These are the FAQ's: Shared Use Frequently Asked Questions

Many questions arise for communities working on shared use. This resource is designed to answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

What is shared use?

"Shared use" (also known as "joint use") is the concept of opening up access to a facility or resource to allow use by community members who would otherwise be excluded. A common example is when a school opens up access to its grounds to allow the public to use a track or playground outside of school hours. The key is that entities are pooling existing resources to create increased access to physical activity opportunities.

Does shared use always involve an agreement between two partners?

Shared use can involve a school or other facility opening access through an agreement with a formal partner, like the city. Shared use can also be accomplished without a partner, when a facility decides to allow community access to the facility for healthy eating/active living purposes. There are a variety of ways shared use can occur through written policy and shared use agreements. ChangeLab Solutions has developed resources around open use policy, which allow school districts and other entities to formally grant community access to their facilities

What are some of the benefits of shared use agreements?

Shared use has a multitude of benefits. A key benefit of shared use practice is its ability to serve as a public health strategy to combat obesity. With limited facilities for children and adults to be physically active in most communities, the increased access to playgrounds, tracks, fields, and other school recreational resources provided through shared use can improve community health and vitality. In addition, shared use can make economic and practical sense as cities and communities struggle with limited resources. Shared use allows for interagency collaboration, breaking down silos between schools, cities and counties, and departments of planning, health, parks and recreation, and others. Shared use also builds community, as community members rally together to increase access to a space, and are able to be more connected through the use of a shared space in their community.

As a state report from Maryland notes, shared use practice "is both fiscally responsible public sector decision-making and wise community planning."[1]

What are some ways to put the concept of shared use into practice?

There are multiple ways of achieving shared use success. A shared use agreement can be a first step for a community that may want to see how shared use works in one location. Shared use agreements are agreements between two partners that describe each one's roles and responsibilities. Often, one party agrees to open up its space to community members, while the other may agree to assist with money, maintenance, construction, or other resources. A shared use agreement also spells out which party is responsible for maintenance, operations, and other responsibilities for a specific site. Such agreements can cover more than one facility.

A shared use policy will generally have a broader effect beyond one facility, and can assist a school district or other entity in shaping a vision for how they can assist in supporting community health. Some facilities have informal policies, in which they allow community members or groups to use their space, but do not have a written policy guiding how that use can and cannot occur.

Who is in charge of adopting shared use policies?

Shared use agreements must be signed by decision makers for both of the entities that are coming to agreement (e.g., city council, school board, tribal community, etc.). Shared use policies can be adopted by the decision maker for the entity that is providing new access – often, the school board. As noted above, shared use policies can also exist informally based on actual practices of the community.

Does a shared use agreement always have the title "shared use"?

No. A shared use agreement may have a variety of names. Possibilities include: community use agreement, open use agreement, joint use agreement, memorandum of understanding (MOU), and recreational use agreement. There also informal agreements that are not documented in a written document. The goal is to create more access to physical activity opportunities. Please refer to our resource the Spectrum of Shared Use to get a more detailed description of the variety of approaches to shared use.

Who do I approach if I am interested in establishing a shared use agreement in my community?

As a community member, or someone who is interested in establishing shared use, you may start with contacting the person in charge of the site you'd like access to. For example, if you are focused on increasing community access to a school site, build a relationship with the school principal to discuss your ideas and concepts to increase opportunities for physical activity. Other municipal leaders such as city council members or parks and recreation personnel may be key stakeholders to engage in establishing a shared use agreement.

In addition you could approach other community members about their interest in having access to a certain site. Community support and engagement can be critical to persuade key decision makers to allow community access to a site.

What are some challenges when approaching shared use agreements?

Shared use can take time. A lot of shared use is about building relationships. There are usually multiple stakeholders that you will need to engage in your discussion around a shared use agreement or in the policy adoption process. Liability is often cited as an area of concern, but fortunately there are a multitude of steps an organization or entity can take to minimize their risk and increase access to physical activity opportunities. Other challenges can be maintenance, operations, or the cost of maintaining a program. All of the challenges can be addressed through the right partnerships.

How can concerns about liability be addressed?

Liability concerns can sometimes be an obstacle to shared use, when a school district or other entity is reluctant to open up its facilities for fear that it will face an expensive lawsuit if someone gets hurt. With 70 to 80 percent of school districts in the country engaging in some form of shared use, liability does not need to be a barrier. To minimize the risk of liability, districts should always keep their facilities and equipment well maintained, and should have processes for maintenance and for addressing hazards that emerge and injuries that occur. Districts generally have such processes already in place in order to keep students safe during the day. In all 50 states, districts have the same or more responsibility for injuries that occur during school hours than for those outside of school hours – so shared use does not increase the type of liability risk that districts face. In addition, some districts require provisions in shared use agreements that transfer responsibility for potential liability from the district to another willing partner, such as the city or a nonprofit. By combining prevention, avoiding negligence, sharing liability risk, and insurance, school districts and others can minimize liability risk.

How can we work to make sure a shared use agreement is implemented?

Sometimes shared use policies are passed or an agreement may be executed but you don't see the agreement or policy being implemented. As an advocate, ask one of the key decision makers about a timeline for implementation of the agreement or policy. Visit the proposed site at the time when community access is intended to be available. Reconvene stakeholders and take steps to encourage implementation. Be persistent!

Should evaluation measures be included in shared use agreements?

The idea of evaluation measures is that they require an assessment of how a policy change is working. Evaluation measures are a good idea. For some communities, shared use might be a new practice and they may choose to pilot shared use for a period of 6 months or a year. When evaluation is included within the shared use agreement, it allows all parties to come together to ensure the shared use agreement is working the way it was intended to work, and allows the parties to address concerns or problems that may have arisen. This is also allows for any amendments to made to the agreement or policy during the reconvening of key decision makers.

Who are some of the key stakeholders in shared use?

Key stakeholders can be community members, parents, students, or children who live in a community that lacks adequate, safe spaces to play. Additional stakeholders may be community organizations that provide programming (i.e. Kiwanis clubs, YMCA, Boys & Girls Club etc.).

Does shared use only involve schools?

No. While shared use has been primarily focused on schools, because schools offer space and physical activity amenities, they are not the only places shared use can take place. Depending on your geographic location, faith based institutions can open their spaces for community access. Other common places for shared use may be libraries, which many municipalities share with schools, or other municipal buildings.

Where can I find more information?

For additional resources, please visit the Shared Use Clearinghouse, a repository of information including toolkits, legislation, shared use agreements, policies, research and reports. Refer to ChangeLab Solutions Checklist for Developing Joint Use Agreements for additional guidance on shared use.

Who can I contact if I have more questions?

Mikaela Randolph
Shared Use Campaign Manager
Mikaela@saferoutespartnership.org

Reference

[1] Whitaker, D. et. al (2008) Managing Maryland's Growth: Smart Growth, Community Planning & Public School Construction. http://planning.maryland.gov/PDF/OurProducts/Publications/ModelsGuidelines/mg27.pdf (p. 39).