

The Relationship Between Joint Use Agreements and Physical Activity

Nearly a third of American children and adolescents³ – and two-thirds of American adults⁴ – are overweight or obese. Over the past few decades, obesity rates have soared for all age groups, doubling among preschoolers and more than quadrupling among children ages 6 to 11.⁵

To counter rising rates of obesity and related diseases, Americans are urged to eat healthier foods and lead more active lives. For many, however, it's difficult to follow this advice where they live. Walking and bicycling are dangerous on roads designed for cars driving at high speeds. Schools and shopping districts are too far from homes for children and their families to reach on foot. Parks, playgrounds, and other outdoor recreation areas are often remote, inaccessible, or poorly maintained – if they exist at all. For too many communities, these factors combine to make healthy choices all but impossible.

Addressing Inequity in Opportunities for Physical Activity

Barriers to recreational opportunities are particularly pronounced in lower-income neighborhoods. Health challenges, and in particular the risk of overweight and obesity, do not affect all of us equally. Disparities in overweight and obesity prevalence exist in many segments of the population, based on race and ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status.⁶ The very same communities that are at greater risk for

overweight and obesity have far fewer parks and open spaces. A national study of 20,000 young people in the United States found that resources for physical activity – including public parks and recreation facilities, as well as private facilities – were distributed inequitably, with non-white and lower-income neighborhoods twice as likely as higher-income white neighborhoods to lack even one facility for physical activity.⁷ Communities with higher poverty rates and higher percentages of African-American residents have significantly fewer parks and green spaces.⁸ In addition, substantial research supports the commonsense contention that young people, particularly adolescents, who do not have safe places for participating in positive activities during after-school hours are more likely to engage in potentially dangerous activities such as drug use, risky sexual behaviors, and gang involvement. Access to safe recreational facilities is one critical element to solving this problem.

Indeed, parents rank safety as the number one factor in deciding whether and where their children can play.⁹ Because children are more likely to be physically active when they're outside,¹⁰ outdoor safety is important.¹¹ A lack of safety outdoors is a



challenge for children living in lower-income neighborhoods. One study in Boston found that playgrounds in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates and higher percentages of African-Americans were less safe than those in other neighborhoods, not only with regard to having well-designed and maintained equipment but also with regard to security from crime.¹² The safety concern is borne out in obesity statistics: one recent study found that children whose parents perceived their neighborhoods as especially unsafe were four times as likely to be obese as children living in neighborhoods perceived as safe.¹³

Safe playgrounds offer children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods the potential for physical activity. Playgrounds are sites of high physical activity in a diverse range of neighborhoods.¹⁴ In rural areas, playgrounds attract children more than nearby fields do.¹⁵ In inner-city neighborhoods, safe playgrounds increase the number of children engaging in physical activity. One intervention in an impoverished urban neighborhood in New Orleans showed that keeping a schoolyard with a play structure open after school hours and providing adult supervision increased the number of children who remained outside and active after school by 84 percent.¹⁶

The Promise of Joint Use Agreements

In recent years, increasing access to existing recreational facilities at schools has emerged as one of the most promising strategies for building more opportunities for activity. This promise is rooted in the realization that even the most poorly designed and underserved neighborhoods include schools. In an era of budget shortfalls, maximizing access to existing facilities – rather than trying to construct new ones – is the most efficient

and economical use of public resources. Although this toolkit focuses on school recreational facilities, joint use agreements can be used to maximize other community assets, such as libraries, theaters, and community gardens.

When the school day ends, school facilities are often closed to community residents who might otherwise use them. Understandably, school districts lock their facilities because they lack the capacity and funds to run programs, and they may have concerns about additional legal or maintenance costs that might arise from the use of school property outside regular school hours. At the same time, communities across the country are expressing a growing desire for safe, accessible, and affordable places for activity – and some are demanding access to what are, in fact, public resources. As a formal legal document, a joint use agreement can facilitate community access to school facilities and grounds.

What Is a Joint Use Agreement?

A *joint use agreement* refers to a written agreement between a school district and one or more public or private (nonprofit) entities, allowing public access to school property and detailing the shared responsibility for maintaining the facilities. Implicit in the agreement is that public, and in some cases private, resources will be pooled to expand community access and use public space more efficiently.

Joint use agreements can be written for various types of facilities; this toolkit focuses solely on indoor and outdoor school recreational facilities, such as gymnasiums and playgrounds. These agreements can range from informal or “open” public use to organized after-school and weekend athletic activities for adults and youth.



National Support for Joint Use Agreements

Community use of public school facilities and grounds is as old as public education itself. Schools have historically been the site for all kinds of community events and public meetings. There is typically an assumption that communities can get access to their schools, especially outside of regular school hours. Nationally recognized authorities – such as the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity,¹⁷ the American Academy of Pediatrics,¹⁸ and the Institute of Medicine¹⁹ – have recommended joint use of school facilities as a strategy to increase physical activity opportunities in underserved communities.

Child health and physical activity advocates are not alone in their support for joint use. In the 2000 report *Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizen's Guide for Planning and Design*, the U.S. Department of Education recommends joint use as an important strategy in its school design principles.²⁰ Building Educational Success Together (BEST), a national collaborative of educational equity and school facility advocates, promotes joint use in its model policies to support high-performing schools.²¹ The community school movement, aimed at bringing providers of student health and other support services into school buildings, applies the joint use concept.²² Urban planners and community developers have also advocated for joint use schools, particularly those connected to the smart growth movement.²³ The National Trust for Historic Preservation recommends joint use in establishing schools as centers of communities.²⁴ All of these perspectives point to the potential for multiple benefits of joint use – improving educational outcomes, increasing community amenities and physical activity, using public resources more efficiently, and more.²⁵

A few states, including North Carolina,²⁶ Maryland,²⁷ and California, also have promoted joint use. In recent statewide school construction bonds, California has created a pot of capital funds for building or renovating school facilities to support joint use. Additionally, both the California Department of Education and the Division of the State Architect encourage joint use in their state agency documents.²⁸ However, no state appears to



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have established a robust policy or funding framework to fully support, incentivize, or guide local joint use efforts.²⁹

A 2006 study found that only 29 percent of the nation’s public and private schools provided open access to their physical activity spaces and facilities outside of normal school hours.³⁰ Moreover, it appears that in lower-income areas there is less access to schools, suggesting a disparity in community access.^{31, 32}

As this toolkit illustrates, however, there are many bright spots across the country from which to learn and build upon. For example, a 2006 survey of California school districts found that nearly 60 percent already have some form of joint use in place, and half reported that they were in the process of building new schools that will incorporate some type of joint use facility.³³

What Are the Barriers to Creating Joint Use Agreements?

In some localities, community access has become more difficult due to school district concerns over liability and vandalism, budget cuts in facilities maintenance and staffing, and increased use by schools or school-connected groups. Joint use partnerships are not simple to implement, and they must be thoughtfully crafted. Even the seemingly straightforward act of unlocking school playgrounds on weekends takes time, money, administrative oversight, and political support to plan, fund, and implement; programs also can require ongoing coordination, communication, and cooperation among partners who have little or no history of working together.³⁴

One study conducted in four communities in the United States found that safety, insurance, and liability concerns are key barriers.³⁵ Joint use agreements can help address these and other concerns by clearly articulating each partner’s financial, legal, and operational responsibilities. But there is no one-size-fits-all approach. As the case studies in this toolkit illustrate, the terms of these agreements will vary depending on community needs and characteristics.

Communities can put joint use agreements to work for more than school recreational facilities, expanding access to libraries, parks, and other city and county properties. Developing and nurturing joint use agreements creates a win-win for students and the entire community. This toolkit breaks down the elements of a strong joint use agreement and provides information about how to overcome potential barriers to implementation.

Joint Use Terminology*

JOINT USE**	The use of school district facilities by a non-district entity.
SHARED USE	When a school space is used by the school during school hours and by a non-school user after hours (for example, a classroom for instruction during the school day and for program activities after school).
DEDICATED USE	When a school space is exclusively available to the outside entity during the school day and after school (for example, an after-school office or storage area).
CIVIC USE	The occasional joint use of school buildings and grounds by individuals or groups (for example, for voting, community meetings, special events, or as emergency shelters, as well as casual use by the public for recreational purposes).
REAL ESTATE JOINT USE	Use, either shared or dedicated, where the user seeks no relationship with the school or its families but desires access to the school facility.
DROP-IN USE	When the space is made available for informal, drop-in activities. In this case, the user does not reserve the space in advance. Usually, spaces are made available for drop-in use during specified hours.
ONE-TIME USE	When a school space is available to the outside entity during the school day and/or after school for a specific period of time on a single day. Typically, the user has reserved the space in advance.
REPEATED USE, SHORT TERM	When a school space is available to the outside entity during the school day and/or after school for a specified number of hours over a longer period of time (e.g., multiple days, weeks, or months).
JOINT DEVELOPMENT	Two or more entities partnering to plan, site, design, and/or build a new school or renovate an existing school to better support the joint use of the building and/or land.

Joint User Types

INDIVIDUALS	Persons, generally residents of a community, who have access to exterior spaces (such as play equipment, athletic fields, or courts) and open space for personal use.
CIVIC GROUPS	Individuals or organizations who seek occasional use of school buildings and grounds for activities or events such as polling, community meetings, and special events.
OTHER PUBLIC AGENCIES	Public agencies that are not part of the school district and may offer programs, need to lease space, and/or seek joint development with ongoing joint programming.
PRIVATE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS	Nonprofit groups using school buildings and/or grounds for programs such as after-school activities, health clinics, or adult education classes.
PRIVATE FOR-PROFIT CORPORATIONS	For-profit groups using school buildings and/or grounds for education-related work, such as a private testing service, or unrelated work purposes, such as private offices.

* The definitions are taken from the following document: 21st Century School Fund and Center for Cities & Schools (March 2010). *Joint Use of Public Schools: A Framework for a New Social Contract*. Washington, DC: 21st Century School Fund. Available at http://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/reports/2010_JU_Concept_Paper.pdf

** Note that school-based joint use agreements are the primary focus of this toolkit, but joint use agreements can also be put in place with other local government agencies as well as with nonprofit and private organizations.

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