



KABOOM! CASE STUDY

Ending Playspace Inequity in Baltimore

Dear Readers



Baltimore is a city that shows what it means to lead with a deep commitment to its children.

Over the last few years, Baltimore has taken intentionally bold and coordinated action to address a challenge that plagues far too many communities. Baltimore decided to address its lack of safe, high-quality places for kids to play. Baltimore's progress has been remarkable. The city has secured funding for more than 60 school and park playgrounds, which were identified as needing replacement. Along the way, local leaders have transformed the way an entire city prioritizes investments in play.

Working in deep partnership with various city agencies and community stakeholders, we've connected data to action; we've aligned capital investments across systems; and we've proven that when schools, parks, city leadership, philanthropy, and residents work together, real change is possible. Leaders in Baltimore brought KABOOM! to the table to support existing ways of working and to support what matters most to residents — ensuring that children are equipped to grow up healthy and happy.

The progress Baltimore has made to address playspace inequity is a direct result of extraordinary leadership across the city. Dr. Reginald Moore and the team at Baltimore City Recreation & Parks are redefining what equitable investment looks like. Dr. Sonja Santelises and the leaders at Baltimore City Public Schools are connecting play to student wellness, learning, and joy. Dr. Frank Lance and the team at Parks & People are

ensuring that every step of this work is grounded in community voice, trust, and stewardship.

All this progress would not have been possible without the leadership and vision of Mayor Brandon Scott. The shifts he's making in Baltimore to prioritize safety as a public health issue are making the city a better place for kids and families to live and enjoy, reporting some of the lowest homicide rates since the 1970s. Mayor Scott's administration has made parks and recreation a visible public priority. As a national partner and expert in playspace equity, KABOOM! worked hand-in-hand along the way to support the vision and priorities of local stakeholders.

What's happening in Baltimore is more than a local success story. It's a model for cities across the country.

It shows how we can break the cycle of disinvestment, build systems that prioritize equity, and sustain this work well into the future.

This case study captures the lessons, challenges, and breakthroughs to be learned from Baltimore's journey. Every child deserves a safe, joyful place to play. We hope this resource supports other cities working to make this vision real.

With gratitude,



Lysa Ratliff
KABOOM! CEO

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01

Understanding the Need: The State of Playgrounds in Baltimore

Play is a developmental necessity that sparks social, emotional, and physical growth. Beyond encouraging physical activity, play aids children in developing essential communication skills, resilience, and executive functions like conflict resolution. It also supports self-regulatory behaviors and coping skills to manage toxic stress. In addition, playgrounds are one of the few public spaces designed specifically for kids, creating a sense of belonging.

In many U.S. cities, disinvestment over generations has denied many children — especially Black and Brown children — access to quality spaces for public recreation. This situation often mirrors broader patterns of inequity in education and health.

In many Baltimore neighborhoods, especially those with predominantly Black and Brown residents or lower household incomes, children have historically had limited access to safe, high-quality places to play. Because local budgets are closely tied to the city's tax base, decades of discriminatory housing policies and economic segregation have led to chronic underfunding in the very communities that need investment most. As a result, many playgrounds are outdated, in poor condition, or missing altogether.

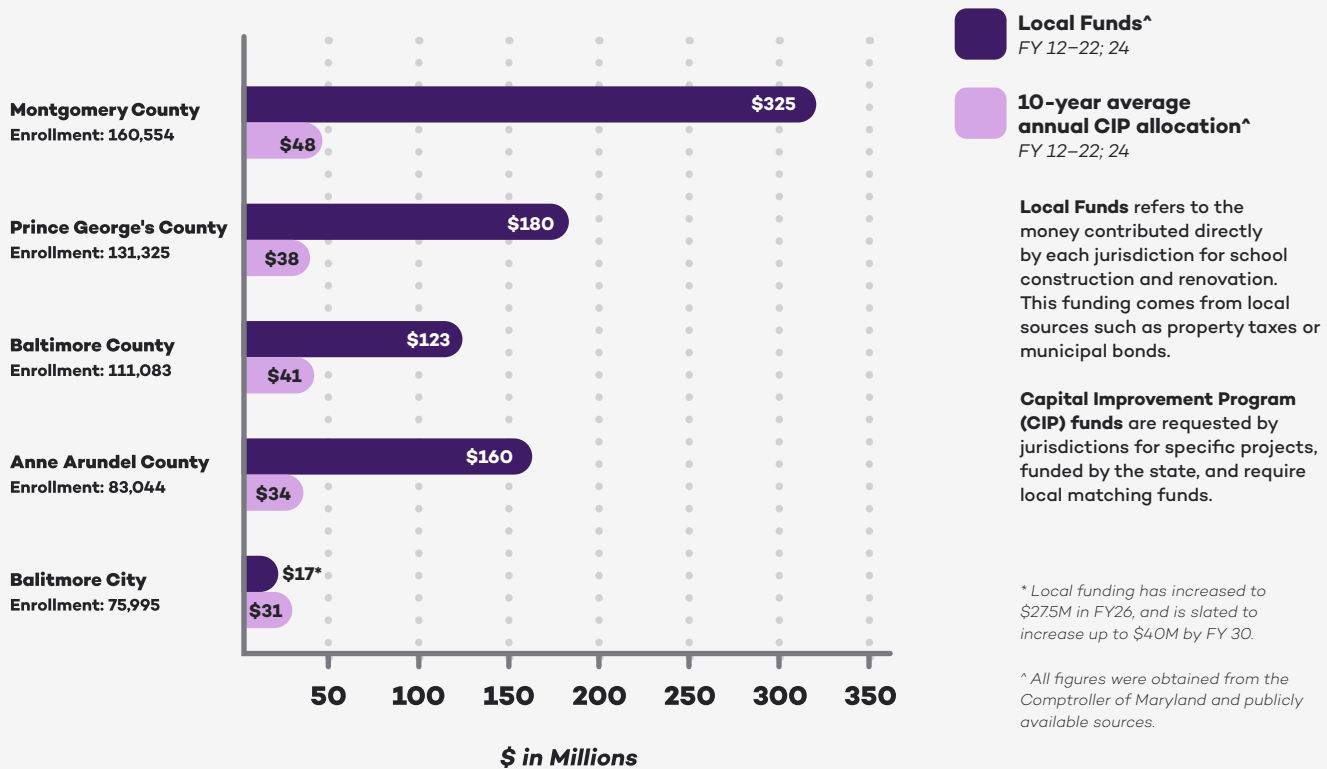
Baltimore also receives far fewer dollars for its public school facilities than neighboring jurisdictions due to the city's limited tax base and

high infrastructure needs. A large percentage of the city's land is occupied by tax-exempt institutions such as universities, hospitals, and government buildings, meaning reduced property tax revenue for funding capital projects. As a result, Baltimore struggles to generate the local match required to fully access state school construction funds, unlike wealthier jurisdictions that can more easily contribute their share.

Photo of the Leith Walk Elementary/Middle School playground before it was replaced through the partnership between KABOOM! and Baltimore City Public Schools in May 2025.



Funding Allocations in Baltimore City Schools and Surrounding Jurisdictions



Compounding this challenge, the city's school buildings are older and often need emergency repairs for things like HVAC, roofs, and plumbing. These tradeoffs mean that there is little left in the budget for investments in outdoor play or green spaces — elements that are still important for student health and wholeness.

The resulting backlog means that Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) estimates that the current maintenance and capital budget is roughly \$375M less than what is needed to upgrade and maintain district buildings to industry standards.

Towns and cities across America face similar realities. These conditions have

real consequences for the health of families. More broadly, Baltimore has a long history of racial segregation, white flight, and disinvestment that has resulted in sharp disparities in access to parks and greenspace. This is particularly the case on the west and east sides of the city, which have the highest population of Black residents and the highest rates of poverty. As a result, playspaces are one area where children in Baltimore are missing out.

To better understand the gaps, KABOOM!, City Schools, and Baltimore City Recreation & Parks (Rec & Parks) conducted a comprehensive playground assessment that identified 97 locations for playground replacement,

building on previous assessments. Taken together, the two systems are responsible for 267 public playgrounds in Baltimore across parks and elementary schools.

This assessment used a model focused on the physical attributes of the playspaces and surrounding areas, and evaluated and rated the condition of various playground components. The playgrounds identified for replacement were of poor quality and located in neighborhoods that are traditionally overlooked for infrastructure improvements. Recognizing this history, City Schools and local leaders in Baltimore prioritize major investments in the most disinvested communities, further leveraging philanthropic partnerships to expand that reach.

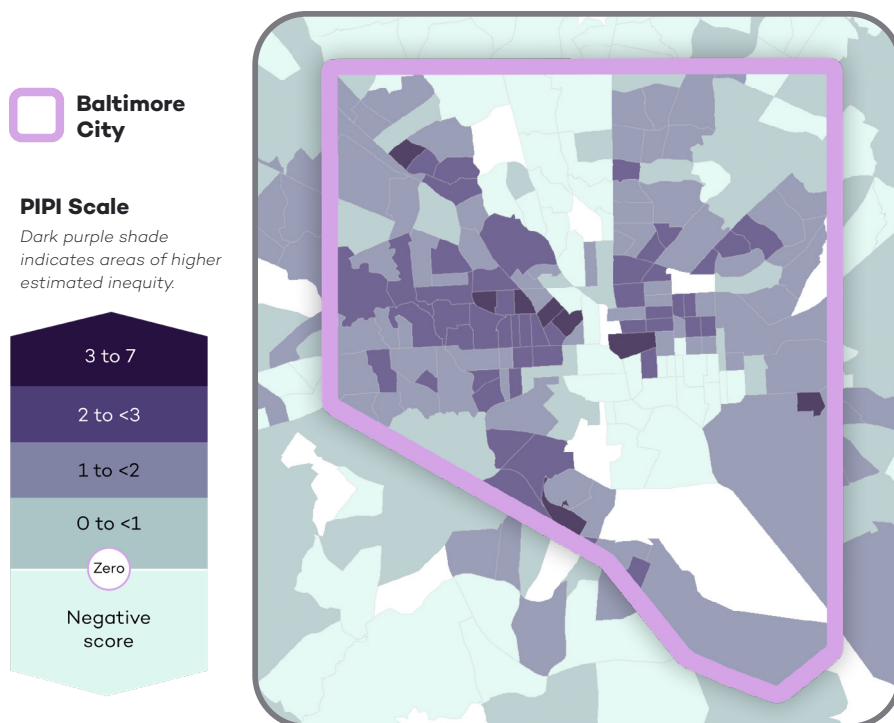
In addition to the on-the-ground surveys (quality data), the partners are leveraging the Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI), a geospatial tool created by KABOOM! that helps estimate where playspace inequity is most likely occurring. This data is used to better inform investment, maintenance, and programming decisions. Figure 1 shows the PIPI scores for every census tract in Baltimore, with darker shades reflecting more inequity and lighter shades less inequity.

PIPI incorporates 21 data elements, like income, park access, and life expectancy, to create a single numerical score that can be used to estimate playspace inequity. With PIPI, data users can identify the census tracts experiencing the

greatest estimated playspace inequity in any given geography, including the entire United States. Today, Baltimore is still largely segregated between the inner harbor and directly north compared to the majority black neighborhoods in East and West Baltimore, which largely overlaps with the darker purple regions with higher PIPI scores illustrated in Figure 1.

Using PIPI together with detailed local assessment data, partners can align on where the greatest need is across systems in Baltimore and how to most equitably allocate resources.

Figure 1. Map of Baltimore Census Tracts with Playspace Inequity Prioritization Index (PIPI) Score



What Makes a High Quality Playspace?

Not all playgrounds are created equal. When evaluating the condition of a playspace, communities and planners look at several key factors to understand whether it's safe, welcoming, and ready for kids to use. Here are some examples of factors that partners in Baltimore have used to prioritize spaces for maintenance and replacement:



Functionality

Is the playspace usable for its intended purpose? Are the structures in working order and accessible to kids of different ages and abilities?



Safety

Are there any hazards like broken equipment, loose surfacing, or poor visibility that could pose a risk to children or caregivers?



Wear and Tear

Has the equipment aged beyond its intended lifespan? Are there signs of heavy use, weather damage, or vandalism?



Maintenance Needs

Does the site require basic upkeep, targeted repairs, or full-scale replacement? This includes not only the play structures, but also the safety surfacing, fencing, shade structures, and the condition of the surrounding grounds.



Play Value

Does the playspace invite creativity, movement, and social interaction? Are there a variety of elements that support different types of play, such as climbing, pretend play, or sensory exploration?

By looking at these factors together, decision-makers can better understand not just whether a playground exists, but whether it's truly serving the needs of the community.



“Playspace inequity is symptomatic of the experience of the vast majority of our students who come from low-income families.”

Dr. Sonja Santelises
CEO of Baltimore City Schools

Building Momentum

Coming Together on a Shared Vision

Starting in 2015 and accelerating in the following years, city agencies, community leaders, local nonprofits, residents, and KABOOM! worked together to test out new public-private collaborations to address playspace inequity in Baltimore. This work started with over 30 playgrounds built or renovated with catalytic funding from local supporters like the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Baltimore Ravens, and the Baltimore Children and Youth Fund, as well as national partners like The CarMax Foundation and United Healthcare Services.

Despite this progress, the need for quality playspaces remained evident. Requests from teachers, caregivers, and community leaders underscored the demand for playgrounds, which only increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a deep desire to address inequity at the increasing scale it exists in Baltimore, several funding strategies were put in motion to address the urgent needs of kids.

Increased City Investment

For many cities, the value of parks and recreational infrastructure was a key lesson of the COVID-19

pandemic. Residents relied on these spaces for physical activity, mental wellness, and social connection. To keep up momentum, partners used COVID-19 era support funding. Rec & Parks used American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, and City Schools secured Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, both of which represented rare opportunities to make large-scale, community-based investments in infrastructure that supports youth and families.

Playgrounds, in particular, are well-suited to public funding opportunities. They are relatively quick to build, highly visible in neighborhoods, and aligned with federal goals related to health, equity, and education recovery.

One of Baltimore's strategies was to leverage this unique opportunity to direct funding to address decades of recreational disinvestment. In 2022, Mayor Scott announced a \$5 million public investment to build 25 playspaces using Local Parks & Playground Infrastructure (LPPI) and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding as part of his "Rec Rollout" campaign to address historic recreational disinvestment in Baltimore.

Together, these investments reflect a citywide commitment, not just to creating new places to play, but to building opportunity in neighborhoods that have long been overlooked. They

also position Baltimore as a national leader in showing how targeted, equitable investments in recreation infrastructure can close long-standing gaps and support the health and development of the next generation. Rec & Parks was able to deliver on this promise by renovating 26 playgrounds, close to a \$10M investment, most of which were in high need areas. During this initiative, Rec & Parks made additional investments to rejuvenate and modernize six public pools and seven community recreation centers. In 2024, City Schools invested \$5.5 million to build and renovate over 25 playspaces, in addition to leveraging other public funding streams.



“Achieving playspace equity across Baltimore will send the message that we believe in our youth and know they’re capable of the brightest possible future.”

Brandon Scott
Mayor of Baltimore

Expanding the Work

The 25 in 5 Initiative to End Playspace Inequity

In 2022, KABOOM! launched the 25 in 5 Initiative to End Playspace Inequity and under the leadership of Mayor Scott, Dr. Sonja Santelises (CEO of City Schools), and Dr. Reginald Moore (Director of Rec & Parks), Baltimore became the first partner announced as part of this new initiative.

The goal of the initiative is to establish partnerships with different municipal systems across the country to achieve equitable access to quality playspaces, ensuring that every child can experience the critical developmental benefits of having quality places to play. The initiative focuses on helping cities address playspace inequity by aligning public

and philanthropic investment, data tools, and multi-agency collaboration. Rather than approaching playground development one project at a time, the 25 in 5 Initiative supports cities in creating long-term strategies that close the equity gap across systems, ensuring that playspaces are prioritized where the need is most acute.

It was only through KABOOM!'s substantial partnership with City Schools that we were able to welcome other partners to the table to figure out how to solve playspace inequity in schools and across Baltimore more broadly.

A key focus of the 25 in 5 Initiative in Baltimore, and nationwide, is to continue to build partnerships with communities, nonprofits, funders, and other organizations that provide a network of playspaces where kids

"We can't do this work alone. When you have partners that have common goals, it makes a lot of sense to work together."

Dr. Reginald Moore

Director of Baltimore City Recreation & Parks

Photo taken during the Second Gentleman's participation at a KABOOM! event in Baltimore.





Children provide feedback and input on a new playspace at Gilmor Elementary School.

live and learn, and promote health and well-being through the creation and transformation of playspaces in communities hardest hit by chronic disinvestment.

Since the launch of the partnership, Baltimore has made significant strides toward ending playspace inequity. These efforts have been backed by more than \$12 million in combined public and private investment, signaling strong and sustained commitment from city agencies, philanthropic partners, and local communities.

Prioritizing Community Voice and Policy Change

Community members are the experts in defining their needs and guiding the design of playspaces. By involving residents throughout the process — from playground design and planning to maintenance — the partnership

helps foster a sense of ownership and pride in these spaces, ensuring they are used, maintained, and cherished by the community for years to come.

Community mobilization has been a key thread running through our shared efforts from the very beginning even before the 25 in 5 Initiative. The multi-sector partnership “Play More, B'More” brought together KABOOM!, Family League of Baltimore, and Baltimore Corps in 2016 to build playspaces across the city with a focus on creating professional development opportunities for Baltimore youth. Through “Play More, B'More,” we built or renovated 30 playspaces, mobilized 2,200 volunteers, and activated a paid internship and job training program.

Continuing through the 25 in 5 Initiative the importance of prioritizing community input, partners hosted a listening session on physical activity and mental health featuring Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, and Baltimore City Schools CEO Dr. Sonja Santelises

for a listening session with families to hear from residents about their needs for outdoor recreation and to discuss the overall importance of play for kids' mental health.

The partnership has also contributed to lasting policy change, including the passage of HB.1147, a statewide law banning the use of toxic PFAS chemicals in playground surfacing. This milestone law ensures safer and healthier environments for children across Maryland. The Baltimore City legislative delegation has supported these efforts by contributing Legislative Bond Initiative (LBI) funding to this effort as well. KABOOM! alone has received over \$1M in funding for Baltimore playgrounds through LBI's since the start of our formal initiative.



“The number one lesson that we’ve learned is that the community’s voice must be the strongest, it must be the loudest, it must be heard, it must be incorporated into the work.”

Dr. Franklin Lance

President and CEO of Parks and People

Sustaining a Path Forward

Ending playspace inequity isn't just about building playgrounds. It's about building infrastructure, partnerships, and governance models that can outlast a single investment. The true work lies with taking on the long-standing cycles of disinvestment that have left many neighborhoods with aging, unsafe, or missing playspaces. It means planning ahead for the maintenance and care of public spaces, with thoughtful design choices that reduce long-term burdens and clear strategies to secure and allocate resources equitably. And it means ensuring that playspace equity remains a city priority well into the future.

To do this, Baltimore's partners are aligning not just around capital projects, but around sustainable systems change. As the city surpasses major milestones in its journey to end playspace inequity across the city, the groundwork is being laid for even greater strides to ensure every child grows up with access to safe, joyful places to play, now and for generations to come.

"Public-private partnerships work when you have trusted partners at the table. You can move a municipality forward in ways you otherwise can't."

Dr. Franklin Lance
President and CEO of
Parks & People

Long-term Maintenance and Planning

Rec & Parks is exploring innovative approaches to playground maintenance, including opportunities for public-private partnerships and workforce development.

City Schools now employs two Certified Playground Safety Inspectors (CPSI) within their facilities team, tasked with managing all district playspaces. They are also conducting an analysis of playground maintenance to improve warranty tracking and forecast annual costs for maintenance, repairs, and replacements. Rec & Parks is also currently in the process of finalizing a Comprehensive Master Plan, which will set citywide priorities for park and playground improvements as well as overall recreational initiatives. Rec & Parks also employs several CPSI on staff to ensure playspaces comply with national safety standards and guide maintenance and improvement plans to reduce the risk of injury.

Greener, Cooler Playgrounds

As cities like Baltimore face rising temperatures and longer summers, the design of outdoor spaces like playgrounds must take climate resilience and environmental equity

into account. This means reducing the heat island effect by replacing asphalt with cooler surfaces, planting trees for shade, and using natural materials, where possible, to make play safe and enjoyable for more of the year.

This work is expanding through the city's participation in the Nature Everywhere Communities program, which supports cities in embedding nature-based solutions into public spaces. As part of this effort, Rec & Parks and City Schools are each developing pilot Nature Exploration Areas (NEAs) that support nature play and learning. City Schools is exploring how NEAs can serve a dual purpose: replacing outdated or missing tot lots while creating nature-rich early learning spaces that benefit children of all ages.

In addition, KABOOM!, Parks & People, and Rec & Parks were recently awarded a Thriving Communities grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which will support this work at the intersection of environmental justice, community resilience, and child well-being.

We are also collaborating with City Schools to align our playspace projects with the district's environmental sustainability goals as stated in their Sustainability Plan. This includes adding shaded seating near playspaces, creating outdoor classroom spaces, and providing training to faculty and staff, all with the goal of getting kids outside more frequently.



“We can’t do this work alone. When you have partners that have common goals, it makes a lot of sense to work together.”

Dr. Reginald Moore
Director of Baltimore City
Recreation & Parks

A Model for National Change

Baltimore's progress shows what is possible when a community unites around a shared goal of playspace equity. This approach treats playspaces not just as amenities, but as essential infrastructure that is critical to public health, education, climate resilience, and neighborhood belonging.

In a moment when cities across the country are reckoning with historic inequities, aging infrastructure, and myriad challenges related to budget, Baltimore is showing what it looks like to invest differently and build with intention. The 25 in 5 Initiative

is an inspiring model, calling on other cities to take similar steps in closing the play equity gap and providing all children with access to safe, nurturing playspaces.

This work is far from finished. But Baltimore's experience offers a clear and hopeful path forward. When public agencies, nonprofits, and residents come together around a bold, shared vision — and when that vision is backed by investment and trust — cities can close equity gaps, reinvigorate public space, and create places where every child has the chance to thrive.



Photo courtesy of Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks

