make it bigger than sports.** Many athletes grew up in overlooked communities, and more and more are taking a public stand on issues of inequity. Sure, they want kids to have the opportunity to play like they did. And they also want to help strengthen communities more broadly and eliminate the disparities that they experienced as kids.

Approaches to Engage:

- **Elevate each sport in multi-sport spaces.** The good news is that many teams and leagues have rallied around the broad goal of getting kids active and have embraced multi-sport efforts, including many of the major teams in SEMI and WNY. At the same time, it is important to make sure that your playspaces allow for each team’s sport to be played. Imagine a court that has beautiful new basketball hoops and also comes with high-quality goals, nets, and fences to encourage kids to play street hockey, futsal, volleyball, or even wiffle ball.



Building Multi-Sport Playspaces



Stephen and Ayesha Curry's Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation

Stephen and Ayesha Curry's foundation is focused on ensuring all Oakland elementary and middle school students have access to excellent places and equitable opportunities to play. The foundation is leading efforts with the Oakland Unified School District, KABOOM!, and other partners to transform 25 elementary schoolyards into state-of-the-art multi-sport playspaces.

The new schoolyards include multi-sport courts, mini soccer pitches, play structures designed by kids, community gardens, outdoors classrooms, reading areas, murals, and more.



Detroit Pistons

The NBA team, in partnership with The City of Detroit, invested \$2.5 million to refurbish 60 basketball courts in 44 parks throughout the city from 2017–2023. The refurbished courts are used for basketball as well as other sports.

The Pistons also support programming through the Pistons Neighbors Program in partnership with the City of Detroit and funders such as RCWJRF and the William Davidson Foundation. Summer activities in city parks include basketball, futsal, tennis, dance, yoga, art, and other options.



Lilly Endowment Investment in Indianapolis Parks

In late 2022, the Lilly Endowment granted \$80 million towards improvements across 42 parks in the Indianapolis Parks system. Parks were prioritized for investment based on community input, an equity analysis, and likely impact. Projects include several multi-sport courts and fields as well as new playgrounds, splash pads, walking trails, gardens, and park amenities such as restrooms and shelters.



National Hockey League (NHL) Street Hockey

In 2023, the NHL launched a new youth street hockey league in partnership with Tim Hortons that is quickly expanding to cities across the United States and Canada. The goal is to offer neighborhood-based street hockey leagues for kids aged 6–16. The gameplay and equipment are designed to be flexible and can be played on many surfaces. Beyond indoor and outdoor arenas, teams play on tennis courts, parking lots, basketball courts, and other non-traditional places.



The Colorado Health Foundation

The Colorado Health Foundation has invested over \$5 million with KABOOM! and communities across their state — including rural communities in the Otero and Rio Grande counties — to give kids access to great new outdoor places to play. The initiative is guided by a [playspace equity assessment](#) that prioritized 35 communities that have worked with KABOOM! to involve kids and community volunteers in the design, planning, and construction of custom playgrounds, multi-sport courts, and adventure courses.

- **Make it personal.** For good reason, athletes are hometown heroes. Create meaningful opportunities for current and former professional athletes to use their platforms to drive attention and resources to the places they call home. This goes for the local team's players and also for professional athletes who grew up in SEMI or WNY but now play somewhere else.
- **Make it easy for stars to shine.** Given their busy schedules, professional athletes need quick and easy ways to engage with the community. Align your design, construction, and activation schedule with moments when athletes can be available and make the most of their limited time.
- **Be an asset for team partnerships.** Because teams tend not to have big philanthropic budgets and rely heavily on corporate sponsorships for their business, provide turnkey opportunities for local teams to collaborate with their corporate partners in supporting your courts and fields work. Consider ways to engage professional athletes alongside corporate partner employees as volunteers. Enable the local teams to offer a standard set of philanthropic sponsorship benefits to their corporate partners on your behalf. Encourage the sports leagues, which often defer to the teams on philanthropic matters, to lift up these partnerships as examples for teams in other parts of the country to learn from and follow. Consider creative ways to obtain and monetize gifts of team-branded products that can be sold or auctioned to fans. In addition to direct monetary contributions, these opportunities for significant in-kind contributions of brand, time, and product from sports leagues, teams, and athletes can be invaluable.



Government

Federal, state, and local government plays an important role when it comes to courts and fields. Local government is where the rubber meets the road. Municipal parks agencies, public schools, and public and affordable housing systems are tasked with providing the lion's share of free, publicly accessible playspaces. Government at all levels is also the primary source of funding for courts and fields, in the form of either dedicated capital funding for parks or through grant programs that support related initiatives from economic development to environmental resilience.

Interests and Needs:

- **Balance stakeholder interests.** Government, by definition, is supposed to represent the aggregate interests of all constituents. Finding common ground in today's fractured society is exceedingly difficult. Leveraging the fact that playspace development is an issue that appeals to a broad base is critical.
- **Avoid unnecessary risks.** Philanthropy and government are complementary. Aside from a foundation's need to comply with tax law and state nonprofit regulations, most are typically accountable only to a Board of Directors, so they have the flexibility to fund experimental efforts that can yield outsized returns. On the other hand, government is accountable to the broader public and is, by its nature, more risk-averse and better suited to funding that helps scale solutions that have a proven track record.
- **Provide leadership on pressing priorities.** Although subject to political whims, government plays a key role in driving action on big, urgent challenges. If the political stars align, new large-scale funding streams can emerge to meet these challenges.

Approaches to Engage:

- **Learn the lay of the land.** It is important to involve local government decision-makers in your work from the beginning and to map out state and federal funding opportunities available to you in different phases of your initiatives. Whether coming from your state's department of natural resources or the U.S. Department of the Interior, longstanding grant programs support park development. Explore all of those, and then go beyond the usual suspects to learn about funding streams for community economic development, neighborhood revitalization, and environmental resilience that can reasonably be used for courts and fields.
- **Prime the pump.** Navigating the complex web of government funding opportunities requires time, expertise, and strong relationships with policymakers, government program administrators, and executive branch leadership. Start early to build their familiarity with your work and to identify the best future opportunities for government funding. Emphasize how many constituents support investment in courts and fields, which can result in outcomes tied to pressing government priorities, such as economic development, health, and the environment.
- **Jump on opportunities.** Many government programs stay fairly consistent from year to year, while others are fast-moving and may evaporate if you don't tap into them now. For example, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 provided states and municipalities with a large influx of flexible resources to spend on pandemic response and recovery. Many communities across the country now use these funds to build new park facilities, but all ARPA funds must be obligated by the end of 2024 and spent by 2026. If your community still has ARPA dollars available, you should urgently explore whether they can fund your courts and fields work.

All Hands On Deck

The list above is not intended to be exhaustive. Depending on your local community, other stakeholder types might pertain to the work, such as court and field equipment providers and installers who may offer reduced costs, developers who may value new courts and fields in their own planning and building, and national nonprofits that may provide expertise in youth development, court and field activation programs, and evaluation.

Even allowing for certain unique local circumstances, taking the above steps will lead to the funding that helps you through the demonstration project phase as you accelerate your overall march to playspace equity.

Step 3 — Expansion

Once you've successfully reached your demonstration project goals, you are ready to expand your work. The goal is to achieve the scale needed to address the gaps across your county at the scale they exist. A smaller, more rural county may need fewer courts or fields in absolute terms than a large suburban or urban county, but it is still important to see any demonstration project as a step toward playspace equity for your entire county.

For the demonstration project phase, you will rely primarily on catalytic philanthropic funding combined with company and sports partnerships. Leveraging those partnerships and the outcomes you've achieved from any demonstration project can make the case to government to scale your work. As needed, meet government matching fund requirements by seeking continued support from the private funders you engaged through each demonstration project.

Relevant government funding can take many forms, flow through a variety of levels and agencies, and address a mix of issues.

Starter List of Government Funding Sources

Source	Examples
Federal (ongoing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Interior: Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership — \$192 million for park development • Department of Housing and Urban Development: Community Development Block Grants — \$3.3 billion for community economic development • Congressional Earmarks — \$15.3 billion appropriated for fiscal year 2023 can be used for local projects including parks • United States Department of Agriculture support for rural recreation spaces, including Rural Economic Development Loans and Grants • Various health, education, disaster, defense initiatives, Brownfield grants, etc. • Other tax credits, opportunity zones
Federal (one-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hundreds of billions of dollars from recovery, climate, and infrastructure investments, including ARPA, Inflation Reduction Act, and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law which include programs that can fund parks, but have fast-approaching deadlines for securing and/or obligating these funds
State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public works, parks, and economic development funding • Environmental (e.g., Clean Water State Revolving Funds; Michigan Department of Natural Resources) • New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation opportunities such as the Consolidated • Funding Application (CFA) process
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bond referenda • Municipal and Parks and Recreation capital budgets

In addition to locally controlled block grants, competitive grant programs, targeted grant allocations for urban or rural communities, and directed legislative appropriations like earmarks, you can advocate for new or expanded funding programs to enable the building, maintenance, and long-term sustainability of more courts and/or fields in your county.

Step 4 — Sustainability

You are investing a lot in new courts and fields, so make sure you can maintain them over time.

The details matter. Take steps upfront to minimize maintenance costs.

Minimizing Maintenance Costs

- **Generate collaborative funding.** More funders at the table increases the likelihood that someone will pick up the tab for maintenance.
- **Set aside funding for maintenance upfront.**
- **Continue to cultivate community leadership.** If the community feels ownership of, and belonging in, the playspace, then the community will more likely take care of the playspace.
- **Use quality products and installation.** Higher quality reduces maintenance needs.
- **Seek upfront maintenance plans from manufacturers and installers.**
- **Don't relegate maintenance to a small department with an even smaller budget.** Maintenance is everyone's responsibility. The best approaches often involve multiple municipal agencies, including the parks department, public works and waste management, public safety, and youth engagement.

Spotlight

A Whole-of-Government Approach to Maintenance

Collaboration from the outset of the project with those who will be responsible for ongoing maintenance strengthens engagement for the longterm.

The planning process for the 10,000 square foot **JTNY Power House Skatepark in Jamestown, NY** included community members, national experts, and local city officials. Maintenance for the skatepark falls under the Jamestown Public Works and Parks department, and representatives were involved in project planning decisions such as the choice of durable materials that could withstand cold weather. This early engagement led to a seamless transfer from project planning to ongoing maintenance with the park's opening in 2022.

Lastly, it is time to think about your legacy. Bring your key stakeholders together to ensure that playspace equity remains a priority for your community for generations to come.

Local Gameplan Checklist

Step 1 — Understanding Need

- ☐ Use this report as a conversation starter in your community
- ☐ Collect input from youth, families, and the broader community
- ☐ Map out key partners in your community
- ☐ Collect current data on the location and quality of existing courts and/or fields in your community
- ☐ Conduct an equity analysis to understand gaps in access to courts and/or fields, including applying the KABOOM! PIPI tool
- ☐ Select the best location for one or more demonstration projects

Step 2 — Building Momentum

- ☐ Rally youth, other community members, and community-based organizations, on their terms, to participate in the demonstration project phase
- ☐ Secure catalytic funding by understanding the specific interests of philanthropists, local businesses, regional and national companies, sports leagues and teams, and government
- ☐ Build one or more demonstration projects
- ☐ Document each proof point you create through a demonstration project

Step 3 — Expansion

- ☐ Use the outcomes you've achieved during the demonstration project phase to make the case for addressing the need for courts and fields at the scale the need exists across your community
- ☐ Identify and advocate for government funding to replicate work done during the demonstration project phase
- ☐ Identify and secure matching funds from philanthropic sources

Local Gameplan Checklist Continued

Step 4 — Sustainability

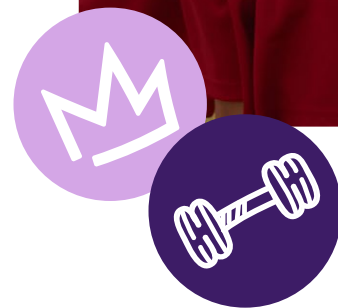
- ☐ Focus on the quality of products and installation to minimize long-term maintenance costs
- ☐ Seek upfront maintenance plans from installers
- ☐ Determine the cost for long-term maintenance
- ☐ Include the cost of long-term maintenance in your fundraising goals and plans upfront
- ☐ Identify and secure funding for long-term maintenance, focusing on collaborative funding from multiple sources
- ☐ Make maintenance everyone's responsibility
- ☐ Continue to cultivate active youth and community engagement, including organizing clean-up days
- ☐ Adopt a whole-of-government approach to maintenance that doesn't relegate maintenance to a single small department with an even smaller budget
- ☐ Share lessons learned along the way and celebrate progress

2D Keeping Score: Measuring Outcomes Today and Tomorrow

Before we dive into the work, we must envision what success looks like. That means we also must know how to measure success at each key juncture of this journey.

We begin with the end in mind, measuring against our goals from the start. Thorough and accurate assessment of progress — necessary for recruiting organizational allies, persuading the public, and getting checks signed — relies on thorough and accurate baseline assessments.

Determine what all stakeholders will need to see in order to get on board and stay on board. Then devise and agree on the right metrics and start measuring on day zero. Some of those metrics are baked into the recommendations contained in this Playbook, such as tallying the existing courts and fields and applying the PIPI analysis to identify gaps.



Addressing Gaps in Access to Courts and Fields

Infrastructure Metrics

Good	Number of courts and fields built and improved
Better	Before and after snapshots of access gaps by race and income
Best	Before and after census tract-level PIPI analyses

Other metrics may require consensus building and creativity to identify and gather. Measuring the effects of infrastructure investment has its complications. It differs from measuring the impact of a program that provides direct service to specific individuals, like an afterschool or job-training program, because public infrastructure is intended to benefit everyone in a community, not a select few individuals that you can track.

Ultimately, building the new courts and fields does not alone constitute success. In addition to measuring changes in infrastructure access itself, you also need to agree on and measure a wide range of child- and community-focused outcomes.

Wide-Ranging Outcomes from Courts and Fields

Examples of Child Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
Physical	Increase in physical activity	Reduction in child obesity rates
Social/Emotional	Increase in interaction with friends	Reduction in behavioral challenges
Cognitive/Creative	Increase in problem-solving activity	Improvement in comprehension and motivation

Examples of Community Measures	Outputs	Outcomes
Youth Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in youth sports • Increase in sports sampling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in equitable youth sports participation rates
Economic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in retail foot traffic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in small business activity
Social Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in interaction with community members from different demographics • Increase in positive outlook for community's future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in community pride • Increase in social cohesion • Increase in confidence in government
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in perceived neighborhood safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in neighborhood safety
Environmental²²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in natural surfacing • Increase in usage of alternative modes of transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in heat islands • Improvement in air quality • Improvement in storm water management

These measures will enable you to say to savvy government leaders, funders, and community members, “our children are healthier and happier, and our community is stronger” thanks to investment in courts and fields.

Make sure you are measuring the things that are most important to your community. In addition, where possible, align your metrics with standard measures in the field or measures that are particularly important to your key collaborators.

Along with convincing allies, the public, philanthropists, and the government to continue and increase their support for these efforts, measurement is an important learning tool for your collaborators and the broader fields of physical and mental health, economic development, and positive environmental impact. Robust data collection and analysis fuels your ability to make midcourse corrections that improve residents’ lives and keep your playspace equity work viable and sustainable. Disciplined measurement provides you with data-informed answers to hard questions that you will face during periods of political and economic change and challenge.

We who advocate for playspace equity are in the fortunate position of championing a cause to which virtually everyone can relate and support. But to solve the problem of inequitable access to courts and fields at the scale it exists, we need hearts and minds. Measurable results win the day.

²² Heat, air quality, and water sensors are now readily available and relatively affordable. Tracking environmental measures may require engagement with other partners such as city planning and public works agencies, nonprofits focused on environmental impacts, or environmental consulting firms.

Get in the Game:
*A Call to Action for
Stakeholders*

Section

03



Our goal was to light a path toward playspace equity, greater health and happiness for the more than 1.5 million youth in Western New York and Southeast Michigan, and stronger communities throughout the regions. We hope this Playbook is useful to you as you rally your community to ensure every kid has access to quality court and fields.

The challenge is big, but solvable. And it is a collective responsibility to solve it. It will take collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, and perseverance — all things that we learned on the playground. When the work gets hard, tap into your inner child and remember why this work is so important for the children of Western New York and Southeast Michigan.

We are optimistic that your passion for giving kids the places and opportunities to play will motivate others in your community to get in the game. You will bring out the best in your regions and make Western New York and Southeast Michigan shining examples that communities around the country will be eager to follow.

We also hope this Playbook is a valuable resource for communities across the United States who are motivated to end inequity in access to courts, fields, and other playspaces in your towns, cities, and regions.

Our kids are waiting for us. It's time to play!





7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 400
Bethesda, MD 20814
(202) 659-0215