



KABOOM!'s Submitted Testimony on Behalf of Lysa Ratliff, CEO to the New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Agriculture & Markets/Parks & Recreation January 27, 2026

I would like to thank Senate Finance Chair Liz Krueger, Assembly Ways and Means Chair Gary Pretlow, Senate Finance Ranking Member Tom O'Mara, Assembly Ways and Means Ranking Member Edward Ra, Senator Jose Serrano, Chair of the Senate Committee on Cultural Affairs, Tourism, Parks & Recreation, and Assemblymember Ron Kim, Chair of the Assembly Committee on Tourism, Parks, Arts and Sports Development for providing me this opportunity to present testimony before this committee on the critical need for sustained investment in children's outdoor recreational infrastructure.

My name is Lysa Ratliff and I am the CEO of KABOOM!, the leading nonprofit in the United States dedicated to ending playspace inequity by building playgrounds in communities across the country wherever there is need. In 2025, we built 70 playspaces across the nation and in 2026 we are celebrating our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Last year, Governor Hochul announced a historic investment of \$50 million in playgrounds, recreation centers, and other kid-focused recreational spaces as part of her Unplug and Play initiative. The State Legislature, recognizing the importance of this type of investment, increased the amount allocated so as to broaden the scope and accelerate the impact of this program designed to mitigate the negative effect excessive screen time is having on our children's mental health. I would like to thank the Governor and the Legislature for that investment and encourage them to maintain their commitment to improving youth mental health through play and physical activity by maintaining these critically needed funds.

Since my testimony last year, KABOOM! has continued to work to provide children from every community, income level, and demographic background easy access to a safe, engaging, and high-quality playspace. These efforts have included the launch of a new partnership with the City of Rochester, the completion of a multi-year playground redesign and construction project in Buffalo with the Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy, a new playground in Long Island built in conjunction with the Islanders hockey team, and meetings with NYCHA on how to improve access to better playspaces for its residents.

While we are proud of these accomplishments, New York State's youth mental health crisis has unfortunately worsened due in large part to the federal government's withdrawal of critical funds to schools, families, community centers, and municipalities which supported children's healthy development in a holistic and inclusive manner. This is not a matter of opinion but of fact and the numbers speak for themselves. A report from the New York City Comptroller's office last month found that close to 40% of surveyed students reported feeling "persistent sadness or hopelessness." Additionally, access to mental health services is becoming more difficult, with 70% of New York City Public Schools failing to meet national standards for social work staffing and the average wait time to make an appointment for a child



with a mental health professional in New York City rising to 50-days and up to 4 weeks in other parts of the state. The federal government's H.R. 1, passed last summer will also strip approximately one and a half million New Yorkers of their health insurance, depriving more families of access to critical mental health services.

It's not enough to just get kids off of screens, we have to shift the types of behaviors they are engaging in while online and provide restorative alternatives that strengthen their mental health and mitigate the damage done by addictive activities conducted while on their mobile devices. According to the American Psychological Association, children who use online applications to help them "escape from problems" or as an alternative to engaging with their peers in healthy ways in the real world are at significantly greater risk of developing an addiction to their devices, experiencing a sense of hopelessness, or developing severe anxiety.

Not only is time spent outdoors and playing critical to reducing the amount of time children spend on their mobile devices but it can also perform a restorative act and help erase some of the negative impacts from addictive online behavior. A 2024 study in the *Journal of American College Health* found that time spent outdoors and in nature can have a restorative effect on the mental health of students who were experiencing anxiety or depression due to time spent online. Increasing access to nature and outdoor play is therefore an affordable, cost-effective, and sustainable approach to helping combat the mental health crisis our children are facing.

KABOOM!'s work directly supports Governor Hochul's 2026 State of the State goals, including the expansion of Youth Safe Spaces and the new "Schools of Distinction" designation. By maintaining this funding, we ensure that these "Safe Spaces" include high-quality, restorative outdoor environments. Our model braids public and private funds together to create the kind of outdoor spaces the research says our kids desperately need and the Governor is aiming to build. These kinds of public-private partnerships not only help reduce the cost of this critically needed infrastructure for financially struggling school districts and municipalities but they also provide residents with an opportunity to have input into the design process they normally wouldn't have, lend capacity to overstretched school districts and municipalities, and enable quicker installation than the public partner could achieve alone.

Additionally, this initiative is increasing the state's capacity to undertake more projects and expedite delivery of tangible results to its residents. By allowing mission aligned nonprofits to be eligible to receive this funding and work with school districts and municipal partners, the State is increasing capacity without incurring additional costs. We hope that New York will maintain this cost effective approach to expanding access for kids' outdoor play.

New York State's commitment to investing in playspaces and other outdoor recreational infrastructure is vital to providing today's children a better mental health outcome as adults. While KABOOM! understands there are many competing interests, an investment in our children's mental and physical health will pay dividends for years to come. Not only does this investment yield healthier adults but also more productive ones who will need less medical intervention as adults. This benefits both our civic society and our state and local bottom lines.

I hope you share my belief in the efficacy of the Unplug and Play initiative and the cost effectiveness of continuing to invest in kids' outdoor spaces. Research shows that for every \$1 invested in mental health interventions, \$4 are returned through decreased absenteeism and higher student achievement. I am confident that this relatively small amount of funding will yield the type of significant returns New Yorkers want by providing parents with an affordable, accessible, and achievable way of helping their children deal with the stress and anxiety they are confronting. Thank you for your time and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

