

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFTER SCHOOL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



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Communities • Adolescents • Nutrition • Fitness

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EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFTER SCHOOL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

Physical activity is known to be an important part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, yet it is often absent from policies and programs aimed at improving the health and wellness of youth. Although there are recommendations for physical activity and physical education during the school day in California, many schools lack the resources and infrastructure to provide such programming. After school and other community-based programs are therefore in a significant position to help youth get the daily physical activity they need.

Most of the work to improve physical activity environments for youth has focused on school environments. Yet youth spend a significant portion of their time in out-of-school or after school environments. Particularly in low income or underserved communities, middle and high school youth often feel alienated from the public school system and relate better to neighborhood, community-based organizations and institutions.

Little has been done to examine the neighborhood structures that are already serving youth and assess how they might become engaged in community health initiatives that strengthen or expand physical activity opportunities for young people. To fill this need, CANFIT created the *Youth Activity Policy Project* (YAP).

The goal of the YAP Project is to increase physical activity opportunities for low income and underserved youth. As a first step, the project conducted a strategic policy analysis of youth-serving, community-based organizations in northern California. This analysis examined the policy and resource levers needed to improve youth-serving organizations' capacity to provide physical activity opportunities for low income youth.

METHODOLOGY

During July and August, 2008 CANFIT searched the Internet for lists of youth-serving organizations in northern California; conducted telephone interviews with representatives from youth-serving and/or physical activity organizations (including state, county, and local park and recreation departments, national youth policy organizations, and intermediary organizations); put into the field an online survey for after school program staff; and convened a group of stakeholders. The goals of these activities were to assess the issues, gaps, and needs surrounding community-based physical activity and to brainstorm the policies needed at the local, program, or state level to increase physical activity opportunities for underserved youth — particularly youth who are low income, female, or in the juvenile justice system.

RESULTS

This information-gathering process identified both challenges and promising practices and policies for community-based programs' efforts to provide physical activity.

CHALLENGES

- State funding supports school-based rather than community-based after school programs.
- Academics take precedence over physical activity in most programs.
- High staff turnover limits programs' ability to train staff to provide all-inclusive, high-quality physical activity.
- There is inadequate funding for staffing, professional development, and equipment.
- There is limited space to conduct physical activity.
- Competitive sports leagues are usually the first to rent fields, limiting the access of neighborhood youth groups.
- The physical activity programming that does exist emphasizes sports rather than skill-building to support life-long physical activity.
- There is a need to identify and provide physical activity programming that appeals to girls.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND POLICIES

- Joint-use agreements that expand facility options.
- Directories that list all after school physical activity opportunities in a region.
- Awards programs that empower girls to be physically active.
- City/CBO joint funding model to support transportation that goes to after school sites (e.g., libraries, park & rec, schools, boys & girls clubs).
- The "Raise the Bar" Program of the Los Angeles Recreation and Park Department that monitors gender equity in youth sports programs run by the department.
- Bond revenue initiatives to support parks, fields, and active recreation.
- Canadian Children's Fitness Tax Credit Program [see: www.cra-arc.gc.ca/fitness].
- Australian Government Initiative that provides school-aged children with access to free, structured physical activity programs after school. [i.e., Active After School Communities; see: www.ausport.gov.au/participating/schools_and_juniors/aasc/about].

FINDINGS FROM YAP PROJECT RESEARCH

The findings of the research point to a number of areas that need to be taken into account in considering how to expand physical activity among underserved youth.

ROLE OF SCHOOLS

- Alienation from school is not necessarily confined to middle- and high-school-age youth. A lot of people in low income communities become disengaged because those institutions have not served them well; parents and children alike often have not had good interactions with the schools. Schools have a lot of work to do to bridge those gaps and be responsive. Yet there are substantial legal issues that make that an arduous process. Community-based organizations, on the other hand, by their very nature, have more of a connection with the disenfranchised.
- When after school and the school day are working well together, the school can feel like a community space. However, after school can become more like an extension of the school day when staff, especially teachers, are not oriented toward youth development.

PROMISING MODELS

- **Australia** established regional centers where any child can go to an after-school program from 3 to 6 p.m. The centers train coaches, parents, volunteers and college students to implement approved curriculum. Any group can apply to implement the program. www.ausport.gov.au/participating/schools_and_juniors/aasc/about
- **Ohio** worked with transportation officials in a local community to establish a free bus system (funded by private/public partnership) that goes to libraries and after school sites from 3 to 8 p.m. www.afscme.org/publications/2465.cfm
- **Canadian Children's Fitness Tax Credit** – a non-refundable tax credit lets parents claim up to \$500 in eligible fees for enrolling a child under 16 in an eligible physical activity program. To qualify for the Children's Fitness Tax Credit, programs of physical activity must be ongoing – a minimum of eight weeks' duration with at least one session a week or, in the case of camps, five consecutive days; be supervised; be suitable for children; and include a significant amount of physical activity that contributes to cardio-respiratory endurance and at least one of muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, or balance. www.cra-arc.gc.ca/fitness
- **City Funding Models** – Both the City of Oakland and San Francisco's Department of Children, Youth, and their Families directly fund a variety of after school programs. See www.dcyf.org/ and www.ofcy.org/
- **CDE Voluntary AS PA Guidelines** – As required by Senate Bill 638, the California Department of Education has developed voluntary physical activity guidelines for state-funded after school programs. An "e-manual" and trainings have also been developed to support the guidelines' implementation. www.californiaafterschool.org/c/@B1BGie873DOeg/Pages/physical_activity.html
- **Girl Scouts** are organized by councils but are still community-based. Councils have strong connections with cities, parks and recreation departments, and other organizations. They have their own curriculum that they use and follow. The Girl Scouts has changed its structure to meet local needs. For example, in Sacramento, the local council led step-dancing for girls, which was a success. There is also a juvenile justice program in which paid staff work with girls in juvenile facilities on programs focusing on self-esteem and health, including yoga. The girls feel that they are being listened to and their needs are being met. www.girlscoutshcc.org/gshccadmin/site1/index.html
- **California Convergence** provides a unique opportunity to accelerate the movement to prevent obesity in California by orchestrating a convergence of seven separately funded initiatives, bringing together leaders from more than 26 communities across the state, together with evaluators and technical experts to create a real-time learning community that can take action and share information, tools, and resources across initiatives and funding streams to increase physical activity and healthy eating. www.californiaconvergence.org/

■ In small communities in the Central Valley, school is often "the only game in town;" it's where the facilities are located. Partners are working with schools to create community centers through joint-use agreements and other means.

■ The instructional aide requirements for state-funded After School Education and Safety (ASES) programs can sometimes limit who can be hired as staff, making school-day teachers most likely to be hired. This practice makes it even more difficult to separate the feeling of after school

from school itself, making it harder for the after school program to be "cool."

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

- People can also feel alienated from community-based organizations. Faith-based organizations are seen as more neighborhood-based and comfortable. There is a greater feeling of ownership and safety.
- Meetings of importance often take place at church.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

- Families need girls to stay home to be babysitters.
- Almost all programs surveyed emphasized the need for greater allocation of resources to “urban physical activity programs that serve girls of color.”
- Common barriers for girls’ involvement in physical activity include concerns for physical appearance, lack of interest, and fear of trying. These issues need to be addressed from several angles, such as including different activities, further staff training, and developing a comfortable environment for girls at the program.

INADEQUATE STAFFING AND FACILITIES

- 70% of programs surveyed are not capable of serving additional youth due to limited funding and limitations of space and facilities.
- Especially in urban and rural communities, finding a space that is safe and easily accessible becomes a challenge. This is where solutions such as joint-use agreements with local schools, parks, and community centers should be pursued.

NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY

- In many programs, there are no safe places within the community that are conducive to youth participating in physical activity. There is not enough law enforcement, especially around parks.
- One solution has been to transport youth to different parks, rec centers, etc. However, transportation then becomes a challenge.

- In Santa Ana and Bakersfield, community organizations engaged at-risk youth in advocacy efforts to support local parks.

RURAL/CENTRAL VALLEY

- In small communities, you are likely to find schools are locked up, the parks are poorly maintained, and there are few sidewalks or stop signs. Counties might provide after school programming, but they often focus on larger cities and ignore the smaller communities.
- High summer temperatures and poor air quality in the Central Valley are barriers to outside physical activity. Unfortunately, there are limited indoor physical activity facilities in smaller communities.

DEMAND FOR SUMMER PROGRAMMING

- During the summer, programs are able to bring in more experts to lead various activities. The challenge has been finding funding for activities during the summer. In addition, facilities are often lacking or closed.
- One technical assistance provider observed that the summer programs are full and have waiting lists, whereas the after school programs do not. There is clearly a demand for summer programs.

FUNDING

- Funding for these organizations mostly comes from corporate and neighborhood donations as well as foundation grants. Only 22% of programs use fees for services to fund their program.
- After school programs primarily spend their money and resources on staff development, trainings, and stipends. Many programs express that, if given additional funding, their program would focus it on increasing staff members and training.



CANFIT RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the research point to eight important recommendations that would begin to address the needs for physical activity for underserved youth in California.

1. EDUCATE AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS ABOUT JOINT-USE AGREEMENTS

Joint-use agreements with schools — and even fire departments and city halls — can open up usable space for physical activity. Many community groups share an interest in youth health, including environmental groups, health advocates, and health care providers. An important point to clarify is how to understand and interpret the law in regard to liability issues, particularly what constitutes “safe transportation” to a site away from school grounds. Another difficulty arises in rural communities, where the schools are often the only available space. Joint-use agreements with community groups, county agencies and the school district could help make school facilities available for physical activity programs. Model joint-use agreements and case studies could help communities take this step. The key challenges appear to be overcoming concerns about liability, maintenance cost, vandalism and graffiti.

2. ESTABLISH PROGRAMS THAT CHANNEL COLLEGE STUDENTS (ESPECIALLY FEMALE ATHLETES) INTO COMMUNITY AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS AS COACHES AND VOLUNTEERS

There is a lack of trained volunteers in after school programs, particularly as many parents are working during those hours. Regional projects could offer college students summer employment and could provide graduating college athletes with a one-year paid contract to serve as coaches in after school programs. Such employment for female athletes would not only increase physical activity opportunities, it would also inspire girls to participate in physical activity. In addition, the college students or recent graduates would receive training and where appropriate, college credit, which could serve as a pipeline for future after school program staff.

3. INCLUDE ELEMENTS IN FUNDING FOR AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT GIRLS

A number of social issues present barriers to girls being involved in physical activity: working parents rely on daughters to be at home after school to look after younger siblings; for many girls, physical activity is not part of their cultural or gender norms; few programs encourage girls to be interested in team sports; and few programs, outside of dance, appeal to many girls.

Parental support for girls’ involvement in physical activity could be developed by engaging parents through outreach and education about the importance of physical activity for their daughters. Other solutions are to include child care for younger siblings as part of a physical activity program. The comfort level of parents and girls could be increased by having more female leaders and coaches (just 10 to 15 percent of coaches are female). And finally, team sports could be de-emphasized in favor of programs focused on building identity, self-esteem and self-awareness, so that physical activity becomes a value that girls can identify with.

4. SUPPORT SUMMER PROGRAMMING

“In a rural county, the public park is only open two days out of the week in the summer. In a recent incident, police were called to remove swimmers from the park on a 109-degree day because the park wasn’t officially open.”

Summer programming not only provides opportunities for youth to be physically active, it also creates local jobs, keeps youth safe, and can decrease summer crime. In order to increase summer programming, a number of challenges need to be addressed. First, lack of access to local neighborhood schools can necessitate transporting participants, staff, and food to more remote locations, expenses that can limit the number of youth who can be served. Second, there are added liabilities for the risks of outdoor activities that involve water sports, moving vehicles, and other risks. Third, additional staff training may be required for risk management in these situations.

5. BROADEN THE FUNDING BASE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity opportunities for youth would expand if there were more sources of public and private funding available to support them. A California tax once supported community centers and schools, providing funding to keep neighborhood centers open during extended hours. For physical activity to be prioritized in after school programs, a dedicated stream of funding is needed to support staffing, training, equipment acquisition, and facility costs. Today, promising funding models include the following:

- The California Convergence, a partnership of seven major funders that supports projects that “move upstream” to improve conditions, environments, and opportunities.
- Use of transportation and redevelopment funds to improve the built environment in low income communities.
- A professional sports organization in southern California (San Diego Padres) that uses sports to engage youth in the parks.
- Health maintenance organizations (e.g., California Pacific Medical Center) providing funding and staff to support after school wellness programs.
- The Baldwin Park Teen Center, a partnership of the City of Baldwin Park Department of Recreation and Community Services and Kaiser Permanente Educational Outreach Program, which provides a multitude of programs and resources, from help with homework to a rock-climbing wall.

6. ADOPT ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES THAT PROMOTE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

“It’s our bureaucratic stuff that often creates more problems than it solves.”

Unfortunately, many after school programs promote sedentary behaviors — such as watching a movie — as a reward and use physical activity — such as running laps — as punishment. Organizational policies should encourage physical activity as a positive behavior, consulting with youth and their families to learn what would engage them most.

7. SUPPORT EFFORTS TO IMPLEMENT AB2404 AND INCREASE GENDER EQUITY (TITLE IX) IN AFTER SCHOOL AND PARK AND RECREATION PROGRAMS

In light of Title IX’s requirements for equal opportunity regardless of gender in educational institutions that receive federal financing, in the late 1990s lawsuits were brought against park and recreation departments in California that were providing better facilities, coaches, and other resources for boys than for girls. Legislation which passed in California in 2004, AB 2404,¹ set mandates for park and recreation departments to demonstrate gender equity in how they allocate resources by 2015. A potential strategy for community organizations to overcome barriers for girls is to examine how they can help after school and park and recreation departments meet the equity mandates of the federal and state laws.

8. DEVELOP AN ADVOCACY AGENDA FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Advocates must work together to reinforce the idea that physical activity is essential to young people’s current and long-term health. Common messages and common agendas should be developed and worked collaboratively.

Coalition members must agree on priorities for advocacy: identifying specific, achievable advocacy goals, and prioritizing the top three goals for increasing community-based physical activity for underserved youth.

Researchers and academics can provide data to make the case that physical activity components added to after school programs will have beneficial results. Advocacy messages should frame community-based physical activity as violence prevention, public safety, job creation, health, and outdoor and environmental education strategies. The focus should be on the strengths and resources within communities.

An advocacy agenda that involves youth and community members in efforts to increase parks, joint-use facilities, and local after school physical activity programs will be more successful. Lift up community strengths and resources as a reason to invest in youth in these communities. Start from a position of strength: there are people ready and able to do this work, they just need, for example, lights and clean parks. Involve community voices in the development of zoning policies, especially those that would decrease liquor stores and alcohol billboards in low income neighborhoods. A successful advocacy strategy also needs to identify legislative advocates for physical activity and look to other stakeholders (such as parks and recreation departments, climate change advocates, community planning and built environment groups) to find areas of overlap where after school physical activity issues meld naturally into their agendas.



PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE AFTER SCHOOL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

SCHOOLS

- School districts should develop joint-use policies to make the schools available to the local community for after school physical activity. School facilities should be open after school and on evenings, weekends, and during the summer.
- Community-based organizations should develop partnerships with California School Board Association members to gain access to schools.
- Community-based organizations should investigate partnering with ASES-funded after school programs to provide physical activity programming for school-based programs.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Through joint-use agreements, park and recreation departments or other city/county agencies should provide space, programming, and staff.
- Transportation and planning commissions should be enlisted to help find open space.
- Communities should develop a free bus system (funded by private/public partnership) that goes to libraries and after school sites from 3 to 8 p.m.
- Schools should enact policies to provide community involvement credit to youth for maintaining the parks.
- Cities and community-based organizations should work together to blend funding to promote physical activity opportunities for underserved youth.
- City councils should dedicate a percentage of city funds to provide outdoor physical activity.
- County boards of supervisors should dedicate a percentage of county funds to provide outdoor physical activity.
- Cities should require sports teams to set aside a portion of their revenues to support physical activity opportunities in communities. (For example, the Oakland Raiders could have a ticket surcharge that goes to the park and recreation department).

STATE GOVERNMENT

- California Department of Education should designate summer as part of after school and make summer programming eligible for funding.
- California Department of Public Health should provide data and use its bully pulpit to give after school physical activity acknowledgement and authority. Legislative action should be taken to acknowledge the importance of physical activity and allow for dedicated funding streams.
- California Department of Education should adopt mandatory physical activity guidelines for after school programs.
- The California Legislature should explore re-enacting a Community Civic Center Tax Act that provides public funds to open community centers on nights and weekends.

COLLABORATION

- Policy “influentials,” such as sports teams, corporate leaders, political donors, and other prominent champions who speak from a position of power, should be enlisted to connect to local and state policy makers.
- Community colleges should work with after school programs to develop career pipelines or career ladders for young people to be trained as recreation specialists to implement quality physical activity programming.
- Foundations and state government should provide incentives to encourage non-ASES-funded after school programs to implement the California Department of Education’s voluntary physical activity guidelines for after school programs.

CONCLUSION

The importance of physical activity for youth – particularly for underserved youth – cannot be overestimated. Current health and lifestyle choices as well as lifelong healthy habits are at stake. Although there are numerous barriers to youth being able to participate in the kind and amount of physical activity they need, many of the ingredients necessary to initiate an effective campaign to increase physical activity opportunities for underserved youth in California are already in place.

Through extensively surveying the field, the Youth Activity Policy Project has discovered that the conditions are right for expanding access to physical activity for underserved youth:

- The need can be documented.
- Program providers are willing to be engaged in the issue.
- Challenges are identifiable and there are suggestions for ways to overcome those challenges.
- Compelling examples of successful programs exist in California (see page 3).
- There are policy models available from other states and countries (see page 3).

A relatively small amount of additional resources can help bring all of these elements together to prepare the field to seek the funding it needs when such funding becomes available at the local, state, or federal levels.



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ENDNOTES

¹ AB 2404, approved by the governor in 2004.
www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/03-04/bill/asm/ab_2401-2450/ab_2404_bill_20040928_chaptered.html

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ABOUT CANFIT

CANFIT helps bridge the gap between communities and policymakers. Since 1993, we have been at the heart of the movement to improve healthy eating and physical activity environments for adolescents in low income communities and communities of color. From grassroots to government, we work with community-based and youth-serving organizations to identify local solutions and support the development of culturally competent policies and practices.

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