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CONTACT: Alison Risso, KaBOOM!, 202-464-6076
Partner Contact

DENVER'S "LEARNING LANDSCAPES" RECOGNIZED
FOR EXCELLENCE IN GETTING
KIDS ACTIVE AND PLAYFUL

National Non-Profit KaBOOM! Compiles List of the Nation's Top Programs

In a new report, *Play Matters*, national non-profit KaBOOM! has searched the country for local initiatives that have increased the *quantity* of available play spaces and opportunities, improved the *quality* of kids playtime, and increased children's safe *access* to them. KaBOOM! is the national non-profit bringing play back into the lives of children. The *Play Matters* report was commissioned as part of the organizations Playful City USA campaign, which seeks to honor communities across the country who have made a commitment to improving the lives of their children through play. "Learning Landscapes," a program of the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver, was one of 12 programs the organization singled out as an example of great ways communities can help get their kids active and healthy.

To make the cut, each of the 12 initiatives had show proven results and represent a significant commitment to increasing play and physical activity. In addition, the program or initiative also needed to be something other communities could do themselves to increase the amount of play in their own children's lives.

University of Colorado Denver's Learning Landscapes program is an entrepreneurial public-private partnership that designs and builds comprehensive outdoor play spaces at schools across Denver. The design-and-build process provided an opportunity to work with schools to engage parents, students, businesses, and civic leaders. Through joint-use agreements, these play spaces were opened up to the community after school hours. The popularity of Learning Landscapes inspired broad public support and \$39 million in public funding, to expand the model program to every schoolyard across Denver.

There have been 48 playgrounds built across Denver, serving 18,000 students; not all created new space for play, but many of old schoolyards lacked play equipment. The

48 new playgrounds replaced or repaired dilapidated asphalt areas and outdated or unsafe play equipment with age-appropriate climbing and play structures, artwork, gathering places, shade structures, and green areas. There was virtually no grass at any of the sites before the Learning Landscapes were developed.

“A schoolyard is more than just a playground,” said Lois Brink, Executive Director of Learning Landscapes, “It is a catalyst for healthy living; it is for embracing the slow wonder of life and creative play, it is for experiencing nature in our ever urbanizing cities; it is for vegetable gardens and reuniting our youth with the joy of food – from seed to table; it is for art as an expression of children and local artists; and, lastly it is for bringing a community together and the celebration of multi-generational places.” According to Brink, the program offers an experiential learning process for students, including assisting them in becoming more physically active and civic minded, while reconnecting communities with their public schools.

Why the focus on play? A recent Institutes of Medicine report on ways to cut childhood obesity rates recommends that communities should *“build and maintain parks and playgrounds that are safe and attractive for playing, and in close proximity to residential areas”* in order to increase children’s activity levels. The IOM went on to single out some of the best practices highlighted in the ***Play Matters*** report by encouraging cities to *“collaborate with school districts and other organizations to establish joint use of facilities agreements allowing playing fields, playgrounds, and recreation centers to be used by community residents when schools are closed; if necessary, adopt regulatory and legislative policies to address liability issues that might block implementation.”*

Childhood obesity rates have nearly tripled since 1980, from 6.5% to 16.3%; more than 30% of U.S. children and youth are obese or at risk of becoming obese.ⁱ Approximately 175,000 individuals under the age of 20 have type 2 diabetes, and two million young people between the ages of 12 and 19 have pre-diabetes. Many government, scientific, and public health agencies recommend that school-age children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day.ⁱⁱ Two-thirds of our children fall far short of meeting this standard.

By spotlighting the great work of Learning Landscapes and the other selected programs, KaBOOM! hopes to show other communities different playful ways they can address their growing childhood health and educational issues.

Other initiatives honored include:

Ankeny, Iowa: Parks and Recreation Department – After failing to pass a bond measure to build a sports complex, the Parks and Recreation Department engaged citizens in the planning process, and they responded in record numbers, which gave the Parks and Recreation Department the political capital to develop even more places to play.

Baltimore, Maryland: Playworks -- Playworks sends coaches into low-income schools to facilitate play during recess and the rest of the school day. As a result of the program, schools are reporting improved classroom behavior.

Boston, Massachusetts: Boston Schoolyard Initiative -- With the leadership of Mayor Tom Menino, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative has transformed the outdoor physical space of more than 70 Boston schoolyards into colorful and engaging outdoor classrooms and places to play.

Boulder, Colorado: The Freiker Program -- Freiker (short for “frequent biker”) uses incentives and technology to increase the number of children regularly bicycling and walking to school. A solar-powered Freikometer counts bike trips, which earn kids points to get prizes and recognition.

Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Switch Program -- Switch What You Do, View, and Chew aims to increase children’s physical activity (“Switch What You Do”), decrease their screen time (“Switch What You View”), and increase their fruit and vegetable consumption (“Switch What You Chew”).

Greenbelt, Maryland – In order to keep local Home Owner Associations from removing playgrounds in an effort to avoid maintenance fees, the City of Greenbelt formed public-private partnerships with them and took over a percentage of the upkeep costs. In return, the Home Owner Associations open their play spaces up to all citizens of Greenbelt.

New York City – Over the last few years, grassroots advocacy groups and community members have caused an increase in applications for block parties and high profile street closures. In urban areas, street closures are a cost-effective way to provide children with access to safe, open areas for play.

San Francisco -- To improve on public transparency and accountability, the Neighborhood Parks Council developed ParkScan, a tool where folks can use the internet to document, report, and track park maintenance issues.

Seattle, Washington -- The High Point Housing Project provides a model of a mixed-income and intergenerational planned community that was designed with a focus on healthy living. By engaging residents and collaborating agencies, the authority created a community oriented to walking and full of safe accessible play areas.

St. Petersburg, Florida -- St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker developed the Play’n’ Close to Home initiative to create a playground within a half mile of every child in the city. Through joint-use agreements with the school district and community organizations, the city has significantly improved opportunities for play.

Tucson, Arizona -- A joint-use agreement between the city and its largest school district meant that the city paid for the playground's safety upgrades and upkeep and the schools open their playgrounds and athletic fields to the public.

ⁱ "F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies are Failing in America," Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

ⁱⁱ *Building "Generation Play."*