



North Carolina: Strengthening Joint Use Agreements for Schools and Communities

Overview

The North Carolina Division of Public Health (NCDPH), under the leadership of State Health Director Laura Gerald, has a long history of collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) to advance school health policies, programs, and practices. An initiative on joint use agreements builds on that history, aiming to provide North Carolina school administrators, local school boards, city and county government employees, and community members with the information and tools to develop joint use agreements to encourage physical activity and combat obesity.

One of the strategies of North Carolina's Obesity Prevention Plan (2007-2012) was to expand opportunities for physical activity, including encouraging the use of community resources such as schools, parks, and recreation facilities. Data from the state's 2011 Healthy Active Children Policy Report, a mandatory report that each district-level school health advisory committee in North Carolina must provide to the state education agency on various health-related indicators, indicated the following:

- Seventy-six percent of local education agencies had a policy that allowed use of school athletic facilities or other school facilities by community members for physical activity outside of school hours or when school is not in session.
- Seventy-five percent of local education agencies had a joint use policy that allows use of community facilities (i.e., not school property) for school-sponsored physical activity or athletics.

Steps Taken

The North Carolina Healthy Schools program, a project between the NCDPI and NCDPH, began to look deeper into the data. At first glance, it appeared that joint use agreements were widely adopted. However, follow-up with the districts revealed that districts which stated that they had a joint use agreement often did not have formal, written agreements in place, but rather informal "handshake agreements," or weak agreements that failed to include all of the components of a well thought-out, broad joint use agreement. In districts that did not have a policy, there was confusion and concern over what was legally permissible in North Carolina regarding community access to school facilities and potential liability risks, as well as a general lack of understanding about how to approach the process.

NCDPH saw an opportunity to provide state-specific guidance around joint use agreements. North Carolina has two laws (General Statutes 115c-12 (35) and 115c-524) that are intended to encourage developing joint use agreements and protect schools from liability. Despite this, many local education agencies are hesitant to enter into formal, written agreements. Although several joint use agreement resources exist from national organizations, school administrators, local boards, city and county governments, and community members wanted to know what was possible in North Carolina and examples of what other North Carolinian districts had put in place.

North Carolina Healthy Schools program staff in NCDPH worked with staff from the Physical Activity and Nutrition Branch, along with other staff in both the North Carolina Healthy Schools program and School Support Services at NCDPI to develop a guide to joint use agreements, [Promoting Physical Activity through Joint Use Agreements in North Carolina](#). The North Carolina Healthy Schools program received



North Carolina: Strengthening Joint Use Agreements for Schools and Communities

grant funding from the National Association of State Boards of Education to pay for developing the guide. North Carolina Healthy Schools contributed additional funds to pay for design and printing. The guide focused on providing an overview of joint use agreements, the existing laws that supported joint use agreements, components of agreements, potential roles of different local-level organizations, benefits to local education agencies, and examples and success stories from North Carolina school districts and communities.

NCDPH coordinated with NCDPI to distribute the guide to all of the school health advisory committees, healthful living coordinators in each local district, and school administrators. They also provided further guidance around joint use agreements through webinars and conference sessions. There are plans to develop a resource webpage where additional examples of joint use agreements from local education agencies in North Carolina can be posted as new ones are developed.

In 2011, North Carolina chose joint use agreements as a strategy for its Community Transformation Grant Project. NCDPH has since broadened this strategy beyond traditional joint use agreements to include other types of policies that increase public access to places for physical activity. Its focus has also expanded to include institutions other than schools, such as faith communities, YMCAs, and other community organizations.

Population Focus

School administrators, local school boards, county and government employees, and community members.

Role of State Health Agencies

The North Carolina Healthy Schools program is a joint project between NCDPI and NCDPH. North Carolina Healthy Schools program staff in NCDPH, Chronic Disease and Injury Section, led the effort to analyze data from the Healthy Active Children Policy Report, follow up with districts, identified the need, and then led the effort to develop a targeted resource to meet that need. NCDPH reached out to multiple partners and stakeholders while developing the guide to ensure that the messages were clear, the information relevant, and presented in a way that would spur local education and government agencies, school boards, and community members to ask the question, "If others communities in North Carolina can do this, why can't we?"

Key Partners

The state health agency and state education agencies jointly led this effort, in partnership with the North Carolina School Boards Association and National Association of State Boards of Education. Staff from the Healthy Schools Program and the Physical Activity and Nutrition Branch were key in developing the guide.



North Carolina: Strengthening Joint Use Agreements for Schools and Communities

Payment Mechanism

Funding for developing and distributing the guide came from grant funding to the North Carolina Healthy Schools program at NCDPI.

Conclusion

North Carolina has identified joint use agreements as a critical strategy to increase physical activity among both children and adults. State health agencies have an important role in promoting joint use agreements and providing the tools and resources necessary to ensure that local level public health, education and government agencies, boards, and community members have clear state-specific guidance. A strong, well-executed joint use agreement has the potential to provide significant benefits to schools, community members, and organizations, increasing access to playgrounds, running tracks, trails, sports fields, gymnasiums, and aquatic facilities, while sharing costs. A strong partnership with the state education agency is essential to expanding the use of joint use agreements, in addition to key partners that can effectively reach school administrators, local school boards, county and government agencies, and community organizations.

A copy of *Promoting Physical Activity through Joint Use Agreements in North Carolina* is available at www.EatSmartMoveMoreNC.com.

For more information:

Lori K. Rhew, MA, PAPHS
N.C. Department of Health and Human Services
Physical Activity Unit Manager, Physical Activity and Nutrition Branch – NC Division of Public Health
Lori.Rhew@dhhs.nc.gov

Kristen Wan, MS, PAPHS
Senior Analyst, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
kwan@astho.org