

# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TASK FORCE REPORT



WASHINGTON STATE  
Recreation and  
Conservation Office

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Julie McCleery of the University of Washington, Center for Leadership in Athletics, prepared this report for the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office. This study was directed by the Washington State Legislature in Section 305 (10) of the 2021 operating budget, as stated:

*Section 305 (10) \$175,000 of the youth athletic facility nonappropriated account—state appropriation is provided solely for a task force to consider ways to improve equitable access to K-12 schools' fields and athletic facilities and local parks agency facilities with the goal of increasing physical activity for youth and families. The task force shall be created and managed by the recreation and conservation office. A portion of the funds must be used to inventory K-12 school fields and athletic facilities and park agency facilities, and for joint use agreements for these facilities. The task force participants must represent geographic diversity and must include representatives from the office of the superintendent of public instruction, the Washington association of school administrators, the association of Washington principals, and the Washington recreation and parks association; participants with a background in public health; and stakeholders who represent diverse communities and communities of color. The task force shall consider joint use agreements, partnerships, improved scheduling practices with local parks agencies including facility rental fees, and other strategies, and submit a report with best practices and policy recommendations to the recreation and conservation funding board. A final report from the board must be submitted to the governor's office and legislature no later than February 1, 2022.*

The Recreation and Conservation Office formed the Physical Activity Task Force. Adrienne Moore, Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport, coordinated and facilitated task force meetings.

**February 1, 2022**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Physical activity is one of the most important elements of overall health. And yet, inactivity among youth is increasing in Washington State, and has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Physical inactivity is more prevalent for girls and youth of color, from low-income families, with disabilities, and who have immigrated to the United States, due to the systemic exclusion of these populations from spaces and programs that offer opportunities to play and be active. The cost of not addressing youth inactivity is high because physical activity is a predictor of physical and mental well-being, school attendance and attention, and long-term overall health. Increasing physical activity in youth saves health care costs, lives, and productivity. Physical inactivity should be viewed as a health equity crisis.



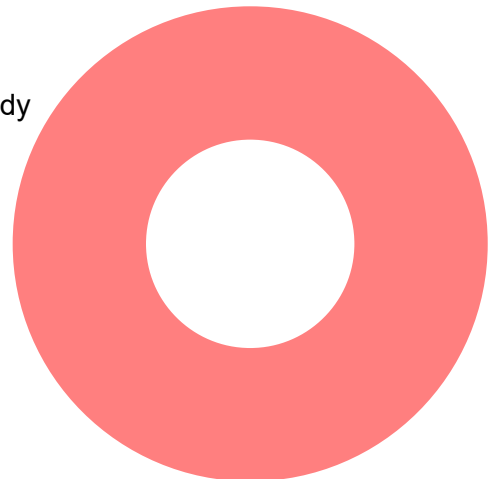
During the past 5 months, a statewide task force looked at the barriers and made recommendations for increasing access to, and use of, community (kindergarten through high school and municipal park) fields and facilities to improve equity in opportunities for play and activity. This report details the task force's work and recommendations. The focus of the group was to understand the ways strengthened shared-use agreements could be a solution to the crisis of youth physical inactivity. Shared use is when a school district, government agency, or other organization allows community access to its facilities through a formal or informal agreement that describes the conditions for use. While the majority of schools in the state have shared-use agreements to some degree, community and user groups still find it difficult to access schools, creating broad, pent-up demand for access to spaces for recreation.

Through the course of this work, the task force found that the Washington State Legislature historically has shown interest in increasing community use of public schools. A series of legislative reports, task forces, and policies show a desire to fully support and provide a substantial foundation upon which this report and its recommendations are built.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report begins with a detailed overview of the problem of physical inactivity and inequitable access to physical activity; describes the national landscape of shared use as a promising but challenging solution to inactivity, and then turns specifically to shared use in Washington State, and concludes with six recommendations for strengthening the state's commitment to strong shared-use agreements, particularly between schools and their surrounding communities. A summary of recommendations is below.

- **Recommendation 1:** Establish three new policies in statute: 1) a policy that designates schools as community hubs or civic centers; 2) a model policy supportive of schools as community hubs; 3) a policy that offers financial incentive to school districts that adopt and implement the model policy.
- **Recommendation 2:** Create a communications campaign to help school leaders and policy makers understand that recognizing schools as community assets and connecting them to community needs and interests will help with the passage rate of capital project bonds and levies.
- **Recommendation 3:** Provide funding for four Shared-use Innovation Hubs to pilot shared-use projects.
- **Recommendation 4:** Change state grant criteria and review processes to embed shared-use and equitable field and facilities access.
- **Recommendation 5:** Use the Athletic Fields and Facilities Inventory as a planning tool to provide information on local assets and informs needs.
- **Recommendation 6:** Fund and commission a statewide study to more fully understand the patterns associated with declines and inequitable gaps in youth physical activity and the associated costs on education, juvenile justice, health care, and economic productivity.





# OVERVIEW

## OVERVIEW OF TASK FORCE AND PROJECT

The 2021-2023 Washington State budget allocated \$175,000 to a task force charged with addressing inequities in youth physical activity in the state. The primary objective of the task force was to discuss the ways shared-use agreements between parks and recreation departments, school districts, community-based organizations, and other public and private entities could increase youth and family physical activity. The proviso reads as follows:



*\$175,000 of Youth Athletic Facility Account is provided solely for the Recreation and Conservation Office to lead a task force to consider ways to improve equitable access to K-12 schools' fields and athletic facilities and local parks agency facilities with the goal of increasing physical activity for youth and families. A portion of the funds shall be used to inventory K-12 school fields and athletic facilities and park agency facilities. The task force participants must represent geographic diversity and shall include representatives from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Washington Association of School Administrators, the Association of Washington Principals, the Washington Recreation and Parks Association, participants with a background in public health and stakeholders who represent diverse communities and communities of color. The task force shall consider joint use agreements, partnerships, improved scheduling practices with local parks agencies including facility rental fees, and other strategies, and submit a report with best practices and policy recommendations to the Governor's Office and legislature no later than February 1, 2022.<sup>1</sup>*

The Physical Activity Task Force's 20 representatives from around the state worked on this charge for about 5 months. The group held five, full task force meetings between August 2021 and January 2022. Sixteen task force members were interviewed individually, as were eight

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other stakeholders identified by the task force. The task force's scope of work also included the review of existing joint-use agreements, an extensive literature review, and a mapping project, all described in more detail below.

Because the task force was asked to improve “equitable access” to fields and facilities, it used a definition of equity, from the Washington State Office of Equity, to ground its work. The definition is as follows:

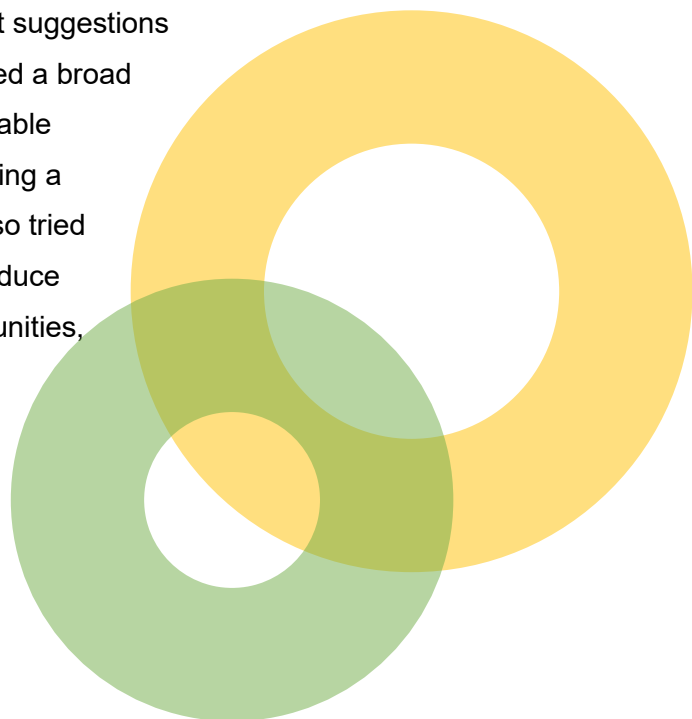
*Equity is not equality. Equity requires developing, strengthening, and supporting policies and procedures that distribute and prioritize resources to people in identity groups who have historically been and currently are marginalized, including tribes;*

*Equity requires the elimination of systemic barriers that have been deeply entrenched in systems of inequality and oppression; and*

*Equity achieves procedural and outcome fairness, promoting dignity, honor, and respect for all people.<sup>2</sup>*

The task force's recommendations, therefore, represent suggestions of ways to eliminate systemic barriers that have excluded a broad swath of Washington State's youngest and most vulnerable citizens from opportunities to be physically active, creating a health equity crisis of youth inactivity. The task force also tried to differentiate its findings and recommendations to produce equity of outcomes; smaller communities, larger communities, and tribal communities may need different adjustments and system changes to support the same goal of increased access and activity.

A list of task force members is in Appendix A.



# THE PROBLEM

## PROBLEM: LACK OF ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS A HEALTH EQUITY CRISIS

Youth physical activity is a predictor of long-term health and well-being.<sup>3</sup> Gaps in access to exercise at young ages become significant community health equity gaps in the future. The benefits of movement for youth are well-studied<sup>4</sup> and facilitate healing, promote resiliency,<sup>5</sup> and mitigate the effects of trauma.<sup>6</sup> During this time of increased stress in communities that are disproportionately impacted by the health and economic consequences of COVID-19, the ability to move and play is essential for physical and mental health.



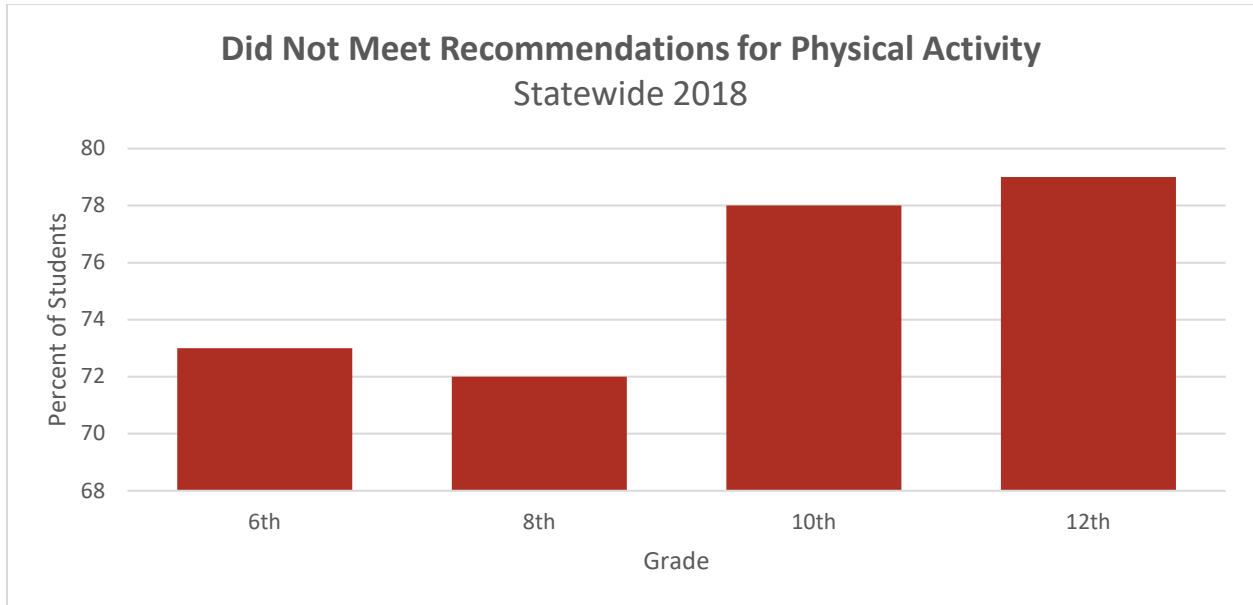
## DECLINING YOUTH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, youth in Washington State are not moving nearly enough: pre-pandemic, only about 24 percent of youth in sixth through twelfth grades were getting the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) recommended 60 minutes a day of physical activity.<sup>8</sup> That proportion has remained about the same since 2012 and is slightly below the national average of 28 percent.<sup>9</sup> The state's two most populous counties report youth physical activity levels below the state average with Pierce County at about 23 percent and King County at 19 percent.<sup>10</sup>



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Figure 1: Rate of Washington State Youth Not Getting 60 Minutes of Daily Physical Activity



The Washington State Health Youth Survey shows that youth of color and girls are getting substantially less physical activity than their white and male peers, with 15 percent of twelfth-grade girls compared with 28 percent of twelfth-grade boys getting 60 minutes of physical activity a day. See Figure 2 for a comparison of tenth-grade students by race and ethnicity. Only 38 percent of Black youth are getting 5 or more days of physical activity compared with 53 percent of white youth. Further, 41 percent of tenth-graders with physical disabilities and long-term health problems report getting 5 days or more of physical activity compared with 49 percent of their peers without disabilities or health problems.<sup>11</sup>

A recent study, *State of Play: Seattle-King County*, confirmed these results and also found that youth from lower income families and immigrant youth were even less likely to participate in physical activity and tend to be excluded from the systems and spaces where play and physical activity happens. In King County, 11 percent of youth who do not speak English at home meet the CDC recommendations compared with 20 percent of youth who do speak English at home. Children from low-affluence families reported fewer days a week of participation in physical activity (3.5 vs. 3.76 medium affluence vs. 4.46 high affluence), fewer sports sampled (8.45 vs. 10.20 vs. 14.77), lower rates of ever having played organized sports (63 percent vs. 79 percent

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medium vs. 80 percent high), or playing in sports in the past year (69 percent vs. 73 percent medium vs. 84 percent high).<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2: Relationship Between Race and Ethnicity and Physical Activity for Washington Tenth-Graders**

Race and Ethnicity	60 MINUTES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY A DAY		Total
	Fewer Than 5 Days a Week	5 or More Days	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	47.5% ±15.2% 38	52.5% ±15.2% 42	100% 80
Asian or Asian American, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander	59.5% ±3.7% 381	40.5% ±3.7% 259	100% 640
Black or African American	61.8% ±8.1% 139	38.2% ±8.1% 86	100% 225
Hispanic or Latino/Latina	53% ±3.5% 341	47% ±3.5% 302	100% 643
White or Caucasian	46.7% ±3% 802	53.3% ±3% 917	100% 1,719
More Than One Selected/Other	49.6% ±4.4% 288	50.4% ±4.4% 293	100% 581

*\*\*Fewer than 5 days" means that those students got 60 minutes of physical activity less than five days a week. The CDC recommends children and adolescents get 60 minutes of physical activity every day.*

## TROUBLING MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPACTS

With declining physical activity comes declines in physical and mental health. About 32 percent of the state's twelfth-grade students are either overweight or obese.<sup>13</sup> Children who have obesity are more likely to have high blood pressure and high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, anxiety and depression, low self-esteem and lower self-reported quality of life, and social problems such as bullying.<sup>14</sup> While these issues are serious for young people to deal with,

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children who are obese also are more likely to become obese adults, leading to a host of other, life-long and potentially life-threatening issues.<sup>15</sup> Preliminary research indicates that obesity rates in youth have increased, possibly significantly, in the past 2 years during COVID-19, due in large part to lockdown restrictions limiting accessibility to physical activity.<sup>16</sup>

Further, rates of youth mental illness have increased sharply. In 2016, 34 percent of tenth-grade youth reported feeling depressed; in 2018, that number had increased to 40 percent.<sup>17</sup> And these are both pre-pandemic numbers. National data on mental health suggests that rates of depression and anxiety have increased greatly, especially among adolescents. A report from early in the pandemic (data collected fall 2020) shows that more than half of teenagers report mental health concerns.<sup>18</sup> Further, the American Academy of Pediatrics, in concert with other pediatric associations, has declared a national emergency in children's mental health based on its findings that "between March and October 2020, emergency department visits for mental health emergencies rose by 24 percent for children ages 5-11 years and 31 percent for children ages 12-17 years. In addition, emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts increased nearly 51 percent among girls ages 12-17 years in early 2021 compared to the same period in 2019."<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, national research and Washington statewide data also show that youth who are physically active experience fewer mental health challenges.<sup>20</sup> Figure 3 illustrates that Washington State tenth-grade students who get 60 minutes of exercise 5 days a week were less likely to experience depression than those who exercised less often.

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Figure 3: Relationship between Depression and Physical Activity for Washington State Tenth-Graders

Depression	60 MINUTES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY A DAY		Total
	Fewer Than 5 Days a Week	5 or More Days a Week	
No	49.1% ±2.6% 817	50.9% ±2.6% 848	100% 1,665
Yes	56.9% ±3.4% 604	43.1% ±3.4% 458	100% 1,062

*The CDC recommends children and adolescents get 60 minutes of physical activity every day.*

## SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES CAUSING DIFFERENTIAL ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY RESOURCES

Lack of access to opportunities to be physically active is a systemic health equity issue. National research suggests there is differential access to physical activity resources “by community, socioeconomic status, and race.”<sup>21</sup> Inequities in both the built environment and recreational programming mean “low-income communities and communities of color consistently have the fewest accessible, safe, and well-maintained recreational facilities. And...they’re also less likely to have sufficient resources to create new recreational spaces.”<sup>22</sup> Failures to adapt play spaces and programming to meet the needs of youth with disabilities excludes them from opportunities to be active.<sup>23</sup>

## FIELDS AND FACILITIES

“People are more physically active when they have access to safe, affordable, high-quality space for play, exercise and recreation.”<sup>24</sup> However, because recreational space and programming is not equitably distributed, not everyone has an equitable opportunity to be active. According to the Trust for Public Lands, in cities, communities of color have access to 44 percent less park space than majority white communities. Further, even when physical activity resources are geographically close and appear accessible, some residents may encounter barriers, which may limit the use of these resources. Barriers may include neighborhood safety concerns, lack of transportation, lack of time, or expenses related to the facility. Additionally, existing social and community norms and lack of universally accessible

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facilities for older adults and youth with physical disabilities and those using assistive mobility devices can be barriers.<sup>25</sup>

In Washington State, available data reflect trends similar to national data of field and facilities inequity. The data in this next section comes from a recent analysis of trends and patterns in youth physical activity in King County as well as interviews with task force members and other stakeholders across the state.

## “There are Just Not Enough Places for Kids to Play.”

From Pasco to Federal Way to Camas, community leaders say it is difficult for kids and families to find space for either structured or unstructured play. The state’s largest city, Seattle, has above average park availability for its residents; however, even there, data on playfield use shows dramatic increases in field usage hours during the past decade commensurate with population growth. Scheduled field time for rectangular-field sports has almost doubled in the past decade from about 26,500 hours in 2006 to more than 50,000 in 2018 (not including hours on school fields). Demand has outstripped availability. Further, while Seattle scores high on overall parks access, it ranks in the bottom half of all cities for the provision of playgrounds and basketball courts, places for kids to play.<sup>26</sup> Data on the state’s other cities (Trust for Public Lands only collects data on cities) reveals much lower park accessibility: in Wenatchee, 72 percent of kids have access—defined as a 10-minute walk—to a park; in Federal Way, 61 percent of kids. In south King County, only 44 percent of the population has park access.<sup>27</sup> And in Spokane, while 87 percent of residents have access to a park, residents in neighborhoods that are majority people of color have access to 22 percent less park space per person than the city median and 70 percent less than those in white neighborhoods.

When it comes to being physically active, having access to a park is a good starting point, but it’s not the same thing as having a safe place to play and be active. Community leaders report significant difficulties finding and securing fields for organized sports and major challenges in supporting free play and family recreation. The policies and practices that shut certain user groups out of field spaces are discussed in the Data and Findings section of this report but, statewide, youth sports users express dismay at the lack of available space to play. One rural community leader said that soccer teams in that community are lucky to get 30 minutes a week

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on half a field. A football program in Federal Way described regularly having to wrangle hundreds of kids on a baseball outfield and get a grant to purchase its own portable lights to be able to play at all in the evenings. One central Washington community leader said, “We don’t seem to have enough...every organization here feels that they never have enough fields for what they do.”

Further, not all Washington communities have the capacity to invest in artificial turf fields. The statewide inventory of both schools and parks (detailed in Data and Findings section of this report) found that most outdoor fields are natural surfaces and lack lighting. For example, only 9 percent of inventoried baseball fields in the state are turf. This means that even if grass fields are available, they are unusable for the majority of the year given weather and maintenance. Grass fields also are challenging for youth with mobility issues and those using assistive devices such as wheelchairs. According to one parks and recreation director in central Washington, “We’re all natural grass and that takes a lot to manage because it gets so torn up between practices and games. You’ve got to let things rest, but they always want to play year-round.” While a park may be accessible to a family, the nature of the field and play area may mean that the field is unusable for the majority of the year. Across the state, people cite difficulties using fields “under water in the winter” or with “huge, dangerous potholes” in the summer, or stripped bare from wear and tear for much of the year. This is especially true in lower income communities and rural areas. In many communities across the state the only turf field is the high school football field.

Finding and securing indoor facilities for sports and physical activity is no less challenging. Given the state’s winter weather, having space to play indoors is paramount. Many leaders express dismay at unused space in schools. One leader suggests there needs to be “a real strong, critical look at what is best for the community” because in the summer, for example, recreation facilities are “double booking and getting real creative” as school spaces are underused. Another pressure on gym space is the proliferation of club sports teams. As one program leader notes, “You can make as many teams as there are players but you can’t physically create more gyms.” These same shortages apply to other types of indoor facilities, including tennis courts, skateparks, and hockey rinks. Further, Americans with Disabilities Act-



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compliant spaces are extremely difficult to find, and programs for youth with physical disabilities struggle to secure safe and accessible gyms.<sup>28</sup>

## SPORTS AND RECREATION PROGRAMMING

For many youth, one main way of getting physical activity is through sports. However, youth sports is less of a solution to this public health crisis than a cause of it. Youth sports has grown into a \$19 billion industry, dominated by competitive travel teams, early specialization, and a focus on competition instead of youth development. This high-cost, structured model of play has left many kids on the sidelines.

The Aspen Institute and the Sports and Fitness Industry Association report that participation in youth sports is predictable by income level. In 2020, 43 percent of kids in families making more than \$100,000 participated in sports compared with 24 percent of kids in families making less than \$25,000.<sup>29</sup> As sports has resumed, affluent families are returning to sports at a much higher rate. In September 2021, 24 percent of parents who made \$100,000 a year or more said their child had resumed sports at a higher level than before COVID-19. Only 13 percent to 14 percent of kids from the two lower-income brackets returned to sports at a higher pre-pandemic level.<sup>30</sup>

In Washington State, the recent *State of Play: Seattle-King County report* found similar patterns: sports is exclusive, economically and culturally, leaving many King County youth on the sidelines. Pre-pandemic, youth who do not speak English at home were almost three times more likely to have never participated in organized sports or recreation than children who speak English at home. Youth of color are significantly less likely than white youth to have participated in an organized sport. The range of sports played by Black and/or African-American youth and Hispanic youth is significantly less than white youth. And kids are more likely to participate in organized sports if their parents make \$75,000 or more, mirroring national trends.

The inequity in access to sports programming also is impacting school sports. Community leaders lament the impact the “pay to play” model is having on school sports. In King County, lower income families mention their kids being shut out because they can’t afford the camps and clinics other kids can. A parent described the problem this way: “Most of the major high schools

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around here, in order for these kids to play at a JV or varsity level, they have to play club ball and...so they feel forced into that system even if they can't afford it...but without that there's no chance they're going to make those teams.” This trend impacts not just who participates in high school sports but also who sees competitive success. The Seattle Times found during the past decade, four of every five public schools that won state titles were schools whose population of students who receive free and reduced-price lunch was well below the state average of 43 percent. Almost all high school state championships are won by wealthier, whiter schools.<sup>31</sup>

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH SPORTS AND FIELDS AND FACILITIES ACCESS

While affluent families are accessing increasingly expensive youth sports programs, lower income families and those opting out of structured sports still are impacted by those programs in their efforts to be active. Because fields are so scarce, in many communities all available play spaces during hours that kids can play are used by structured programming. That includes programs from outside a community, renting facilities for their teams to play. This displaces neighborhood users who might want to access fields for free play or family recreation. Around the state, community leaders reported that fields and gyms were being rented by outside users and seen as a revenue source, resulting in spaces not being available to the local community. There is growing interest among regional policy makers to address this need. Carving out this kind of time on playfields is a challenge when revenue for both schools and parks is at a premium. This issue is taken up again in this report's Data and Findings section about the trade-offs for smaller and rural communities.

The lack of available neighborhood fields also leads to the practice of club, select, and school programs taking kids, who have no local recreation opportunities, out of their communities and offering them scholarships or enticements to play in other communities. A community leader noted that this “extraction of our kids, BIPOC youth, from our communities is deeper than what we are really talking about with fields and facilities. We need to change who has access to sports and hold city councils accountable to this.”

In most communities, and even more so in rural ones, transportation is also a major barrier to accessing parks and playfields for both free and structured play. Community leaders describe

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transportation as the most significant challenge, after cost, facing access to physical activity for youth. According to the *State of Play: Seattle-King County* youth survey, almost 80 percent of youth who participate in organized sports or recreation report driving or being driven as the main mode of transportation. This transportation issue is further linked with field and facility shortages: if fields are not available in a child's neighborhood, transportation to other towns becomes a bigger burden on families, one that many cannot bear.

## A CRUCIAL INVESTMENT: PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PLAY ARE GATEWAYS TO WELL-BEING AND PRODUCTIVITY

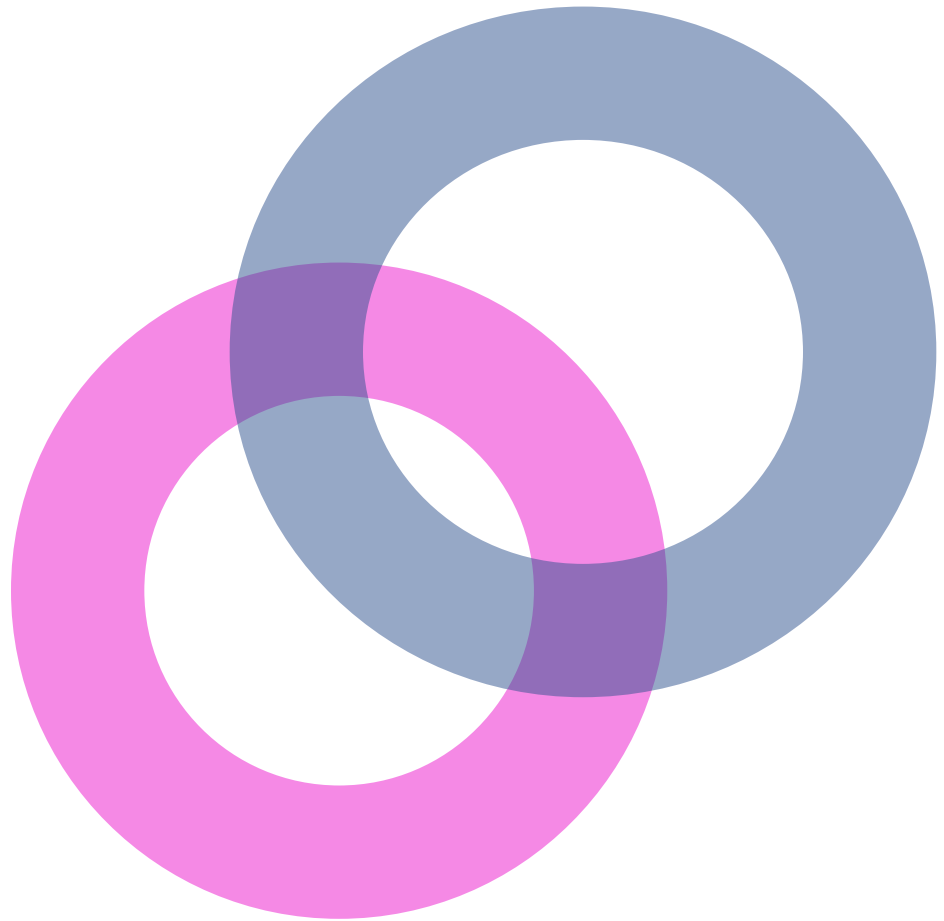
Harvard researcher John Ratey calls physical activity Miracle Grow for the brain. The data is overwhelming about the positive impact physical activity has on many areas of a child's life.<sup>32</sup> Physical activity is a proven way to improve youth mental health.<sup>33</sup> Healthy levels of physical activity also are linked with better educational outcomes, longer attention spans in school, and improved behavior.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, physical activity mitigates the effects of toxic stress and trauma and assists in regulation.<sup>35</sup> Physical activity also has been shown to promote resilience in youth<sup>36</sup> and to be a tool for reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms.<sup>37</sup> Lastly, physical activity is a proven way to boost the immune system and can help serve as a protective mechanism against illness and infection.<sup>38</sup> Both sport and nature—as facilitators of physical activity—can support healing from trauma and adverse childhood experiences.<sup>39</sup>

Further, the CDC identifies youth involvement in prosocial activities such as sports as a protective factor that may lessen the likelihood of youth violence.<sup>40</sup> The Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention suggests partnerships between public housing and park agencies, school districts, and community organizations to provide safe spaces for youth activity as an effective delinquency prevention strategy. For sports and physical activity to be a space for resilience and opportunity for all kids, they first have to become systems that do not reinforce oppressive and exclusive practices; all kids have to have access to the systems and structures that give sport, physical activity, and the outdoors such power.

An upfront investment in changing these systems will pay substantial dividends for the state's health and economic well-being. The *State of Play: Seattle-King County* research shows that if 75 percent of youth in King County meet the CDC's recommended 60 minutes of physical

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activity a day, the County will save \$725 million in health care costs and 52,000 years of life.<sup>41</sup> Extrapolating those figures to Washington State finds that if all youth in the state are active to a healthy level, the State saves almost \$3 billion in health care costs and 212,000 years of life.



# A PIECE OF THE SOLUTION

## A PIECE OF THE SOLUTION: STRENGTHENED SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS

Strengthening shared-use agreements, which increase access to existing places to play, is one potential solution to the problems outlined above. The CDC names shared-use agreements as one of its evidence-based practices to help communities address physical inactivity and associated health equity challenges.<sup>42</sup> The Physical Activity Task Force spent the majority of its time exploring the challenges associated with improving shared-use across the state and recommending solutions. This section looks at the national landscape of shared use: the promise and the challenges.



### Shared-Use Definition

*Shared use is when school districts, governments, or other organizations allow communities to have access to their facilities. It can be a formal or informal agreement, laying out the terms and conditions of property, space, and equipment usage. This agreement is oftentimes in the form of a policy enacted by a school or higher governing body that includes details about fees, liability, scheduling, and types of facilities for use.*<sup>43</sup>

Essentially, these agreements, also called joint-use, open-use, or community-use agreements allow public access to facilities by defining conditions for sharing the costs and risks associated with expanding a property's use. In Washington State, "joint use" has been more common parlance, but—reflecting perhaps a move towards increased collaboration and sharing of resources—shared use is more common nationally and in literature.

These types of agreements may exist between any entity that owns property and those who want to access it. Common examples include agreements between the following:

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- School district and a municipality
- School district and a community user group
- Municipality and a community user group
- Private entity and a community user group
- College or university and a school district, municipality, or community user group

This report primarily addresses agreements between school districts, municipalities, and community user groups. There is specific attention paid to the promise and the challenge of strengthening shared-use agreements with school districts in order to give community members more access to those neighborhood-based, public, physical activity spaces and assets. As described in more detail below, school spaces are typically the most underused and offer the most potential for improving equitable access.

Shared or community agreements are distinct from “open community use,” which is allowing free community access to a school’s outdoor recreational facilities before or after school hours. This is a potential strategy within a community’s arsenal, which also greatly increases physical activity opportunities, but was not specifically explored for this report.

Another related term and concept is “community schools,” which is a collaborative effort by service providers (including the school district) to deliver comprehensive and connected services that are mutually beneficial to accomplishing the mission of all organizations using the schools. The goal and result are building a stronger community.<sup>44</sup>

## SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS INCREASE ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Studies conducted across a diverse range of communities indicate that shared use is an effective strategy to promote physical activity among children and adults.<sup>45</sup> After-school programs and community recreational use of school property are associated with increased community cohesion, economic benefit, reduced childhood obesity rates, crime reduction, and enhanced academic performance.<sup>46</sup> Children who have access to an open schoolyard are significantly more physically active than children who do not.<sup>47</sup> Even more effective than



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opening schools to community use is providing physical activity programs within them. A study of seven under-resourced school districts in Los Angeles County found that community members used open facilities at schools where programs were offered (e.g., swimming, aerobic dance classes, walking clubs) 16 times more often than they used open schools without activity programming.<sup>48</sup> Locally, the Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma and Tacoma School District have seen great success through a strong joint-use agreement accompanied by a partnership for the park district to run after-school sports programs in 36 elementary schools. This increased participation in these park's programs by 450 percent.<sup>49</sup>

## CASE STUDY: IN TACOMA SHARED USE SUPPORTS A SHARED VISION

The Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma and Tacoma Public Schools have embarked on a number of joint initiatives during the past decade in a unique and collaborative effort to better serve the youngest and most vulnerable residents of Tacoma. Foundational to their efforts is a strong partnership and an interlocal agreement that sets out the parameters of how they share public lands and facilities in support of a clear shared vision. Led by Schools Superintendents Dr. Carla Santourno (former) and Dr. Josh Garcia (current) and Parks Executive Director Shon Sylvia, Tacoma have been pursuing a vision of using public assets and sharing community space to increase services and access to the public. Since Metro Parks only has four community centers, schools as community hubs meet residents' needs and create programming that doesn't require costly and time-consuming transportation to access. The result is a thriving citywide afterschool enrichment program and shared community assets for recreation and education. Three other factors support this shared vision: a strong interlocal agreement (another name for a shared-use agreement), collaborative leadership across and throughout systems, and the inclusion of an Out of School Time Intermediary as a third collaborator in the efforts to create more accessible, high-quality programming.

Tacoma's current iteration of the interlocal agreement has been in place for about a decade and was designed to maximize sharing of spaces, consistency, and predictability while limiting payment between the two systems. According to Metro Parks Districtwide Programs manager, Mary Tuttle, the interlocal agreement gives her staff the confidence and comfort to schedule programming at schools without the fear that they could be displaced by other users, particularly

# A PIECE OF THE SOLUTION

those that might pay. This opened up the ability to make concrete plans on an ongoing basis and has led to a thriving partnership.

For schools, the interlocal agreement makes it clear that schools are intended as community hubs and open to the public for meetings, activities, and events. While this can be a challenge for custodial services and maintenance, according to James Neil, Tacoma Public Schools director of Athletics and Activities, “the interlocal agreement provides a clear understanding of who is responsible for what, and as a community and a system we understand how we can provide facilities and custodial support in support of community activities.” According to Mr. Neil, schools also leverage available park spaces for programming like swim lessons, middle school cross-country, baseball, and softball. The agreement provides consistency and predictability for school staff as well as kids and families.

A second piece of the puzzle is what program partners call “leadership at all levels of the system.” From the Joint Municipal Action Committee (a cross-sector, citywide planning group) to organizational executive directors to program coordinators, leaders are breaking down silos to better serve the city’s residents and work across systems. According to Ms. Tuttle, this has created a shared culture and shared responsibility for the community’s kids and allowed for a richness to what can be provided for them in their neighborhoods.

Lastly, Tacoma Parks and Schools have joined with Greentrike an out-of-school time intermediary to facilitate youth programming across school and park sites. Each entity has a clear role. The school district manages facilities, busing, nutritional services, custodial, and registration; Greentrike convenes community-based enrichment providers, setting standards for high-quality programs, and leading data collection on outcomes; and Metro Parks leverages the interlocal agreement to reserve and coordinate space on behalf of all community partners and convene providers weekly.

Some of the projects and investments built on the foundation of the interlocal agreement, shared planning, and common vision include the following:

# A PIECE OF THE SOLUTION

- **Green School Yards Project:** Since 2020, The Trust for Public Lands, Metro Parks, and Tacoma Public Schools have been collaborating with schools and community members to redesign and transform the playgrounds at five elementary schools in the east side and south end of Tacoma. By turning these paved school areas into green school yards, this project will greatly increase the percentage of families who have walkable access to a park. If all Tacoma schools gain community schoolyards, 10-minute walk access would increase citywide from 69 percent to 78 percent.
- **Beyond the Bell, Club Beyond, and the Elementary Sports Program:** To overcome geographic and economic barriers that make it harder for children to participate in recreational opportunities, Metro Parks and community partners offer their afterschool programming directly in Tacoma Public Schools and offer a “pay what you can model.” Originally Metro Parks provided after-school programming in nine locations and offered scholarships to kids. Because there was no transportation and parents had to get on buses to bring kids across the city, scholarships went unused and participation rates were low. Now programs are offered in 36 locations and youth participation in parks programs increased by 450 percent between 2015 and 2018.
- **Shared Buildings:** The Eastside Community Center is a new, and much needed, community space built on school district land, and the Science and Math Institute is a school built on parks’ land in Point Defiance Park, and will soon include a boathouse for both school and community use.
- **Open Use of School Turf fields:** school fields are accessible to community at all times, and only closed to neighborhood users when there are scheduled practices or games.

Built on the foundation of shared interests in a healthy community and a shared agreement for use of community spaces, the Tacoma partnership allows each organization to maximize their assets and strengths in service of Tacoma’s kids.

By opening facilities to community members and linking youth with physical activity opportunities in school gyms, tracks and fields, community fitness and sports facilities, and

# A PIECE OF THE SOLUTION

parks and playgrounds, shared-use agreements increase access to places for physical activity. Shared-use agreements also may increase physical activity levels, especially in communities with low incomes and in rural settings.<sup>50</sup> For communities of color, access to neighborhood-based opportunities for physical activity supports increased levels of activity across all ages.<sup>51</sup> However, there are fewer shared-use agreements in underserved communities and more perceived barriers to the implementation of shared-use agreements in under-resourced communities.<sup>52</sup>

## SHARED USE IS AN EFFICIENT USE OF PUBLIC RESOURCES

Shared use is an effective and efficient policy because it aims to maximize use of existing infrastructure and public assets. “The sharing of school facilities and grounds leverages the community’s capital infrastructure and investments so that every agency that provides services need not build, operate, and maintain its own buildings and grounds.”<sup>53</sup> Increasing access to existing spaces and expanding public use of existing facilities is less expensive than building new facilities, making them ideal steps in a larger strategy to increase recreational access and reduce health inequities.<sup>54</sup> When planning for construction of new facilities, it is more efficient to plan for multiple uses and purposes.

According to national data from the Trust for Public Land, if every public schoolyard were open to the public—designed for the broader community—one-fifth of the population would have increased access to a safe place to play.<sup>55</sup>

## CHALLENGES WITH SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS

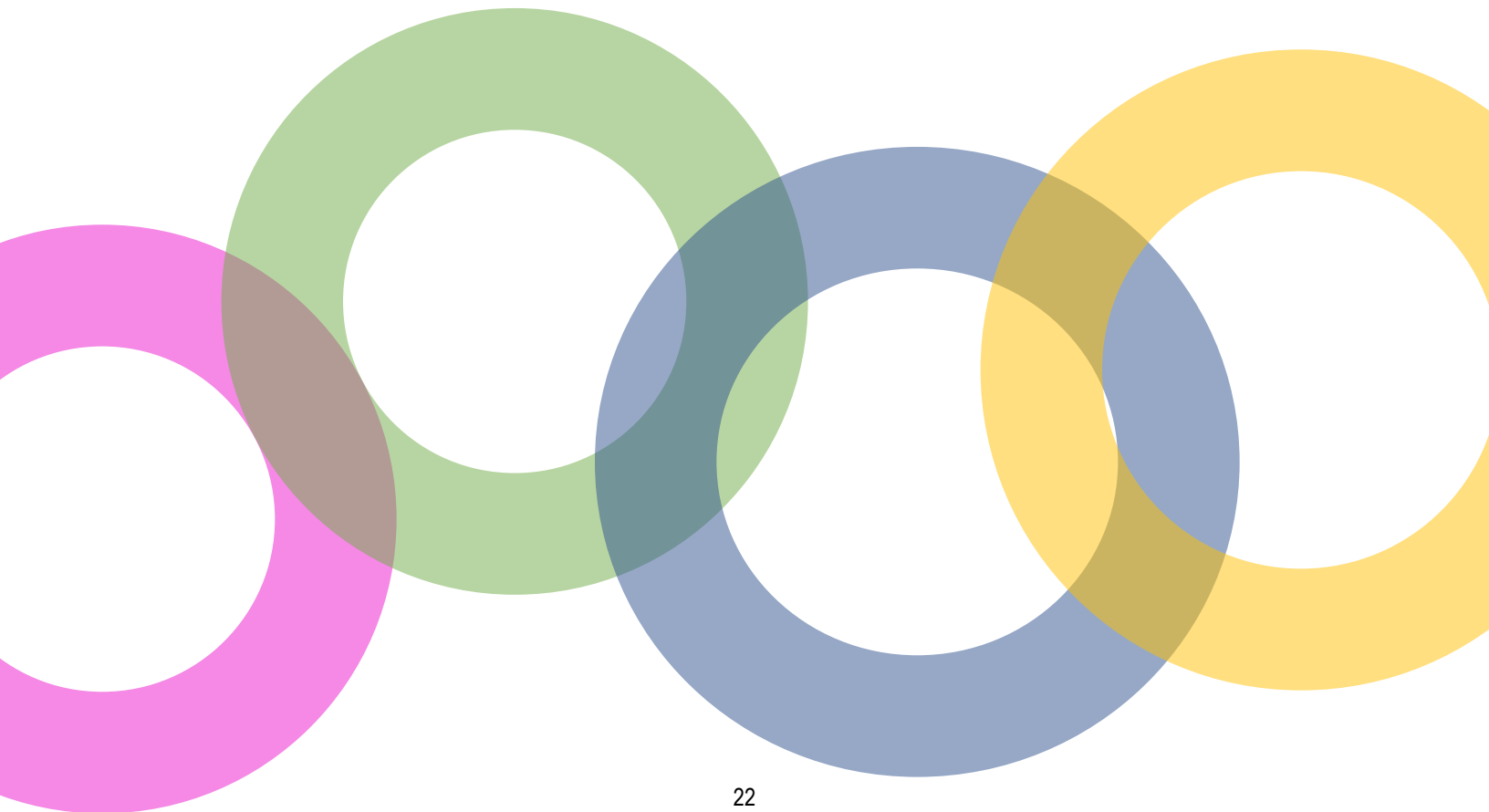
Despite all of their benefits, shared-use agreements are challenging to structure in a way that works for all users and significantly improves community access to public assets. Nationally, the most widely cited challenges are liability and insurance, funding and resources, facilities management, and safety and crime.<sup>56</sup> According to *Shared use for Washington State: A toolkit to guide community partners in forming successful agreements* (Appendix I):

*Although it produces benefits for the community, shared use can be difficult to negotiate and implement. Property owners may have different goals and priorities than those who want to use their spaces. Property owners may also be resistant*

# A PIECE OF THE SOLUTION

*because of liability fears. Even when all parties share the same vision and serve the same community, negotiations may fall through when the parties can't come to an agreement about the fee structure, maintenance and operational costs, priority of use structure, etc. Lastly, time is an important factor. It takes time to form a relationship, draft a shared use agreement, and carry it out, and some organizations feel they do not have adequate resources to devote to shared use.<sup>57</sup>*

Importantly, however, many states and municipalities have found their way around these and other challenges to make shared use a cost-effective community and health-building strategy. These challenges and others specific to Washington State are described in more detail below.



# SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS

## WASHINGTON STATE SHARED-USE AGREEMENT HISTORY

Washington State has mixed evidence of effectiveness in its deployment of shared-use agreements to bolster youth physical activity, but the Legislature and other state agencies have a long history of exploration and interest in the issue and have been, for more than a decade, “seeking ways to expand or incentivize multiple-use of schools” including “making grants available...for joint use of facilities.”<sup>58</sup> The first part of this section details the ways in which the Legislature has demonstrated intent to bolster the use of schools as community hubs.



## CURRENT SUPPORT FOR SHARED USE IN STATUTE

A number of policies and purpose statements in statute recognize the value and importance of shared use of school facilities. Revised Code of Washington [28A.335.155](#), titled *The use of buildings for youth programs limited immunity*, is one of the strongest laws in the country protecting schools against liability for issues that arise with use of their facilities by outside groups. Further, the intent of that statute is clearly spelled out by the Legislature:

*Intent—1999 c 316: "The legislature intends to expand the opportunities of children to take advantage of services of private nonprofit groups by encouraging the groups' use of public school district facilities to provide programs to serve youth in the facilities. The legislature intends the very limited grant of immunity provided in this act to encourage such use, but only under the circumstances set forth in this act."*

Similarly, the purposes spelled out in Revised Code of Washington [28A.620.010](#) indicate an intention to use schools as community assets. Those purposes include the following:



# SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS

*(1) Provide educational, recreational, cultural, and other community services and programs through the establishment of the concept of community education with the community school serving as the center for such activity;*

*(2) Promote a more efficient and expanded use of existing school buildings and equipment;*

*(6) Help develop a sense of community in which the citizens cooperate with the public schools and community agencies and groups to resolve their school and community concerns and to recognize that the schools are available for use by the community day and night, year-round or any time when the programming will not interfere with the preschool through grade twelve program.*

## PREVIOUS STATEWIDE EFFORTS TO BOLSTER SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

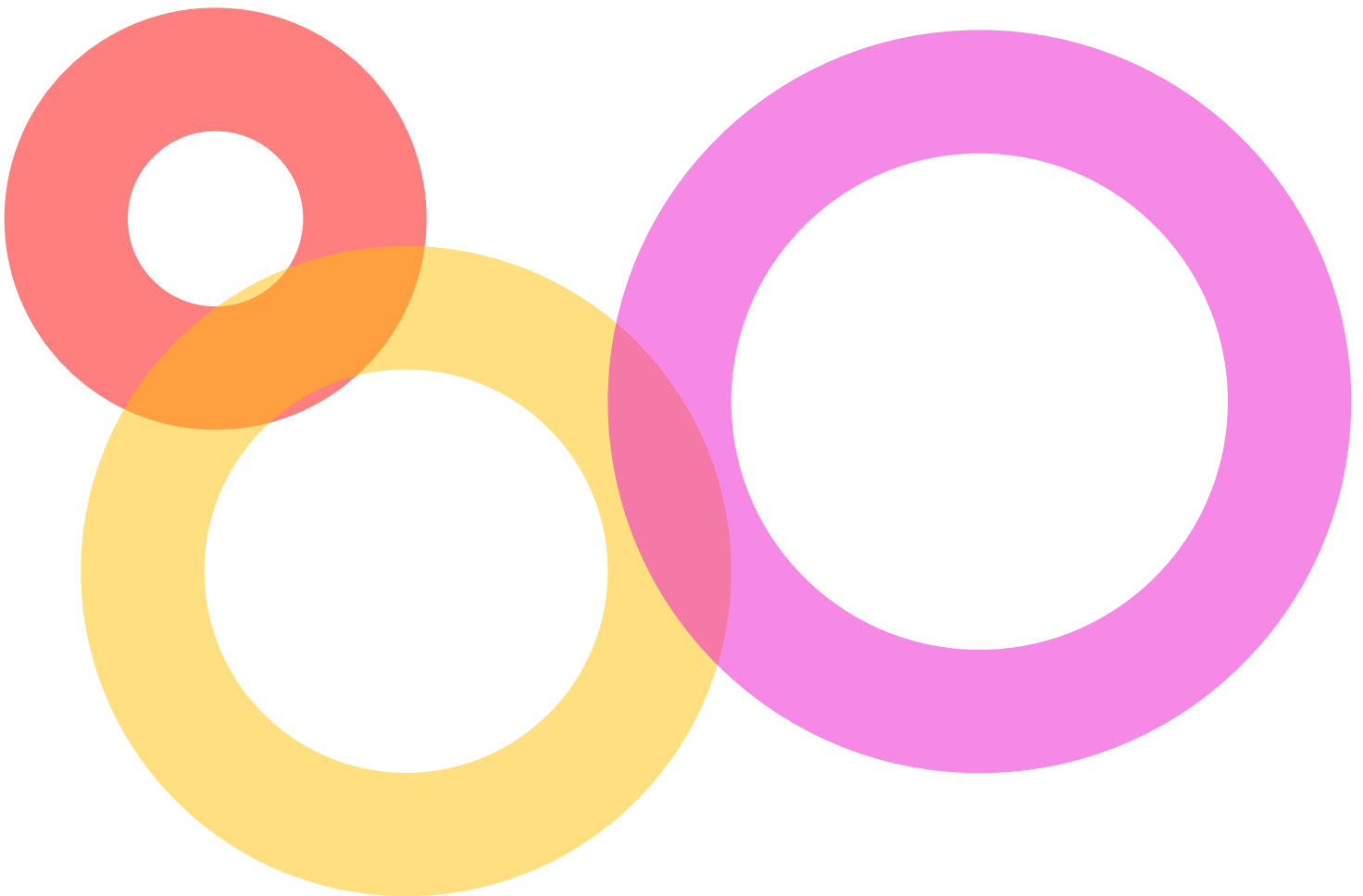
If House Bill 3291: Community Schools Act of 2008, had passed, capital grants would have been provided to develop community schools and convert empty school buildings into community facilities. At that time, “the legislature found that cooperative partnerships and joint use of facilities between public schools, local governments, early learning providers, health and social service providers and postsecondary institutions can result in the effective use of federal, state, local and community resources.”<sup>59</sup>

In 2010, a task force reported to the Legislature on how to “Remove future funding penalties for school districts that accommodate cooperative partnerships and/or joint uses of public-school facilities.” That task force suggested, among other things, that the Legislature should “provide capital grant funds, separate from the school construction assistance program, for the development of community schools and to convert empty school buildings into community facilities. The grants could be used for joint planning, siting and co-location of community schools.”<sup>60</sup>

A 2015 effort that involved the Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition, the Washington State Alliance of YMCAs, the state Department of Health, and the American Heart Association resulted in a statewide assessment of schools and shared use and a community toolkit for end users.

# SHARED-USE AGREEMENTS

Despite all of these efforts and interest, youth physical activity is declining, gaps in who has access to spaces to play are growing, and community leaders are clamoring for increased access to fields and facilities. So the issue remains an important one for communities, state agencies, and the Legislature.



# DATA AND FINDINGS

## DATA AND TASK FORCE FINDINGS

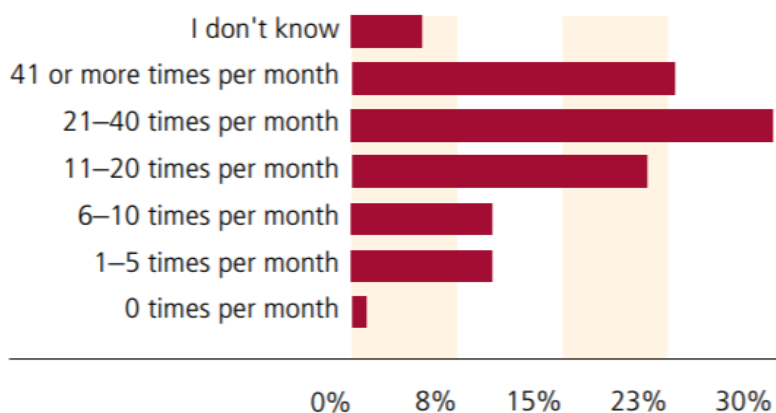
Despite growing reports from community and user groups on the need for access to school facilities, school districts report, overwhelmingly, that they have shared-use agreements with their local communities. A 2015 survey of Washington school administrators found that all but 2 percent of districts reported community use of facilities. Not all had formal shared-use agreements: about 20 percent of districts reported use without a contract.<sup>61</sup>



In the Athletic Fields and Facilities Inventory done through this proviso, 97 percent of districts reported having some type of agreement, formal or informal, for community use of schools. See Figure 4 for the 2015 survey data on frequency of community use of schools.

**Figure 4: Frequency of Shared Use<sup>62</sup>**

Responses of school administrators when asked, “Approximately how many times per month do community members or organizations use your school district’s school facilities during non-school hours?”



The same 2015 report, which also produced a *Shared Use Agreement Toolkit for Community Users in Washington State*, identified statewide challenges for implementing strong shared-use agreements very similar to the national list detailed above. That report cited the following barriers for both school administrators and end users: cost, scheduling, facility scarcity, and liability. See Figure 5 below.

# DATA AND FINDINGS

Figure 5: Identified Barriers to Shared Use of School Project in Washington (2015)



## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TASK FORCE FINDINGS

### COST: A BARRIER FOR EVERYONE

The costs of shared use, while much less than the alternative of building community facilities to meet demand, are problematic for schools, prohibitive for many user groups, and restrictive for those interested in unstructured programming. In the 2015 report, school administrators indicated cost as the main barrier to community use of school property, specifically costs to pay staff for supervision and maintenance. Users also cited cost as a barrier, especially to recurring programming.

The task force concurred with this assessment and also uncovered some other areas of concern with cost. First, some schools choose to see facility rental as a revenue source, and look to do more than just recoup costs. This means that their facilities get used by wealthier programs and tournaments, which only are accessible to a minority of kids. As one community leader noted, we need schools to see facilities “as less of a revenue source and more of a community asset.”

# DATA AND FINDINGS

However, shared-use agreements, in and of themselves, do not mitigate the expenses associated with maintenance, supervision, and safety of fields and facilities. The agreements do help with the possibility of sharing costs across multiple users. The real challenge, according to school, park, and community leaders, is making those costs a budgetary and funding priority. According to these leaders, most capital funding sources do not allow for these types of expenditures, leaving schools to scrape them out of their budgets or seek outside funding sources. The more school facilities are open to the public, the more challenging it becomes for schools to recoup costs.

## SCHEDULING AND ACCESS: LACK OF CONSISTENT AND ACCESSIBLE SYSTEMS

Considering that each school in a district and then each district in the state might have a different mechanism for facility and field rental, community-based organizations and user groups have an extremely difficult time navigating school reservation systems. Additionally, parks agencies have a variety of systems with few online. For community groups run by volunteers, as many sports programs are, figuring out where and how to find information and book fields requires significant time.

In 2015, one-fifth of school administrators reported using an online scheduling system. While this study did not collect data on that specifically, only 4 percent of school districts reported having their facilities' scheduling information available on their Web sites.

Program leaders say that field use policies and request forms, once they are located, are not user-friendly. Points of contact are difficult to find, most forms are only in English, and systems are confusing to navigate. According to one community leader, the field reservation system “locks underserved populations out of the mix of getting access to the field.” Another parks and recreation employee noted that the hoops for both scheduling and insurance are a barrier to newer, informal, and non-English speaking users.

Almost all users point to having to develop personal relationships to navigate field and facility use systems. Because access is so dependent on personal connections instead of systems, this puts non-networked users at a disadvantage. It also creates a lack of accountability, transparency, and potential misuse of power and access.

# DATA AND FINDINGS

## SCHOOL MISSION ALIGNMENT

While one of the central aims of a municipal parks and recreation department or a community-based sports and recreation program is to provide sports and physical activity options to the community, the same is not necessarily true for schools and school districts. While most schools see educating the whole child as an important component of their basic educational duty and have policies supporting holistic well-being, schools' core missions are not to provide their facilities to the broader community. And, often, even a desire or interest to do so runs counter to the available time, resources, and goals schools have.

Providing a clear system for booking, scheduling, maintaining, and cleaning fields and facilities while also ensuring the safety of students, staff, and school facilities is an overwhelming challenge for most schools. Task force members in schools talked about not having the resources or staff to act as facility providers and often having to seek outside resources to provide communities with this benefit. According to one community leader:

*There are not enough people in buildings to do all the work that needs to be done right now in the COVID crisis. There's not even enough staffing. Principals, they are literally putting out fires...So that's not to say they're not passionate about athletics and making use of the facilities. There are literally not enough people right now to help them do their jobs of educating kids...Health and this whole connection with community groups needs to be stronger because we don't have enough people to do all the work.*

School administrators' role is also to protect and maintain school assets for the use of students. Some school leaders noted this can be at odds with allowing community access to those assets. Some talked about dealing with graffiti, substantial litter, and even theft when allowing outside groups to use facilities.

The essential challenge here is that while schools are public assets, built with taxpayer funds, they typically are not built, staffed, or resourced to be a space that is shared with the public. According to *Policy Framework for Joint Use of Schools*:



# DATA AND FINDINGS

*Most school districts have inadequate joint-use policies to guide decisions about access to buildings and grounds and to determine priorities for use. The typical school district underutilizes its public assets, does not necessarily provide comprehensive or appropriate access to those assets, and is not transparent about costs, fees, and availability. All of these practices exclude some sectors of the community.<sup>63</sup>*

Again, these practices are not necessarily intentionally confusing or un-systematic; schools are often doing their best with the resources available to serve as a community asset.

## SILOS

Compounding these challenges is the siloed nature of both youth programming, community planning, and physical activity and outdoor recreation. Silos exist at all levels: local, regional, state. Community planning, educational, and municipal strategic and fiscal planning are rarely integrated leaving shared use to be a reaction to pressure as opposed to part of a pro-active community planning effort from the beginning. This has an impact on how facilities are designed and used.

State agencies, as well, plan for physical activity and parks projects in isolation. A good example of this siloing is the series of studies underway which could inform each other if done collaboratively: the Parks Rx Task Force hosted by Department of Health; the Physical Activity Task Force and a comprehensive equity review of grant programs, both conducted by the Recreation and Conservation Office; and equity initiatives at multiple state agencies.

Further because no single agency is responsible for physical activity, it is a decentralized priority with a number of agencies having funding and programming related to its promotion but lacking a coherent, statewide vision and agenda. No one agency is directly responsible for stemming the decline in youth physical activity, which, despite a range of interventions across state agencies, continues unabated.

# DATA AND FINDINGS

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS IN SMALLER COMMUNITIES

Smaller communities in the state identified the tension between leaving school and park spaces open for community use on a first-come, first-served basis, and creating structure that might better serve some users (and recoup costs) while creating barriers for other users. In one small central Washington school district, the administration recently implemented a plan to schedule and charge fees for use of its physical activity spaces after years of a first-come, first-served approach. The change, while it cost the district money up-front (paid for by a grant), ultimately created structure and a sustainable revenue source to pay for janitorial services, maintenance, and other expenses associated with community use. However, users now have to be part of a program that pays for and schedules time in order to use the facilities. The district recognizes this is an inequitable solution and is looking for ways to resolve this tension and remediate the unintended consequence of shutting some families out of the system while making it more manageable for others and for the school itself. As population growth continues across the state and demand for play space increases, smaller communities will find themselves challenged to develop both practical and equitable solutions.

Further, some smaller parks and recreation departments find themselves unable to broker stronger shared-use agreements with school districts because the schools have better facilities and are not looking to use or share municipal resources. This leaves parks departments scrambling to find suitable spaces for programs. On the other hand, some smaller school districts, especially those that have trouble passing capital bond measures, are more reluctant to allow their facilities to be used by the community because they likely will be unable to afford increased maintenance, repairs, and construction costs in the future. This is a vicious cycle because the community near these facilities, therefore, does not see the school as a public asset and is less likely to vote for bond measures to support school capital projects.

## TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Tribal communities face many of the same barriers to physical activity as other communities around the state. A report on physical activity resources for the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe found that while the tribe has several physical activity resources, including a pool and a gym,

# DATA AND FINDINGS

tribal members found they couldn't use those facilities because of limited open hours, no vehicles to drive there, and few or no transportation alternatives.<sup>64</sup> Due to tribal sovereignty<sup>65</sup> and tribal funding, shared use with schools has more barriers for tribes. Finding solutions that allow sharing of assets between schools and tribes is essential to addressing physical activity access and health inequities for native youth.

## ANALYSIS OF FIELDS AND FACILITIES INVENTORY

A portion of the operating funds allocated for this project were used to inventory kindergarten through high school fields and athletic facilities and park agency facilities. The state Recreation and Conservation Office contracted with Washington Hometown to survey 295 school districts in Washington State using a mixture of surveys, phone calls, airphoto inventory, and web research. A majority of the data for 2,146 schools was gathered using phone calls. Data includes facilities, surface type, lighting, whether they were open to the public outside of school hours, scheduling rules, and if there is a shared-use agreement.

The inventory data revealed some interesting trends such as 75 percent of school districts has a community use policy, 97 percent of all schools allow general public use of their facilities, and 96 percent must be scheduled.

The park agency facility data already was available from a previous Recreation and Conservation Office study, but the athletic facility information was updated and improved upon to include surface type and lighting. There are 1,070 inventoried recreation areas with athletic facilities included in the community park agency data. The data are organized into categories such as, swimming pools, sports complex, community centers, and local parks.

The statewide inventory of both schools and parks found that most outdoor fields are natural surfaces and lack lighting. Football and multipurpose fields are the most likely to be lit and multipurpose, soccer, and football fields the most likely to be turf or synthetic.

# DATA AND FINDINGS

Figure 6: Statewide Fields Data

Fields	Total	Percent Turf or Synthetic Surface	Percent with Lights
Multipurpose	541	45%	47%
Football	112	24%	50%
Baseball	706	9%	20%
Softball	1,555	5%	15%
Baseball/Softball	216	1%	15%
Soccer	358	28%	20%
Practice*	2,226	1%	1%

*\*Practice fields are usable, unmarked fields suitable for practices but not official competition.*

ESRI, a global mapping company, created an interactive map to display the inventory; analyzed the density of facilities in a school district, and measured community proximity to facilities. The map does not reveal which community members have access to the facilities (if at all), or if there are safe walking routes or public transportation. Future analysis could be done to identify barriers to equitable access including preferential scheduling and lack of transportation.

## COVID-19 CAVEAT

The Physical Activity Task Force members recognized the importance of COVID-19 in considerations for sharing space. On the one hand, youth physical activity and mental health has declined precipitously as a result of the pandemic and associated school closures and lock downs, making the need for interventions urgent. On the other hand, schools are overwhelmed by the new requirements for them to mitigate the spread of disease and keep students and teachers safe.

As one task force member noted school administrators understand what a strong connection movement is to a kid's well-being and mental health" and maybe it's a good time for "reimagining what school could look like" with this in mind.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these findings and the Legislature's ongoing interest in finding ways to promote community use of public schools, the Physical Activity Task Force has six recommendations, which were informed by evidence-based practices in other states and regions and by previous work in Washington to address these issues.



### RECOMMENDATION 1

The Legislature is asked to create a bill that establishes three new policies in statute: 1) a policy designating schools as community hubs or civic centers; 2) a model policy supportive of schools as community hubs (this could be done by the Washington State School Directors' Association); 3) a policy offering financial incentive to districts that adopt and implement the model policy. The three elements are described in more detail below.

Given the Legislature's expressed desire for schools to serve as community assets for physical activity and other community services (See Shared-use Agreements section above for details), the task force recommends expressing that desire in statute and adopting a policy with language more similar to that used in California, Utah, or Hawaii. Utah's statute, which enables the widest range of community uses of any state, decrees that "all public school buildings and grounds shall be civic centers;..." "civic center" means a public school building or ground that is established and maintained as a limited public forum to district residents for supervised recreational activities and meetings;...and [a] local school board...shall allow the use of a civic center, for other than school purposes..."<sup>66</sup> Hawaii's statute states that "[a]ll public school buildings, facilities, and grounds shall be available for general recreational purposes, and for public and community use..."<sup>67</sup> California's law states that there is a "civic center at each and every public school facility and grounds within the state."<sup>68</sup>

As a follow on to the Legislature's adoption of stronger language related to schools as community hubs or civic centers, and specifically for physical activity needs, the task force recommends the Legislature require the school directors' association to adopt a model shared-use policy that operationalizes the intentions set out by the new state laws created by the

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Legislature. Many school districts across the state have Policy 4260, which addresses use of school property, but the school directors' association does not have a model policy for shared use of school facilities and grounds.

A *Policy Framework for Joint Use* suggests school districts be guided by a particular vision for shared use. For example, a model policy would lead with a statement such as this:

*The School District envisions its school facilities as public assets and places where—first and foremost—children have a healthy, safe, and well-maintained place to learn and play, but also as facilities that are used to their fullest extent to meet the varied educational, cultural, and recreational needs of our community.*<sup>69</sup>

Model policies would address everything from philosophy and priorities to the specifics about which facilities are available when, the capital costs associated with shared use, and the logistics of scheduling and fee collection. Regarding fee collection, the model policy should suggest a sliding scale that charges more to for-profit organizations, select sports, and tournaments while also asserting that time for programs serving vulnerable populations be prioritized. Examples of a model policy template from California may be found in Appendix F and an example of a Policy 4260 may be found in Appendix G.

In conjunction with the first two parts of this recommendation, the task force asks the Legislature to offer, in statute, the following incentives to schools and school districts that adopt the model policy and adjust (or already have adjusted) school policies and practices so schools serve as community hubs:

- School districts with enrollments of 1,000 or more students that adopt the model policy are eligible for adjustments in the calculated rate of state funding assistance through the School Construction Assistance Program. (This program applies only to indoor instructional spaces, which includes gymnasiums.) Currently, the Funding Assistance Percentage is based on a sliding scale and calculated annually as a ratio of a district's assessed land value per student compared to the statewide average of assessed land value per student. Available assistance ranges from 20 percent to 100 percent of recognized project costs. Additional points are provided for district-anticipated growth. This recommendation suggests giving

# RECOMMENDATIONS

districts additional points for adopting the school directors' association's model shared use policy.

- School districts with enrollments of 1,000 or fewer students that adopt the model policy are eligible to have their capital bond measures be passed by simple majority votes of eligible voters and have adjustments in the calculated rate of State Funding Assistance through the School Construction Assistance Program. This would require a change to the state constitution.

The 2010 report to the Legislature, *Analysis of the Joint Use of Public School Facilities* referenced in the Data and Findings section of this report, also considered the impacts to the School Construction Assistance Program if schools were asked or required to construct buildings to account for community needs. It was determined that such an ask was feasible but would require an in-depth study of the areas in the School Construction Assistance Program that would be affected by adding exceptions to the instructional space eligibility, and would need to be convened in order to address such issues as the following:

- Changes to the funding formula
- Changes to inventory tracking
- Changes to eligibility calculations
- Changes to the funding of basic instructional space
- Possible inequities between large and small districts
- Acceptable partnerships<sup>70</sup>

Some of these items are explicitly addressed in the recommended statute; however, other elements of adjustments to the School Construction Assistance Program might need further clarification as part of the bill creation process.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

The Legislature is asked to direct the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to work in collaboration with the Washington Recreation and Parks Association to jointly create a communications campaign to help school leaders and policy makers understand that

# RECOMMENDATIONS

recognizing schools as community assets and acting to connect them to community needs and interests will help with the passage rate of capital project bonds and levies. The campaign also would help explain the return on investment for schools as community hubs for prosocial activities, including sports. These community benefits include decreased youth violence, decreased disease and health care costs, improved mental health, and improved school outcomes (see The Problem section in this report for fuller descriptions of these associations).

## RECOMMENDATION 3

The Legislature is asked to allocate up to \$5 million for four demonstration pilots called Shared-Use Innovation Hubs. The demonstration project cities or areas will adopt a series of best practices and local-level recommendations from the task force and be supported in implementation by a local advisory committee that includes community partners. The demonstration projects will be in one urban city and school district collaboration; one small city or suburban area and school district collaboration; one rural town or city and school district collaboration, and one tribal area and school district collaboration.

Best practice policies for use in these innovation hubs including the following:

- Data collection on field and facility users
- Public engagement in field- and facility-use strategic planning
- Joint school district and municipal and county-level planning
- Equity audit of shared-use and other field-use policies
- Adoption of a strong, equitable, shared-use agreement brokered by the community
- The creation of a youth sports and recreation advisory council
- A plan that sets aside fields and facilities for free play, meaning unscheduled use
- A field and facilities booking system that is consistent across schools and parks in the region and that is accessible to users
- Intergenerational physical activity programming at school sites, supported by community partners



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Accessible design elements
- Development of a sliding scale fee policy for fields and facilities use
- Consideration of open community use of school facilities and green schoolyard conversions

Los Angeles County used a similar model, called the Joint Use Moving People to Play (JUMPP) project to positive effect at 12 school sites.<sup>71</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 4

State agencies should change grant application criteria and review processes to embed shared-use and equitable field and facilities access. For example, agencies could provide evaluation points for applicants with a shared-use agreement that meets the standards of the Equitable Joint Use Agreement Template (found in Appendix D. Agencies also could change application criteria so applicants identify the equitable policies and practices that ensure the fields and facilities impacted by the grant will be accessible to community. Some of the grant programs that could implement these changes are detailed below.

### RECREATION AND CONSERVATION OFFICE GRANT PROGRAMS

The Recreation and Conservation Office provides funding for athletic fields and facilities in a number of grant programs. Grant programs, including the Youth Athletic Facilities Program and the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Local Parks Category, should make changes to evaluation criteria. Some examples of recommended changes include the following:

- Providing application criteria that give incentives for shared-use agreements governing the fields funded by the program.
- Providing money not just for capital expenditures but as incentives to municipalities with strong, equitable, shared-use agreements by supporting expenditures related to shared maintenance and oversight.
- Prioritizing grant applications that demonstrate partnership.
- Understanding more about why so few schools apply for Recreation and Conservation Office grants through a series of school-based listening sessions, and adjusting grant

# RECOMMENDATIONS

criteria to better support school applications in vulnerable communities and communities lacking fields and facilities based on the Athletic Fields and Facilities Inventory.

- Providing funding for programs to collect data about field users.
- Lowering or dropping the matching requirement in communities with lower field inventory as identified on the state Athletic Fields and Facilities Inventory (facilities per 1,000 people within a school district boundary) and that serve vulnerable populations
- Providing an incentive in evaluation criteria that gives preference to projects that benefit school district facilities where a shared-use agreement guarantees community access and scheduling availability for non-school use.
- Prioritizing projects that increase accessibility for youth with disabilities

## OFFICE OF SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION GRANT PROGRAMS

Healthy Schools; Healthy Kids program provides funds in two categories: physical education/physical activity and nutrition. Applicants pursuing funds for physical activity could be evaluated on the accessibility of facilities to community users and strength of shared-use agreements and be given more points for indicating facilities will be used outside of school hours.

## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE GRANT PROGRAMS

The Youth Recreational Facilities Grant funds up to 25 percent of eligible capital costs of new facilities or major improvements to facilities dedicated to nonresidential youth services (excluding outdoor athletic fields). Applications could be evaluated on the accessibility of funded facilities to community users and strength of shared-use agreements.

## RECOMMENDATION 5

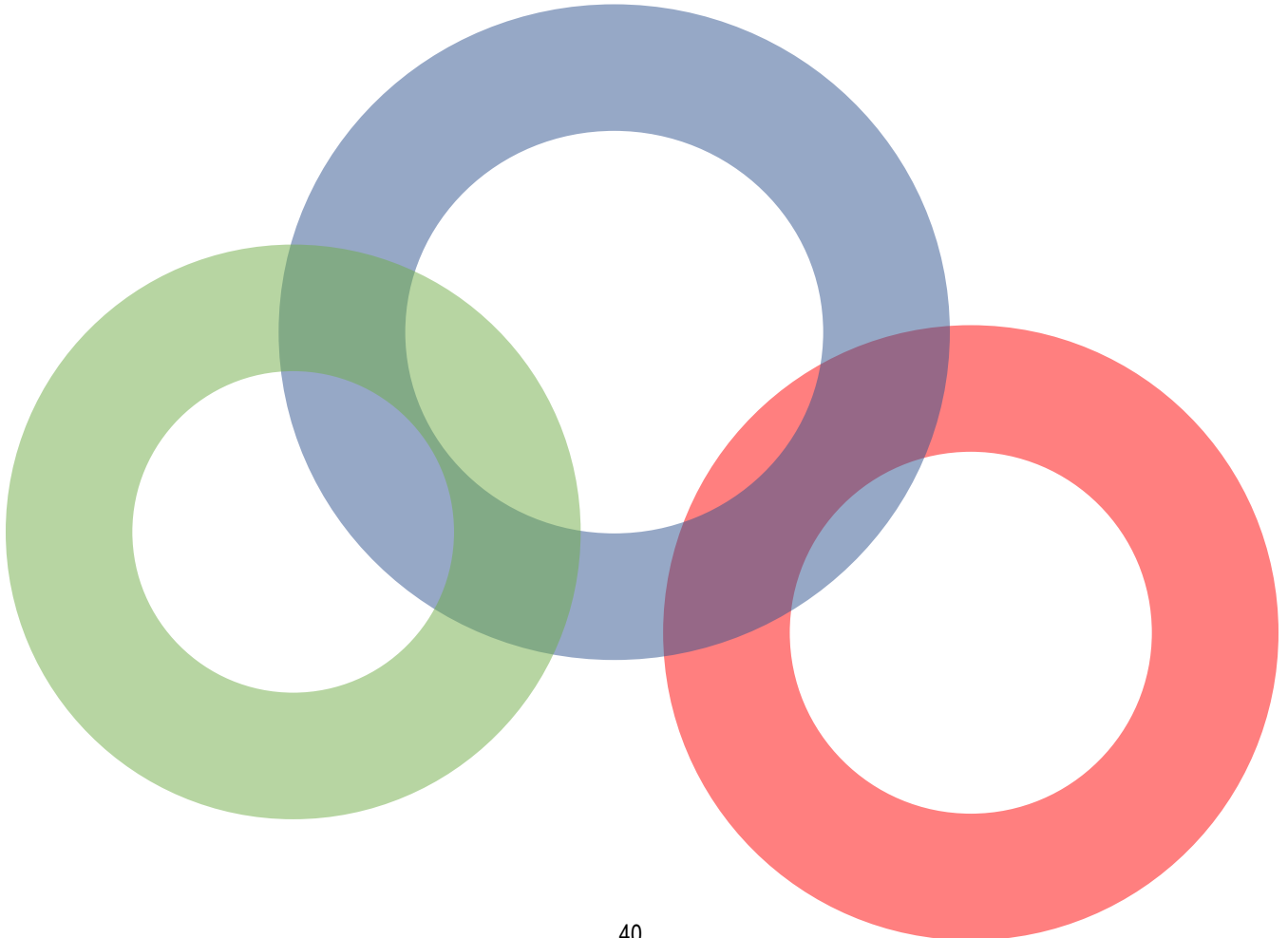
State agencies, school districts, municipalities, counties, community-based organizations, and philanthropic funders should use the [Athletic Fields and Facilities Inventory](#) as a planning tool that provides information on local assets and informs needs. It is important to recognize the map does not address whether or not there is equitable access to any of the facilities identified only where they are located. The map also does not address accessibility of fields and facilities for users with physical disabilities or the condition of the facilities. However, many parks

# RECOMMENDATIONS

departments offer this information on their Web sites. The groups listed above could use the map as a starting point to do an equity and accessibility audit of a region's assets, in conjunction with locally available data, and use it to inform local or regional policies about access.

## RECOMMENDATION 6

The Legislature should fund and commission a statewide study to more fully understand the patterns associated with declines and the inequitable gaps in youth physical activity and the associated costs on education, juvenile justice, health care, and economic productivity. The report would detail the needs of vulnerable youth populations for whom little data is available regarding physical activity, including youth living in tribal communities, youth with disabilities, immigrant youth, and youth living in rural communities. The report would guide the creation of a centralized body to coordinate statewide efforts related to youth physical activity with the goal of reversing the trend of inactivity and ensuring 75 percent of youth in the state are active to a healthy level by 2035. A recent World Health Organization report<sup>72</sup> recommends this type of action as essential to address the health equity crisis of youth physical inactivity.



# CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

Shared-use agreements are necessary but not sufficient on their own to address the crisis of youth physical inactivity in Washington State. The recommendations above are some the Legislature and other state agencies can take to maximize use of existing public facilities in an effort to increase equity, access, and availability of physical activity assets and opportunities. In this final section, some topics for future consideration are addressed.



First, shared-use agreements (contractual arrangements) are not necessary if one organization—a school, park, or faith-based organization—is willing to open its space on an ongoing basis. This is an open use policy and may be more effective especially in rural areas and where organizations and landowners feel comfortable with unrestricted access.

Second, the legislative proviso for this study did not define other types of spaces for the task force to investigate; however, universities and community colleges, unused land, and vacant buildings did come up in interviews with stakeholders. Colleges, especially state institutions, have facilities that only rarely are made available for youth physical activity. Potentially, all state institutions could be required to have an accessible system of access to community user groups.

In some areas of the state, conversion of warehouses, hangars, and other underused land is a desired way to address facilities shortages. State and local laws and regulations make these kinds of facilities mostly accessible to private, well-funded groups. There might be legal provisions that could lower the barriers for community users to make use of available spaces.

Further, with regard to demand for space, as publicly available assets are inundated and opportunities for access are restricted, some private and well-funded nonprofit organizations are orchestrating land purchases for their own uses. These private acquisitions and or public-private partnerships may increase inequities in access if the issues in this report are not addressed.

# CONCLUSION

Finally, shared-use agreements don't, in and of themselves, defray the costs associated with facility use. The sharing of costs can be one element of the agreement but using a sliding scale or other mechanism to ensure the cost of use does not create too much of a burden on smaller organizations, volunteer-based organizations, and those serving youth and families disenfranchised from physical activity, is a separate strategy. This, along with grants focused on capital infrastructure and the built environment, and accounting for the costs of maintenance, safety, and upkeep, is essential.

Some final elements to keep in mind in terms of what complements shared-use agreements:

- Policy and funding prioritization of physical activity at all levels of government.
- Programming: for many families, access to the facilities is a first step in engaging in health promoting activities. On site programs and wellness opportunities can support more robust and ongoing engagement.
- Changes to policies and practices for use of the facilities so once they are open they are accessible and available to all.
- Transportation and parks infrastructure such as playground equipment, walking trails, bike paths, and sidewalks, for improved safety and engagement.

"Flexible approaches to increasing physical activity in diverse geographic settings are needed. Strategies should ideally be guided by the needs of the community, with a tailored approach to promoting shared use and maximizing use of spaces for physical activity."<sup>73</sup> Taken together, shared-use agreements and centralized attention to physical activity infrastructure and programming as a health equity priority, may stem the tide of youth physical inactivity and its attendant mental and physical health consequences.

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<sup>7</sup>This report uses a combination of national, state, and regional data. Quantitative, state-level data is not always available on topics related to youth sports and recreation participation and fields and facility use. The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey is substantially leveraged. In some places, however, a detailed report from King County is referenced because it offers a deeper look into relevant physical activity trends. Where possible, qualitative data from interviews and task force conversations and the Athletics Field Inventory supplement the quantitative data to create a complete, statewide picture. More information about methods is in Appendix B.

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## APPENDICES

Appendices may be found online at <https://rco.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PhysicalActivitiesTaskForceAppendices.pdf>.

## ATHLETIC FIELDS AND FACILITIES INVENTORY

Athletic Fields and Facilities Inventory may be online at <https://wa-rco.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=0947b69ee5a1403092c4381f14f07a3d>