

Addressing Childhood Obesity Through Shared Recreational Facilities



Why Do We Need Shared Use?

Childhood obesity has tripled in the United States over the past 40 years, with nearly one third of children and teens in the United States overweight or obese.¹ The epidemic is related to the fact that, even though studies show that regular physical activity promotes important health benefits and reduces risk for obesity,² most communities have not prioritized built environment policies that support physical activity. As a result, many children do not have the opportunity to engage in adequate physical activity each day.

One way to increase physical activity opportunities is to increase access to recreational facilities. Historically, schools have had a variety of recreational facilities, such as gymnasiums, playgrounds, fields, courts, and tracks. However, most of these schools close their property to the public during non-school hours, such as weekends, holidays, summer break, and before and after school, because of concerns about costs, vandalism, security, maintenance, and liability in the event of injury. Unfortunately, these concerns can have a huge effect on health, as access to recreational facilities is associated with lower body mass index among children and increased physical activity among adults. Luckily, shared use (or joint use) agreements have become a popular strategy for addressing these concerns while also creating built environment policies that encourage partnerships and support healthy lifestyles.

What is Shared Use?

A shared use agreement is a formal or informal agreement between two separate government or private entities, often a school district and a city or county, setting forth the terms and conditions for the shared use of public or private property. Typically, each party under a shared use agreement helps fund the development, operation, or maintenance of the facilities



that will be shared. In so doing, no single party is fully liable for the costs and responsibilities associated with use of the recreational facilities.

Making use of school facilities that would otherwise not be used after school hours allows for a more efficient use of public space and money, and is an almost effortless strategy against childhood obesity. Studies have also shown that the number of children who are physically active outside of school is 84 percent higher when schoolyards are kept open for public play.³ Many schools and communities have been so pleased with the results that they have expanded the partnership to include non-profit and private entities, such as libraries, hospitals, local gyms, YMCAs, and private schools. Some of the successes that communities have experienced include a more efficient use of public space and tax dollars, increased funding for the school district, neighborhood revitalization, increased physical and social activity, and increased collaboration between local government and the school district.

Nationally recognized authorities – such as the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity,⁴ the National Physical Activity Plan,⁵ the American Academy of Pediatrics,⁶ the Department of Health and Human Services,⁷ the Office of the Surgeon General,⁸ and Institute of Medicine⁹ have recommended the shared use of school facilities as a strategy to increase physical activity opportunities.

What to Consider When Writing an Agreement

When writing a shared use agreement, a community must address concerns about safety, costs, security, maintenance, and liability. For this reason, in 2010 Change Lab Solutions conducted a [50-State Scan of Laws Addressing Community Use of Schools](#) that is useful in identifying policies by state that address liability. Another useful tool that can assist in the writing of an agreement is UC Berkeley's [Cost Calculator](#), which helps decision makers better understand the costs associated with operating facilities under a shared use agreement. With education and research, any community can address these and other concerns and still author an impactful agreement.

Shared use may already be in practice informally, but it is important to make sure there is a formal, written policy that will continue after possible staffing changes. Most importantly, formal agreements can protect all involved parties from future legal issues. All shared use agreements should address the following:

- Maintenance – Who will make repairs and address wear and tear to the property?
- Operations — Who will unlock gates/doors? Who will run the programs?
- Liability – What if someone is injured on the property?
- Ownership – How does shared use affect how decisions are made about the property?
- Cost – How expensive will the partnership be? Who is in charge of expenses?
- Access – Who will have access and when?

Success Stories

- New York City, NY used shared use agreements to launch the “Schoolyards to Playgrounds Initiative,” which opened more than 200 school playgrounds citywide for use outside of school hours. For more information, [click here](#).

- In 1959, the City of Edmonton, Edmonton Catholic Schools, and Edmonton Public Schools (Alberta, Canada) entered a shared use agreement to optimize use of publicly funded facilities. This agreement is still in place today. For more information, [click here](#).
- Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte, NC organized a Joint Use Task Force consisting of 2 dozen agencies to provide a more comprehensive and coordinated picture of the needs of the community... and to recognize the inter-relatedness of ... categories of infrastructure investments.” For more information, [click here](#).
- In 2004, the city of St Petersburg, FL discovered through GIS mapping that the city did not offer many residents easy access to playgrounds. They found that elementary schools were located in all areas that playgrounds were missing, and through an incentive called “Play ‘N’ Close to Home” created shared use agreements that allowed the city to take over maintenance of many parks in exchange for public use of the land after school hours. For more information, [click here](#).

References

- 1 Trust for America's Health. *F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future* 2011. Washington, D.C.:TFAHJ 2011.
- 2 The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Decrease Overweight and Obesity 2001. Rockville, MD: United States Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General, 2001.
- 3 Farley T, Meriwether R, Baker E, Watkins L, Johnson C, Webber L. Safe place spaces to promote physical activity in inner-city children. Results from a pilot study of an environmental intervention. *Am J Pub Health*. 2007; 97:1625-1631.
- 4 White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. Report to the President. 2010. Available at: http://www.letsmove.gov/sites/letsmove.gov/files/TaskForce_on_Childhood_Obesity_May2010_FullReport.pdf Accessed February 2013.
- 5 National Physical Activity Plan May 2012. Available at: http://www.physicalactivityplan.org/parks_st1.php accessed February 2013.
- 6 See American Academy of Pediatrics, Active Healthy Living: Prevention of Childhood Obesity Through Increased Physical Activity, *117 Pediatrics* 1834, 1834–42 (2006), available at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/117/5/1834.full.pdf+html>. Accessed February 2013.
- 7 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Healthy People 2020: Physical Activity Objectives (PA-10)*. 2010. Available at: www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topicsobjectives2020/objectiveslist.aspx?topicid=33. Accessed February 2013.
- 8 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Surgeon General's Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, January 2010.
- 9 See *Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity*, *Inst. of Med.*, 2–7 (Sep. 2009), http://www2.aap.org/obesity/community_advocacy/IOM.pdf#RoutinePhysicalActivityAccess Accessed February 2013.