



Safe Routes
to School
National
Partnership

Shared Use

Increasing Access to Physical Activity Opportunities

Childhood obesity has more than tripled in children and adolescents in the past 30 years.¹ Low-income communities and communities of color tend to be adversely affected by obesity and have fewer adequate places for children and families to be physically active.² In many communities, schools are centrally located and have gymnasiums, playgrounds, athletic fields, courts, tracks and other recreational facilities that could allow residents to be more physically active if they were available outside of school hours for community use.

What Is Shared Use?

“Shared use” or “joint use” occurs when government entities (or sometimes private, nonprofit organizations) agree to open or broaden access to their property and/or facilities for community use, such as recreational activities.³ The partnerships can be formal (e.g. based on a written, legal document) or informal (e.g. based on historical practice). Formal arrangements are often documented through an agreement which sets forth the terms and conditions for the shared use of the property or facility. Successful partnerships generally rely on the pooling of resources to expand community access and use public space more efficiently.

Why Shared Use?

Shared use is seen as a promising strategy to address issues of physical inactivity and obesity across the country. In addition, shared use has been recommended by 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. These organizations recommend sharing existing school and community recreational facilities to promote opportunities for

physical activity.⁴⁻⁶ The research is clear: the more active children are, the healthier they will be now and when they grow up. Yet certain places make physical activity harder instead of easier. Place matters, and experts know that where we live, work and play — the physical environment itself — determines, to a large degree, whether we will be healthy.⁷

Too often, children find the gate to their school’s blacktop or basketball court locked after school hours, locking them out of opportunities to be physically active. Closing off recreational facilities after school leaves many children and families struggling to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. They may live in an area without a nearby park or be unable to afford exercise equipment or a gym membership. Shared use agreements can fix these problems. Shared use makes physical activity easier by providing children and adults with safe, conveniently located, inviting and low- or no-cost places to exercise and play. Besides making sense from a health perspective, shared use agreements make sense financially because they build upon assets the community already has. Sharing existing space is cheaper and more efficient than duplicating the same facilities in other parts of the community.



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Challenges

While shared use is an effective approach to increasing physical activity, working successfully in urban, suburban, or rural settings, sometimes it can be challenging for communities to overcome the concerns that may arise. Communities of color and low-income communities face additional challenges and facilities are less likely to be made available through shared use. Fortunately, shared use agreements can address potential hurdles by identifying concerns and spelling out solutions.⁸

- **Maintenance** – How can we keep the space in good condition? Shared use agreements can detail each partner's responsibilities to help ensure that school properties are respected and maintained. When school resources are being shared, it's important to have shared use agreements that specify who needs to make repairs and who will address wear and tear to the property. Some school officials have noticed a decrease in vandalism since implementing a shared use agreement. They have noted that when the community shares school resources,

they take pride and ownership in the space, which can help deter vandalism.

- **Operations** — Who will unlock the gate? Who will run the programs? These questions can be answered with shared use agreements so that partners know what they are responsible for.
- **Liability** – What if someone gets hurt? Experts say most schools' existing liability insurance is sufficient to cover any liability issues associated with shared use. Shared use agreements can identify liability concerns and make sure they are accounted for.
- **Ownership** – How does joint use affect how decisions are made about the property? The agreement should be clear about the ownership of land, facilities, and any items constructed or brought onto the property.
- **Cost** – How expensive will the partnership be? Shared use agreements can be used to define how much each partner contributes. Partnerships do not need to cost a lot to be successful. Agreements can help partners anticipate what costs might be.

What Makes a Successful Shared Use Agreement?

- Clearly articulated goals
- Detailed planning that includes sources of funding and division of responsibilities
- A recognition of the individual benefits to each partner
- A long-term commitment from everyone involved
- Ongoing communication among partners and with the community
- A process for resolving any conflicts that may arise
- Support from policy makers and community members



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Shared Use in Rural, Urban, Suburban and Faith-Based Communities

While there may be barriers to overcome, shared use can be applied in multiple settings, such as rural, urban and suburban. More recently, faith-based organizations have become engaged in the practice.

Rural

In rural communities, schools often offer both indoor and outdoor opportunities in communities that can often be geographically isolated. By engaging key stakeholders and cultivating innovative partnerships rural communities can increase opportunities for physical activity in their communities through the shared use of school facilities. They offer opportunity for students and communities to take advantage of much needed green space or indoor recreational space for physical activity opportunities. Rural communities face challenges different than urban communities based on the infrastructure and multiple landowners that can make expanding walking trails or park space challenging for the parks and recreation department. Shared Use practice has shown that it can be effective in reducing costs for operating schools by combining multiple services that meet community needs in one location making the school the center of community.⁹

Urban

In urban communities that are often densely populated, barriers to physical activity may include issues of personal and traffic safety. Urban communities face issues of urban violence, which make finding safe places for the community to recreate a challenge. In addition, there are inequities in the availability of parks and open space, which make schools an ideal space to turn for recreational opportunities.

Suburban

Suburban communities are often physically dispersed and many lack a community center, which can make it difficult for the community to access physical activity opportunities. Shared use of school facilities offers opportunities for capacity building, collaboration and communication around physical activity in communities.

Faith Based Communities

In addition to the school facilities, many communities in the South are working with faith-based communities to increase access to physical activity opportunities. Across the country the idea of including faith-based communities in the conversation about physical activity is gaining popularity. In many communities that may be deemed park-poor, schools and churches offer recreational facilities that allow the community to be physically active.

Resources

Safe Routes to School National Partnership

- » Shared Use of School and Community Facilities
- » Shared Use Clearinghouse

Joint Use.org

- » www.jointuse.org

ChangeLab Solutions: NPLAN

- » The Benefits of a Written Shared Use Agreement
- » A Look at State Rules Affecting Joint Use Agreements

Kaboom

- » Playing Smart: Maximizing the Potential of School and Community Property through Joint Use Agreements

University of California Center for Cities & Schools

- » Joint Use Schools Initiative: Partnerships and Environments for Student Success

Public Health Law Center

- » Finding Space to Play: Legal and Policy Issues Impacting Community Recreational Use of Property



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Conclusion

Shared use policies and agreements work to address the lack of physical activity opportunities in communities. In underserved communities, shared use policies and practices help to address equity in communities adversely affected by obesity. There are a variety of ways in which the practice can be implemented through a variety of different agreements.

Creating healthy communities is the responsibility of all of us and it all begins with a conversation. Please see our resources on engaging school board members, superintendents and principals in this work in your community.

References

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