

# INCREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES IN MISSISSIPPI

CHANGE CAN HAPPEN



## MISSISSIPPI CASE STUDY

*This case study describes how shared use policies and agreements have helped increase physical activity in communities in Mississippi.*

Mississippi ranks as one of the least healthy states in the country,<sup>1</sup> so it's no wonder that key agencies across the state are working together to make big changes. Along with a focus on healthy and nutritious food access, the state has also taken substantial steps to get all Mississippians more physically active.<sup>2</sup> The state has devoted particular efforts to encouraging physical activity by increasing access to school facilities through shared use, putting into place one of the few state shared use initiatives in the country.

### SHARED USE EFFORTS IN MISSISSIPPI

In 2010, the Mississippi legislature added a new chapter to the state education code to encourage local school boards to adopt policies allowing public recreational use of school property outside of school hours.<sup>3</sup> The law encourages school districts to enter into shared use agreements with community organizations and local government agencies. In addition, the law directed the Mississippi Department of Education, in consultation with the Department of Health, to develop a best practices toolkit for school districts interested in shared use agreements.<sup>4,5</sup> The Best Practices Toolkit for Shared

Use Agreements in Mississippi, published in 2012, assists communities across the state with tools to adopt shared use policies and implement shared use agreements. Key components of the toolkit are model language for shared use agreements,<sup>6</sup> a summary of technical assistance resources, potential partners, funding opportunities available to school districts to promote community use of school property, and a list of shared use school sites.

### Shared Use Mini-Grant Program

As part of its shared use initiative, in the fall of 2012, the Mississippi Department of Health and the Mississippi Department of Education released a mini-grant funding opportunity of around \$4,000 per school or community to assist with shared use policies and implementation.<sup>7</sup> The grants were intended to provide access for community members, agencies, sports leagues, and even dance, yoga, and martial arts instructors, allowing use of indoor and outdoor facilities (athletic fields, gyms, basketball courts, pools, playgrounds) for unstructured play or for structured classes, practices, and games. Grantees were required to have partnerships with the school district in question, work in communities where 40 percent or more of students qualify for free or reduced priced school meals, and be willing to



develop and adopt a formal shared use agreement policy. In addition to the funding, the Mississippi Department of Health provided training and offered ongoing technical assistance to assist grantees in building support for shared use policies, as well as in the development, adoption, and implementation of shared use agreements between the school and the community.

State efforts to increase shared use policies were focused on the Mississippi Delta,<sup>8</sup> a section of western and northwestern Mississippi bordered by the Mississippi River where there are strong community institutions and leaders, but high levels of poverty, low educational attainment, and high rates of obesity and other chronic conditions. With grants and educational efforts occurring in the Delta, shared use agreements became a key strategy to increase physical activity among Delta residents. Funding helped to support the construction of new walking trails and installation of new fencing, provided program and activity equipment and supplies, ensured administrative support, and provided public outreach and marketing campaigns focused on shared use and school/community initiatives.

Through the collaborative efforts in the Delta, 12 formal and seven informal shared use agreements are now in place. One community that kicked off a robust shared use program after receiving a mini-grant was the city of Leland in Washington County, where shared use agreements permit the use of local school running tracks, which now host local walking groups of community members who support each other in being physically active. As Leland Health Council Coordinator Jesse Tyler explained, “Joint-use agreements are particularly great because they give the public safe, well-known, central places to get together and get active.”

## **RAISING AWARENESS AROUND HEALTH EQUITY AND SHARED USE**

In order to increase understanding throughout the state of Mississippi of the benefits of shared use and the need for health equity focused work, the Mississippi Chapter of the NAACP had a vision of using social media and other approaches to advance shared use. Through the Voices for Healthy Kids initiative, the Mississippi NAACP received a \$10,000 grant for those goals. “You can enact a law,” said Corey Wiggins of the Mississippi NAACP, “but what will the implementation look like? The law does not mean that shared use agreements will be implemented. There is a bridge that needs to be built.”

The campaign worked to build that bridge by helping to implement shared use agreements in high-impact communities and increase shared use practices in Central

Mississippi and the Mississippi Delta, while also building internal capacity within the Mississippi NAACP around shared use agreements and health disparities, using social media to engage young people around shared use, health equity, and social determinants of health. The social media campaign allowed the Mississippi NAACP to engage with many partners around shared use and health equity, and advanced the work in the Delta and throughout Mississippi.

## **BARRIERS TO SHARED USE PRACTICES IN MISSISSIPPI**

### ***Apprehensions by Superintendents***

Although amending liability laws for educational institutions initially reduced fears around liability, the law has not been enough to quell the concerns of superintendents who are still concerned about liability if the community is allowed to use the facilities. There is often an initial surge of support, with many communities holding kick-off celebrations at sites with new shared use agreements, but enthusiasm from local leaders tends to die off subsequently.

### ***Lack of Community Awareness***

While the practice of shared use has seen much success throughout the state of Mississippi, there is room for improvement. Many community members who live or work near a school site do not know they can utilize the school sites for recreational purposes. The Mississippi State Health Department recognizes that a statewide marketing and promotion campaign for this strategy would assist in raising awareness. In addition, highlighting the successes across the state would have the potential to increase the practice among key school administrators.

## **CONCLUSION**

While shared use is often seen as a public health strategy, it has a fundamental effect on how we view and use school spaces in our community. That’s why cross-departmental collaboration, such as the partnership between the Department of Health and the Department of Education, is crucial to successfully increasing shared use agreements. In Mississippi, the funding from the state Department of Health along with the technical assistance from the Department of Health and the Department of Education provided critical support to communities embarking in shared use practices.

Having champions at the state and local levels is also important for increasing shared use. Mississippi benefits from having champions in state departments and state and local organizations such as the Delta Collaborative and

the Mississippi Chapter of the NAACP. These leaders and champions continue to raise awareness and promote shared use as a means to address health inequities.

The sustainability of shared use practices requires a multi-faceted approach. In Mississippi, investments from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have helped increase staff capacity to focus on the issues and to strengthen interagency collaboration. This in turn has led to opportunities to develop key resources such as the toolkit, which remains to be a useful tool for schools and school districts who are seeking guidance on establishing shared use agreements.

In addition, it's critical to fully assess where shared use practices were already taking place and where efforts would most benefit those communities that are suffering from health inequities. The social media campaign led by the Mississippi Chapter of the NAACP helped amplify discussions about how racial and economic inequities can affect a community's access to physical activity opportunities and resulting levels of chronic disease.

All of these factors have contributed to the success of shared use in Mississippi. Since 2010, there have been 24 shared use agreements established in the Delta region of Mississippi.

The Mississippi State Department of Health has facilitated 31 shared use agreements throughout the state since its initial funding by the CDC in 2010. There have been increased collaborative efforts with the Mississippi Department of Education and the Mayor Health Councils. Although there is much work to be done, Mississippi's shared use initiative has made an enormous difference in community access to physical activity opportunities.

## END NOTE

The information in this case study was drawn from a series of phone interviews conducted in summer 2016. Individuals interviewed include:

- Tiffani Grant & Jackie Hawkins, Mississippi Department of Health
- Corey Wiggins, State Health Chair, Mississippi Chapter NAACP

1 <http://stateofobesity.org/adult-obesity/> Retrieved August 3, 2016.

2 Other physical activity initiatives include: Encouraging the implementation of Safe Routes to School programs and policies across the state; Appropriating funds to the Mississippi Department of Health to establish physical activity incentive grants to schools and communities; Encouraging development, maintenance, redevelopment, and equitable access to public green spaces, including parks, community gardens, greenbelts, play fields, trails, and public rights of way, as well as recreational facilities in all neighborhoods that increase the opportunity for physical activity for all community members; Providing technical assistance and funds to schools and communities to establish shared use agreements. 2015 Mississippi Obesity Action Plan, [http://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/\\_static/resources/6164.pdf](http://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/resources/6164.pdf) Retrieved August 3, 2016.

3 Mississippi Code, Title 37, Chapter 171, <http://law.justia.com/codes/mississippi/2015/title-37/chapter-171/>.

4 Mississippi's Shared Use Law, [http://www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/Mississippi\\_SharedUseLaws\\_FINAL\\_20140203.pdf](http://www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/Mississippi_SharedUseLaws_FINAL_20140203.pdf) Retrieved August 3, 2016.

5 Liability Risk for After-Hours Use of Public School Property to Reduce Obesity: Mississippi, [http://www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/MS\\_JointUse\\_FINAL-20140124.pdf](http://www.changelabsolutions.org/sites/default/files/MS_JointUse_FINAL-20140124.pdf) Retrieved July 28, 2016.

6 Best Practices Toolkit for Shared Use Agreements in Mississippi <http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/healthy-schools/scannedfromaxeroxmultifunctiondevice0012.pdf?sfvrsn=2> Retrieved August 1, 2016.

7 Healthy Lifestyles: Making Communities Healthy Mini-Grant Application [http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/healthy-schools/shared-use-agreement-\(sua\)-making-your-community-healthy-mini-grant-application.pdf?sfvrsn=0](http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/healthy-schools/shared-use-agreement-(sua)-making-your-community-healthy-mini-grant-application.pdf?sfvrsn=0) Retrieved August 4, 2015.

8 Working Together for Healthy Hearts in the Mississippi Delta [http://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/\\_static/resources/4964.pdf](http://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/resources/4964.pdf) Retrieved August 5, 2016.