



KABOOM! Written Testimony for the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands On the Implementation of Title II Section of the EXPLORE Act

America's Semiquincentennial Celebration is a once lifetime opportunity to celebrate America's crown jewel, its public lands. And we applaud the subcommittee's efforts to ensure that every American has an opportunity to take full advantage of the natural beauty, wonder, and adventure that our national parks and other public lands offer. KABOOM! is a national nonprofit that provides playspaces to kids who live in communities where outdoor recreation investment has not been a priority. These include city and rural communities across the nation, as well as the gateway communities that often serve our national parks.

As a nonprofit, KABOOM! works to form public-private partnerships (P3s) that braid public and private funding together to build new outdoor infrastructure. In addition to our funding and public sector partners we also involve the community in the design and build process. At the very outset of a project, our playground design experts work with the children at the school or community center that will receive the new playspace for their input into what their future playground will look like. Later, when we build the playground, we invite the community to help with its installation by painting benches or murals, moving mulch, planting flowers, or any other task that needs to be done. In this way, our partnership model extends beyond the funding and programming partners to include the entire community that is receiving a new playspace.

While our mission is focused on playspaces, we see our work as an early step in developing American's love of the outdoors.. We believe that kids who spend more time on playgrounds are more likely to grow into teens and adults who appreciate a variety of outdoor activities, from organized sports to hiking and mountain biking. In this way, outdoor play serves as a gateway to the wider world of outdoor physical activity. This is especially true when playspaces incorporate natural design features, use recycled wood instead of plastic or aluminum for the play equipment, and encourage free form play as opposed to traditional equipment based play (e.g. slides and swings). These playspaces, referred to as Nature Exploration Areas or Living Schoolyards, provide the kind of stimulation and connection to nature that fosters a deep appreciation for the outdoors and satisfies children's need to be in nature.

All too often, playgrounds of any type are out of the reach of too many kids. For some kids, the issue is distance, for others it is because the only play equipment nearby is at a school which is not open during certain periods or weekends, but for others it is because the traditional playspace is often inaccessible to children with physical or cognitive disabilities. Nature based and free form play is better able to serve those children's needs. When kids are in nature playspaces the environment around them becomes the play elements through their imaginations. That is why any child, regardless of ability, can find a way to have fun in these types of playspaces.

Title II of the EXPLORE Act's Access America framework reflects exactly the kind of systemic, standards-based approach to accessibility that KABOOM! advocates for at the community level. By establishing a consistent framework for access across federal lands, Congress is modeling the principle we apply to every playground project: that accessibility cannot be an afterthought, but must be designed in from the start. This work is critically important to KABOOM!'s mission of educating school districts and municipal parks departments about the importance of nature-based, universally accessible playspaces. The traditional playground of only a few years ago does not meet the diverse play needs of children today. When we consider the forces competing for kids' attention, from social media to multi-player video games, ensuring that they have fun, engaging outdoor places is critical to combatting the youth mental health crisis our nation is facing. Ensuring that those spaces are accessible to everyone is equally important and ensuring that the children's ability to play across the entire spectrum of outdoor spaces is a task that requires cooperation across the entire recreation sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on the important issue of access to nature and engaging children in outdoor recreation at the earliest possible age. We welcome the opportunity to support the subcommittee's work in any capacity that would seem appropriate, both in the promotion of our public lands or the celebration of America's 250th Anniversary. If you would like to learn more about KABOOM!'s work and our model of partnership please feel free to contact our office.