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Promoting Physical Activity Through the Shared Use of School Recreational Spaces: A Policy Statement From the American Heart Association

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Most Americans are not sufficiently physically active, even though regular physical activity improves health and reduces the risk of many chronic diseases. Those living in rural, non-White, and lower-income communities often have insufficient access to places to be active, which can contribute to their lower level of physical activity.

The shared use of school recreational facilities can provide safe and affordable places for communities. Studies suggest that challenges to shared use include additional cost, liability protection, communication among constituencies interested in sharing space, and decision-making about scheduling and space allocation.

This American Heart Association policy statement has provided recommendations for federal, state, and local decision-makers to support and expand opportunities for physical activity in communities through the shared use of school spaces. (*Am J Public Health*. 2014;104:1583-1588. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301461)

REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY is an important behavior for general health and to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension, obesity, and some types of cancers.¹ Unfortunately, the vast majority of youths and adults are not sufficiently physically active. Depending on the population of study and the physical activity assessment used, between 53%² and 95%³ of adults and between 50%⁴ and 90%³ of adolescents are found to not participate in physical activity at levels recommended by the US government.⁵ African Americans and Latinos are less physically active^{2,4} than are their White counterparts. All Americans should have a variety of community resources that provide an opportunity to be physically active.

Public schools are located in all communities and often have physical activity facilities and spaces that can be shared with community members. The American Heart Association supports policies that enable schools to share their

physical activity spaces with individuals and community groups. This is in direct agreement with the American Heart Association 2020 Strategic Impact Goal to improve the cardiovascular health of the nation by 20%.⁶ Sharing school spaces is also a strategy of the US National Physical Activity Plan,⁷ an objective of Healthy People 2020,⁸ and a recommendation of the 2010 White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity,⁹ and it is in line with recommendations of leading public health authorities.¹⁰⁻¹² However, policy recommendations and tools are needed to facilitate and encourage the shared use of school resources. We have identified the benefits and challenges of shared use, provided policy recommendations to support and expand shared use, and highlighted areas for needed additional research.

DEFINITION OF SHARED USE

Opening school buildings and grounds during non-school hours for community use is often referred

to as “shared use” or “joint use”: public schools sharing their facilities that are conducive to physical activity with individual community members, community groups, or school or public agencies during non-school hours. Facilities include both indoor and outdoor physical activity spaces. Shared use includes individual community members’ informal use for unstructured, unsupervised use and supervised, community-sponsored activities, such as team sports and supervised open gym.

Shared use may occur through an informal arrangement or may involve a formal written contract (i.e., shared use agreement or joint use agreement) between a school district and another entity, such as a municipality, county, or nonprofit organization. The contract defines the rights and responsibilities of the parties on issues such as cost, liability, maintenance, and staffing. Model shared use agreement resources are available from many sources, including the National Policy and Legal Analysis Network.¹³

ACCESS TO SPACES AND THE PROSPECT OF SHARED USE

In many communities, opportunities exist for physical activity. Most local governments provide public parks and recreation centers, and commercially available sports and fitness facilities are sometimes available. However, many rural, non-White, and lower-income communities often do not have the same density of community recreational facilities¹⁴⁻¹⁶ as do those living in higher-income neighborhoods. Privately owned commercial facilities typically require memberships or fees that limit the accessibility for lower-income populations. Therefore, it is important to have convenient access to affordable physical activity spaces in all communities.

Public school facilities have emerged as an area of public health advocate attention because of their great availability in US communities and their importance as a place for physical activity. It is estimated that public schools total 6.6 billion indoor square feet and more than 1.0 million acres of land.¹⁷ These schools have spaces, including ball fields, courts, gymnasiums, and playgrounds, that the broader community can use.^{18,19} The School Health Policies and

Programs Study, conducted in 2000 and 2006, found that virtually all schools reported at least one outdoor physical activity facility and that most elementary schools had playground equipment.¹⁸ The most common outdoor facilities were general use fields, baseball or softball fields, basketball courts, and soccer or football fields; common indoor facilities were gymnasiums and weight rooms.

Several studies have found that opening school grounds to the community results in increased physical activity in those communities.^{20,21} Adolescents surveyed in Boston, Massachusetts; Cincinnati, Ohio; and San Diego, California, were more likely to be physically active when they had access to fields and play areas after school.²⁰ A study conducted in two lower-income New Orleans, Louisiana, communities found that when a previously locked schoolyard was opened and supervised, the number of children who were physically active outdoors was 84% higher than was the number in a community with closed schoolyards.²¹ These studies exemplify how when school grounds are made available, they can be successfully used for physical activity.

Schools benefit from shared use through being a valuable

community resource. There are intrinsic benefits from providing a clean, safe place for community members to be active and building relationships with community groups.²² The case study described in the box on this page exemplifies how schools and communities can benefit from a successful partnership. By contributing community assets to nearby residents, schools can generate the community goodwill needed to support tax revenue, capital building projects, and other fund-raising initiatives. This is especially important in areas with low or declining numbers of children—places in which households may not be invested in school improvement projects. Because only about 45% of households have children younger than 18 years,²⁵ maintaining community goodwill is an ongoing pursuit for many schools. Finally, regular physical activity may be associated with higher academic performance.^{26,27} Schools that open their grounds for physical activity indirectly promote being physically active and, consequently, youths' academic performance.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SHARED USE

Researchers and advocates have identified a set of challenges that must be addressed to foster

more widespread implementation of shared use. Below are five prominent challenges.²⁸

1. Providing adequate funding for costs associated with greater facility utilization.²⁸⁻³¹ Costs associated with the use of facilities include maintenance, cleanup, and repair; staff supervising activities or providing security; and costs of lighting and other utilities.
2. Establishing effective dialogue between the multiple users of school spaces.^{28,30-32} The diversity of constituencies interested in sharing school spaces range from individuals and local sports organizations to state and federal legislatures.³³ These groups can have difficulty communicating relevant issues because of different meanings of common terms.
3. Designing school spaces to facilitate shared use.²⁸ Schools without sufficient facilities conducive to physical activity are limited in what they can share with individuals and community organizations.
4. Ensuring protection from liability, crime, vandalism, and other physical incivilities.^{28,30-32,34} School officials across the nation are highly concerned about

Case Study: Turning Some Elementary School Fitness Parks Into Community Fitness Parks: San Antonio, TX, 2012

On April 12, 2012, the San Antonio City Council approved a partnership with San Antonio Sports SPARK parks to expand school playgrounds to include sports fields and walking trails. The parks will be open to the community after 3 p.m. They will be planned using the local resources of architecture students at the University of Texas, San Antonio. The program is starting with one elementary school, Sky Harbor. The principal of the school, Marina Avila, noted that many local residents do not have a safe place to walk; thus, the program is particularly beneficial to the community. San Antonio Sports SPARK is an initiative with San Antonio Sports, a nonprofit sports commission, and the City of San Antonio and the University of Texas at San Antonio College of Architecture. The program's goal is to build 100 new school parks in Bexar County, TX, over a 10-year period. The SPARK School Park Program was created in 1983 and is a nonprofit organization operating out of the city of Houston's mayor's office.

Source. KENS5²³ and San Antonio Sports.²⁴

liability should someone be injured while participating in recreational or sport activities while on school property.³⁵

5. Determining decision-making processes for allocating space.^{28,30-32} If school districts or individual schools do not have a system in place to identify eligible users and eligible activities and to manage scheduling, use can become ad hoc, which may exclude some individuals or groups.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SHARED USE

State and local policy tools are needed to make it easier to support and expand shared use. As of 2010, only eight states require schools to be available for community use (Alabama, California, Hawaii, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Utah), 37 states and the District of Columbia allow community use of schools, and five do not address the issue in legislation (Illinois, Michigan, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Wyoming).³⁶ State policies in the form of legislation or regulation are particularly important in enabling, incentivizing, and, in some cases, mandating shared use. Opportunities also exist for stakeholders to pursue policies at the federal and local levels. Depending on the unique legal and political context of each state, there are several ways to incorporate these recommendations into existing or new policies. Some recommendations may lead states to consider creating or clarifying legislation. Others can be addressed through state departmental regulation or policy change. Finally, some policy recommendations can be pursued through working with

nongovernmental entities that guide school action, such as state-level school board associations or associations of school administrators. The box on this page displays a case study of how Mississippi implemented best practice legislation. Rather than list all the states that have enacted similar policies, where applicable, we have illustrated policies with examples. Table 1 displays a particular policy recommendation and which of the shared use implementation challenges are addressed. We propose the following 11 recommendations.

- Encourage or require school districts to provide community recreational use of school property. California and Utah have designated public schools as “civic centers,” requiring school districts to make their facilities and grounds available for public access.^{38,39} Other states have language in legislation that encourages schools to allow community access, such as Alaska’s law stating a school district “may” allow the community to use school property.^{36,40} State agency regulations and policies can also accomplish this policy recommendation. Education associations are a critical partner and often create model school district policies. For example, in Wisconsin, stakeholders are in discussions with the state’s school board association to develop sample shared use policy to be distributed to the association’s members.⁴¹
- Require school board policy to address shared use. States can set requirements for what must be contained in local school district shared use and wellness policies. Mississippi legislation requires that school districts address community recreational use of school property in con-

sultation with the school health council.⁶

- Clarify or provide liability protection for schools for recreational use of properties. States should have clear laws that provide appropriate legal protections for school districts. For example, Minnesota added language in its immunity statute protecting governmental entities from “any claim for a loss or injury arising from the use of school property or a school facility made available for public recreational activity.”⁴²
- Authorize school districts to enter into contracts to shared facilities and set specific requirements for what is included in the contracts. States can authorize school districts to enter into shared use agreements and require key provisions, such as language to address safety and liability. Wisconsin requires that shared use agreements outline the time, place, eligibility, and type of recreational activity; the supervision of the activity; and a statement outlining the participant’s assumption of risk.⁴¹
- Require proof of insurance for groups using school property. Some states have policies that require schools to ensure that community groups have insurance before entering into a shared use agreement. Louisiana policy states that schools “shall require in the agreement that the other entity maintain and provide proof of adequate liability and accident insurance coverage as determined by industry standards.”⁴³ A Tennessee policy strongly encourages local school boards to set this requirement.⁴⁴
- Support full and dedicated funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The schools can use Land and Water Conservation Fund State and Local Assistance funds to acquire, develop, and share public outdoor recreation facilities. Stakeholders can work with state and local government representatives to support ongoing funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- Incorporate community recreational use of school property as a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan priority. For schools to be eligible for Land and Water Conservation Fund funding, states must include recreational use of school property as a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan priority.⁴⁵ Wisconsin’s Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan does so by identifying school parks as potentially being available as neighborhood parks, youth athletic fields, and a location for recreational classes; the plan additionally comments on how school districts and park systems can benefit from the shared use of facilities and land.⁴⁶
- Provide incentives for shared use in school construction. State policies can incentivize school districts to consider shared use concepts when renovating or building schools. Washington State convened a group to address how shared use worked in the school construction assistance program. The resulting report provided recommendations for the state’s School Construction Assistance Program and Community Schools that addressed barriers to promote shared use.⁴⁷
- Outline joint powers’ concepts and opportunities. Joint powers are specific laws that authorize local governmental entities to work together to share facilities and resources. Minnesota law authorizes “joint powers

Case Study: State-Level Implementation of Best Practice Legislation to Promote Shared Use: Mississippi, 2012

The American Heart Association and the Public Health Law Center developed sample policy language to assist stakeholders in exploring state-level policy change to promote community recreational use of school property. In the 2012 legislative session, Mississippi used this language to create a comprehensive state law that incorporated many of these policy recommendations. The Mississippi law does the following:

1. Specifically authorizes a school district to adopt a policy for shared use
2. Limits liability for injuries that occur during recreational use of school property during nonschool hours
3. Encourages school districts to enter into shared use agreements
4. Authorizes local governments to expend funds to pursue shared use agreements
5. Requires the department of education to create a shared use toolkit
6. Requires the department of education to maintain a Web site to promote information sharing by the school districts
7. Requires each school district to address community recreational use of school property

Source. Public Health Law Center at William Mitchell College of Law.³⁷

agreements” to build and maintain recreational facilities, enabling collaboration between school districts and city park and recreation departments.⁴⁸

- Require state-level toolkits and plans for dissemination to local communities. Mississippi legislation requires a toolkit, stating, “The State Department of Education, in consultation with the State Department of Health, shall develop a best practices tool kit relating to shared use agreements for school districts.”⁴⁹ The statute outlines the key components of the toolkit and sets

a timeframe for how often the toolkit must be updated. Mississippi also requires a Web site to encourage information sharing among school districts.

- Commission studies through state workgroups to assess barriers and determine solutions. States have the power to commission studies. Vermont commissioned such a report in 2010, which identified liability concerns as a barrier to shared use, and recommended “statutory protection from liability, to encourage schools to open their facilities to the public

under appropriate conditions.”⁵⁰ Washington’s report identified policy solutions to financial barriers in school construction.⁴⁷

RESEARCH NEEDED FOR SHARED USE

Existing research has only begun to document the prevalence of shared use, to identify and examine the perceived barriers and motivators to shared use, and to understand the policies being utilized to enact shared use. This work needs to expand across

states and local communities to increase its generalizability and should include evaluation measures of both the process and the outcomes of shared use. We have described specific research recommendations and categorized them into recommendations on the influence of shared use on health outcomes and understanding policy implementation.

Influence of Shared Use on Physical Activity

- Conduct longitudinal observational and experimental studies to measure users’ physical

TABLE 1—Policy Recommendations to Promote and Facilitate Shared Use That Address Shared Use Challenges

Policy Recommendation to Promote and Facilitate Shared Use	Shared Use Challenges Addressed by the Recommendation				
	Funding	School Design	Communication	Liability	Decision-Making
Encourage or require school districts to provide community recreational use of school property.	X		X	X	X
Require school board policy to address shared use.	X	X		X	X
Clarify or provide liability protection for schools when recreational use of the property is allowed.				X	
Authorize school districts to enter into shared use agreements, and set specific requirements for what is included in the agreements.	X		X	X	X
Require proof of insurance for groups using school property.				X	
Support full and dedicated funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.	X	X			
Incorporate community recreational use of school property as a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan priority.	X	X			
Provide incentives for shared use in school construction.	X	X			
Outline joint powers concepts and opportunities.	X		X	X	X
Require the creation of state-level toolkits and local dissemination plans to local communities.	X	X	X	X	X
Commission studies through state workgroups to assess barriers and determine solutions.	X	X	X	X	X

activity type, duration, and frequency; sociodemographic characteristics of users; and the characteristics of the shared school areas utilized (e.g., ball fields, tennis courts) before and after changes in shared use.

- Identify program participation rates and program characteristics for activities that occur on shared school space before and after shared use.
- Determine the access and use of shared school spaces of residents living in nearby neighborhoods and any changes in their physical activity or health outcomes.

Policies and Approaches for Implementation

- Examine the impact of state policies and identify barriers and motivators to implementation.
- Identify best approaches through case studies examining characteristics of successful schools, school districts, and community groups.
- Identify successful long-term practices and conduct replication studies to determine the transferability of these practices.
- Examine the prevalence of injuries that occur during shared use activities and the amount of litigation resulting from injury.
- Examine networks and links in the greater community setting to understand which groups are natural shared use partners.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many benefits when schools share recreational facilities with their local communities. These include increasing opportunities for physical activity, garnering community goodwill, and

supporting the academic mission of the schools. Challenges exist, which include funding, communication, decision-making authority, adequate facilities, and liability concerns, but they are not insurmountable. States, local governments, and other groups can develop supportive policies to minimize the challenges associated with shared use. We encourage lawmakers and other stakeholders to enact these recommendations in ways that are amenable to the unique context of their jurisdiction. ■

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