

Active Living Research

Building Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity and Support Active Communities
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Promoting Physical Activity through the Shared Use of School and Community Recreational Resources

INTRODUCTION

Regular physical activity promotes important health benefits and reduces risk for obesity.¹ Providing access to safe, affordable and convenient recreational facilities is a critical strategy for helping children and adults be more active, especially in lower-income communities and communities of color that often lack such facilities.^{2,3}

Leading public health authorities, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommend sharing existing school and community recreational facilities to promote opportunities for physical activity.⁴⁻⁸ For example, Healthy People 2020 objectives recommend that school recreational facilities be open to the community before, during and after school hours, as well as on weekends, holidays and over the summer.⁴

Schools are often centrally located within a community and have gymnasiums, playgrounds, sports fields, courts, tracks or other facilities that could provide opportunities for residents to be active if they were available outside of normal school hours.⁹

The shared use (or joint use) of existing school and community sport and recreational facilities can be a cost-effective way to promote physical activity among residents of all ages. For example, a school may allow community members to use a track, playground or basketball court for free when school is not in session. Additionally, legal contracts, commonly referred to as joint use agreements, can set the terms for sharing sport and recreational facilities or programs to create opportunities for community members to be physically active.¹⁰ Joint use agreements, for example, can provide opportunities for a local youth league to use school fields in the afternoons or on weekends, or promote reciprocal use of school facilities with a local park.

This brief summarizes research on community access to school sport and recreation facilities outside of school hours, as well as studies that examine the shared use of school facilities and programs with other community groups or agencies. It also describes challenges commonly associated with the shared use of recreational facilities, and opportunities for policy-makers at the state and local level.

Key Research Results

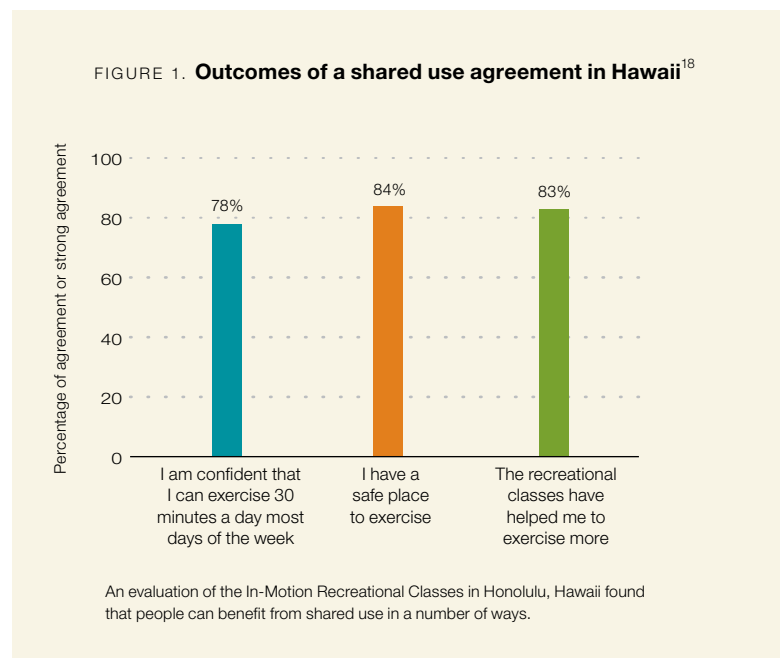
Many communities, especially those with populations at high risk for obesity, lack recreational facilities.

- Lower-income communities and communities with higher proportions of Black, Latino or other racial and ethnic populations at high risk for obesity are less likely to have access to parks or other community recreational facilities than higher-income or predominately White communities.¹¹⁻¹³
- One study found that minority and lower-income neighborhoods were half as likely as White, higher-income neighborhoods to have at least one physical activity facility in their community.¹⁴

Children who have access to existing and renovated school recreational facilities outside of regular school hours are more likely to be active.

- A survey of 12- to 18-year-old adolescents in three cities (Boston, Cincinnati and San Diego) found that these youth were significantly more likely to be physically active when they had access to fields and play areas after school.¹⁵
- A study in two lower-income New Orleans communities found that the number of children who were physically active outdoors (i.e., those who were walking or very active in their neighborhood and/or a schoolyard) was 84 percent higher in a community that opened a schoolyard for public play than in a community that had closed schoolyards. Survey results also showed that children living in the community with the open schoolyard spent less time watching television, movies and playing video games on weekdays.¹⁶

- A study of six public schools with renovated schoolyards and three control schools found a significant increase in the number of children who were physically active at the renovated schoolyards outside of regular school hours. The study also found a significant increase in children's *overall* activity levels at schools with renovated schoolyards.¹⁷ All of the schools in the study were in lower-income, inner-city neighborhoods in Denver.
- An evaluation of a shared use program in Hawaii between the Honolulu Department of Parks and Recreation and a large local high school found that the program provided participants with new opportunities for physical activity (e.g., senior fitness classes, adult fitness and recreation programs, teen strength training). The program had more than 1,000 participants, including students, teachers, school staff and community members (see Figure 1).¹⁸

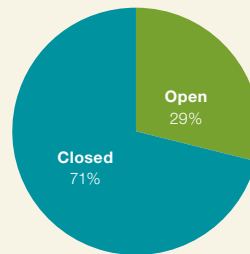


Progress toward opening school facilities for recreational use outside of school hours is slow and some evidence suggests that lower-income communities are less likely than higher-income communities to offer shared use of school facilities.

- An analysis of School Health Policies and Programs Study (SHPPS) data from a national survey of public and nonpublic elementary, middle and high schools found that 67 percent of schools allowed the public to use outdoor school physical activity facilities without being in a supervised program. This percentage did not change between 2000 and 2006.¹⁹ The study also found that about two-thirds of all schools surveyed allowed community sponsored youth sport teams to use their physical activity facilities outside of regular school hours, but only about one-third of schools allowed community sponsored youth activity classes or lessons, or supervised open gym or free-play.¹⁹ Only 29 percent of schools surveyed offered all of the above-mentioned types of shared use to both children and adults during one or more of the following times: before school, after school, evenings, weekends, or during school vacations (see Figure 2).²⁰

- A 2009 national survey of public schools in lower-income and primarily Black and Latino communities found that 69 percent of schools reported their recreational facilities were open to the public outside of regular school hours for either informal or supervised use.²¹
- A California study found income-related disparities in community access to school facilities outside of school hours. Sixty-eight percent of respondents from higher-income districts or county offices of education indicated that some or all of their schools were open for public recreational use outside of regular school hours, compared with only 44 percent of respondents from lower-income districts.²²

FIGURE 2. **Schoolyards open for all types of shared use**²⁰



A 2006 national survey found that only 29 percent of schools allowed all of the following outside of school hours: use by youth sport teams, use for youth activity lessons, supervised open gym or free-play, and use of outdoor facilities for those who were not in a supervised program.

Surveys of school administrators in lower-income communities or communities of color cite issues such as liability, staffing, maintenance and cost as barriers to opening schools for recreational use outside of school hours.

- A national survey of school principals from lower-income communities and communities with higher proportions of Black and Latino populations examined perceived barriers to providing community access to school facilities outside of school hours. Among schools that did not allow public use of their recreational facilities, the following reasons were identified as extremely important for restricting access: liability concerns (61%); insurance (61%); cost of running activities and programs (60%); staffing for maintenance and security (57%); safety concerns (57%); and maintenance costs and responsibilities (55%).²³
- A state survey of California school administrators from lower-income school districts found the most frequently cited reasons for not opening schools to the public outside of school hours were lack of staffing (45%); liability concerns (44%); safety concerns (44%); insufficient funding (39%); and risk of vandalism (38%).²²

- A study conducted in four communities in the United States, with variability across sites in terms of education, race and socioeconomic status, found that safety, insurance and liability concerns were key perceived barriers to making indoor and outdoor recreational facilities available for public use. Other concerns included overuse of facilities, vandalism and the need for supervision.²⁴
- A national survey of school principals in lower-income and minority communities found that 83 percent of all respondents were “somewhat to very concerned” about liability if someone was injured while participating in recreational activities on school property outside of regular school hours. Among the 31 percent of respondents who reported that their facilities were not open for community use, 91 percent were “somewhat to very concerned” about liability.²¹

Conclusions

Providing children and families with access to safe, affordable and convenient places to be physically active is an important strategy for promoting health and reducing risk for obesity, especially in lower-income communities and communities of color. Schools, often located in the heart of a community, can serve that purpose.²⁵ Many schools, however, either do not share their recreational facilities or limit the types of shared use and facilities that are available to the public during non-school hours. In some states, schools in communities with greater concentrations of residents at high risk for obesity are even less likely to share their facilities.²²

School administrators commonly cite concerns about liability, insurance, safety, cost, staffing and maintenance as reasons for not opening their facilities to the community outside of school hours. Joint use agreements can help address these concerns, particularly in communities that lack public or private recreation facilities. States also may choose to address barriers to community recreational use of school property through legislative action.²⁵

Considerations for Local Policy-Makers and Decision-Makers

The Institute of Medicine recommends that local governments “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; and if necessary, adopt regulatory and legislative policies to address liability issues that might block implementation.”²⁶ Schools, community groups and local governments can enter into joint use agreements to address the perceived barriers to sharing recreational facilities and programs. Local policy-makers and decision-makers should consider the following issues to address barriers to shared use:

- **Liability:** School decision-makers should become familiar with liability protections that apply specifically to the community use of their recreation and sport facilities outside of regular school hours. A 2009 survey of liability laws nationwide found that public schools may be protected by some form of governmental immunity in all states to varying degrees.²⁷ Where liability protections are inadequate, school officials may consider supporting advocacy efforts that address limited liability protections for the shared use of school recreational facilities. In addition, local schools, agencies and community groups can use joint use agreements to reduce their liability risk and associated costs through sharing responsibility for potential liability and liability insurance costs.²⁸
- **Maintenance:** Decision-makers can address maintenance costs and responsibilities through joint use agreements as well. Joint use agreements can help schools and their partner(s) establish mutually agreed responsibility for facility maintenance and repair.²⁸ Responsibilities include determining 1) the amount of maintenance that will be required if facilities are shared outside of regular school hours; 2) if school staff or staff from the partnering organization will be responsible for maintenance; and 3) how maintenance costs will be shared. The sharing of maintenance costs may be partly based on the amount of time that a facility is used by each party. Written procedures can be employed to help address maintenance concerns and to discourage the misuse of facilities.²⁹
- **Vandalism, Crime and Other Safety Issues:** Decision-makers should consider traditional proactive safety and crime prevention measures such as security cameras, warnings, emergency telephones and security personnel, as necessary, to deter criminal behavior. Further, partnerships with community organizations may instill a sense of ownership among members of the community resulting in a greater responsibility for the care and protection of a shared resource. Joint use agreements can be used to address, where necessary, maintenance and repair issues for potential vandalism or other misuse.
- **Scheduling:** Shared use should consider priority of use, hours of availability and conditions of use. Joint use agreements can help schools and their partner(s) establish the priorities for each party in the use of shared facilities.²⁸ Decision-makers may wish to develop a master plan that provides direction for priority of use. For example, when school recreational facilities are shared, the school might have first priority, followed by the partner organization, and then informal community use. In addition, hours of availability and conditions of use should be clearly stated.²⁸ For example, certain facilities, such as tennis courts, might be open only to a school tennis team during spring games and practices, but open at night for members of a community tennis league when the cost of lighting is shared.

- **Costs and Operations:** Decision-makers should carefully consider issues relevant to costs and operations when sharing facilities for the purpose of recreation and physical activity. Costs of equipment and supplies, water, electricity, maintenance, and staffing can all be shared. Joint use agreements often include a cost assessment that helps both partners better understand and address the costs associated with sharing facilities.²⁸ In addition to costs, partner groups can share staff and resources, such as custodial and maintenance staff.²⁹ A joint use agreement can address compensation for overtime work, such as securing and inspecting the facilities. Additionally, union contracts and terms of employment for union employees, where relevant, should be addressed by the agreement.

Considerations for State Policy-Makers

Studies indicate that for many school officials, liability is perceived as a primary barrier to allowing community use of school recreational facilities during non-school hours. Although liability can be addressed by a joint use agreement at the local level, state policy-makers also can consider adopting regulations and/or legislation to address liability issues where necessary. The American Heart Association and the Public Health Law Center have drafted policy guidance on important considerations regarding school liability legislation in an effort to promote community use of school property. The policy guidance includes elements of a sound policy and the decision and trade-offs involved in policy change efforts. It includes sample language for various policy sections, including findings, a purpose statement, definitions and exceptions to protect users from extreme malfeasance by schools. It also addresses critical implementation components, including statewide coordination of best practices and education about joint use and liability exposure, as well as sample policy and contract language for use by the school districts. Advocates have used this policy guidance to implement statewide change.

Additional Resources and References

American Heart Association

Eliminating Barriers for Community Recreational Use of School Property:
Policy Guidance on Liability and Shared Use

www.publichealthlawcenter.org/topics/active-living/school-policies

California Pan-Ethnic Health Network

Unlocking the Playground: Achieving Equity in Physical Activity Spaces

www.cpehn.org/pdfs/Joint%20Use%20Brief.pdf

Joint Use Primer

www.cpehn.org/pdfs/Joint%20Use%20Primer%20-%20CPEHN%204-09.pdf

National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN)

Opening School Grounds to the Community After-Hours: Joint Use Toolkit

www.phlpnet.org/healthy-planning/products/joint_use_toolkit

Liability Risks for After-Hours Use of Public School Property: A 50 State Survey

www.nplanonline.org/nplan/products/liabilitysurvey

Prevention Institute

Interactive Website Developed for California's Joint Use Statewide Task Force

www.jointuse.org

21st Century School Fund and University of California, Berkeley Center for Cities and Schools

Joint Use of Public Schools: A Framework for a New Social Contract

<http://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/reports/Joint-Use-Concept-Paper.pdf>

Joint Use Calculator

www.21csf.org/csf-home/publications.asp

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For updates and a Web-based version of this brief, visit www.activelivingresearch.org.

Active Living Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, stimulates and supports research to identify environmental factors and policies that influence physical activity for children and families to inform effective childhood obesity prevention strategies, particularly in low-income and racial/ethnic communities at highest risk. Active Living Research wants solid research to be part of the public debate about active living.

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Endnotes

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