



**SPORT**  
FOR  
**ALL**

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**PLAY**  
FOR  
**LIFE**

**A Playbook  
to Develop  
Every  
Student  
Through Sports**

# Reimagining School Sports

A Project Play initiative of the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, "Reimagining School Sports" recognizes the essential role that high schools play in preparing young people for life – and the educational, social, emotional and physical benefits that flow to students whose bodies are in motion. The initiative aims to make quality sport and physical activities accessible to all students by identifying strategies that administrators and other leaders can adopt, aligned with the mission of schools and within the context of a comprehensive education.

In the United States, school decisions are made largely at the local levels. Further, the ability to engage students in sports is shaped by a school's size, mission and resources. So, Project Play launched a national search to find the trailblazers in eight school types. That way, principals, superintendents, athletic directors, coaches, physical education teachers and others can draw inspiration from their best peer fit.

The eight school types:

- [Large urban public high schools](#)
- [Small urban public high schools](#)
- [Large rural public high schools](#)
- [Small rural public high schools](#)
- [Large suburban public high schools](#)
- [Small suburban public high schools](#)
- [Private schools](#)
- [Charter schools](#)

The Aspen Institute invited schools across the nation to share their innovations and apply for recognition. A \$20,000 award was given to one winner in each category, made possible by our project partners – Adidas/BOKS, The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation, and Hospital for Special Surgery. Reports on each school type were released in 2021 and can be read at the above links or visiting [as.pn/schoolsports](https://as.pn/schoolsports).

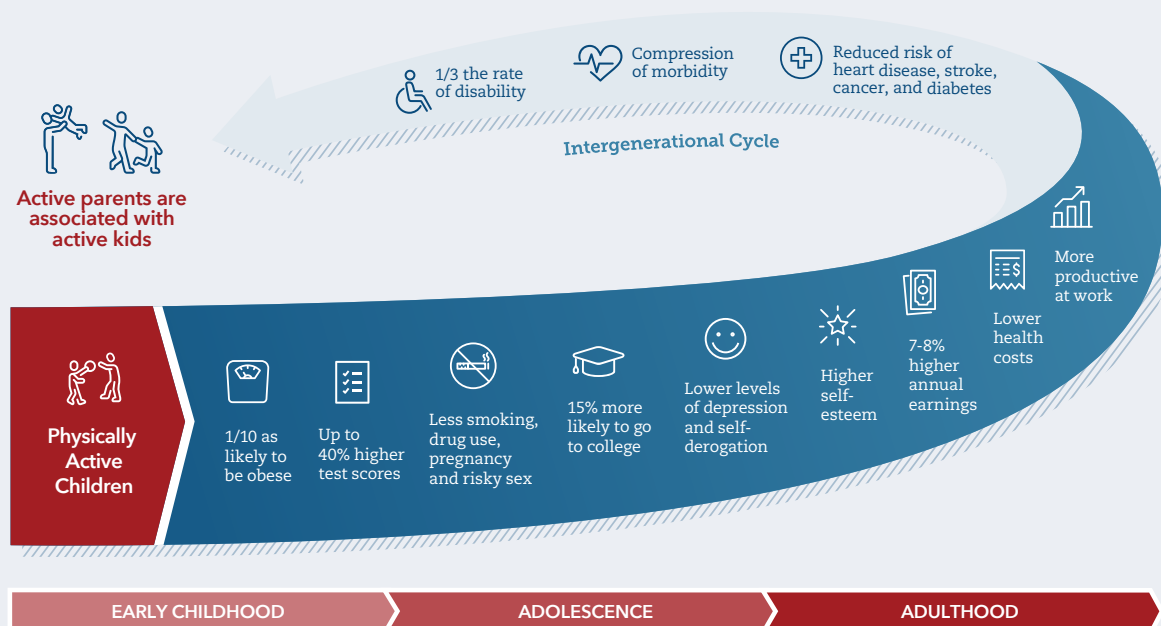
Here, we present the final report in the Reimagining School Sports series, *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Develop Every Student Through Sports*. It aggregates the best of the ideas we discovered, packaged in a form that local leaders from across school types can use as an aspirational model, with recommendations on how other stakeholders can help drive systems-level progress.

**Learn more about this project and find all reports at:**  
[as.pn/schoolsports](https://as.pn/schoolsports)



# ACTIVE YOUTH DO BETTER IN LIFE

What Research Shows on the Lifetime Benefits



## Vision Statement

We envision schools in which all students have the opportunity to develop through sports the educational, social, emotional and physical benefits that will serve them in life.

## Sport Definition

Project Play defines sport as, “All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. Participants may be motivated by internal or external rewards, and competition may be with others or themselves (i.e. personal challenge).” For other terms used in this report, see Glossary on Page 33.

## About Project Play

Project Play is an initiative of the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, the mission of which is to convene leaders, facilitate dialogue and inspire solutions that help sport serve the public interest. Since 2013, Project Play has shepherded the national conversation around what good looks like in youth sports. Hundreds of organizations have used Project Play frameworks and ideas to introduce programs, expand grantmaking, shape government policy, advance research, and develop tools to train coaches, empower parents and mobilize leaders.

Other frameworks we have introduced:

[Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game](#) (2015, focused on children 6-12)

[Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports](#) (2021, relevant to all youth 17 and under)



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## KEY FACTS AND TRENDS

\* Change from 4 Years Earlier

### Percentage of High Schools Offering Sports in 2017-18

School Type	% Offering Sports	*
All Public Schools	68.6%	+0.1%
Non-Charter Public Schools	82.6%	-3.0%
Charter Schools	40.6%	+4.9%
Urban Public Schools	64.7%	+1.5%
Rural Public Schools	73.6%	-4.0%
Suburban Public Schools	71.2%	-3.0%

### Percentage of Students Playing High School Sports in 2017-18

School Type	Participation Rate	*
All Public Schools	38.8%	-0.1%
Non-Charter Public Schools	40.8%	+0.1%
Charter Schools	19.3%	-0.6%
Urban Public Schools	32.6%	+0.8%
Rural Public Schools	42.2%	-1.8%
Suburban Public Schools	40.5%	+0.4%

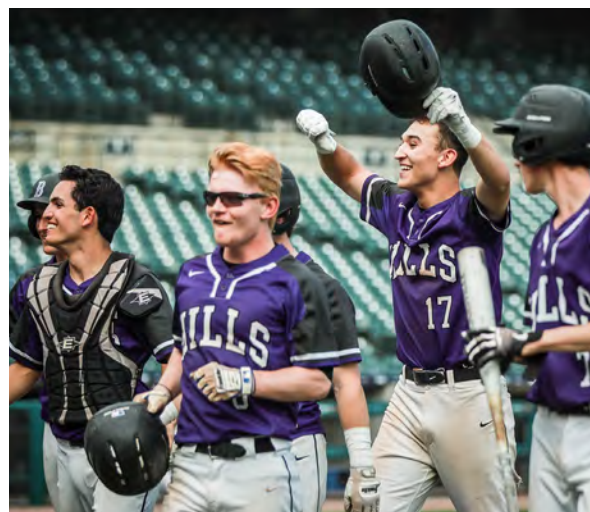
### Participation Rates by Gender in 2017-18

Females	Participation Rate	*
All Public Schools	35.1%	+0.6%
Non-Charter Public Schools	37.0%	+0.8%
Charter Schools	18.4%	+0.4%

Males	Participation Rate	*
All Public Schools	42.7%	-0.4%
Non-Charter Public Schools	44.9%	-0.2%
Charter Schools	21.0%	-0.9%

Source: Resonant Education/Aspen Institute analysis of public high school sports data from the Civil Rights Data Collection in 2017-18 compared to 2013-14. Data are not available for private schools.



### Attended PE Class 1 or More Days Per Week

	1991	2019
9th grade	66%	35%
10th grade	52%	26%
11th grade	27%	22%
12th grade	21%	20%

### Online Activity

Spent 3+ hours per day on video games, social media or computer use for non-school work

	2009	2019
All students	25%	46%
Boys	28%	48%
Girls	21%	45%

### Physical Activity

Was active at least 60 minutes per day

	2011	2019
All students	29%	23%
Boys	38%	31%
Girls	18%	15%

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

# THE PROBLEM

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Principals and school leaders today are tasked with developing the whole student. Many appreciate that sports, broadly defined to include all forms of physical activity, can help students grow academically, socially, physically and mentally in ways that will benefit them throughout their lives. Sports are a meaningful strategy to foster student engagement and motivation, which so many states, districts and schools are grappling with now.

In fact, sports are the best venue in schools to build social and emotional skills, according to former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.<sup>1</sup> “It’s hard to

teach that in Biology. It’s hard to teach that in Algebra,” Duncan said at an Aspen Institute event. “It is much more organic and authentic to do it through sports. It’s the perfect practice field for those skills.”

Yet, fewer than four in 10 students play sports in public high schools<sup>2</sup> and only 23% get the recommended level of daily physical activity – down from 29% in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Data from the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) also show a decline in total sports participation opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Many high schools are unable to deliver sports programs that meet the needs and hopes of students.



## HIGH SCHOOLS LACK THREE TYPES OF SUPPORT:

**FUNDING:** Athletic departments do a lot with a little. In the national search for innovative high schools that anchored this project, the winning schools typically allocated just 2%-4% of the total school budget to sports. Only one winner surpassed that, a small suburban school that spent 10% by spending heavily in football, the most expensive sport. Coaching stipends, equipment, uniforms, transportation, and referees/officials are often the largest expenditures.<sup>5</sup>

Other parts of the school budget typically cover facilities maintenance, as well as salaries for physical education (PE) teachers and, where made available, athletic trainers. But many sports programs lack

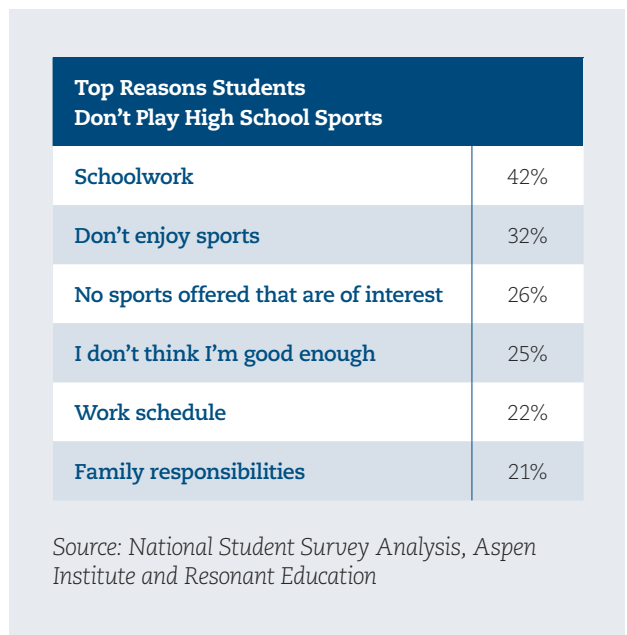
full-time athletic directors to organize activities, and they often must cover budget gaps with football and basketball gate revenue, booster club support, and increasingly, pay-for-play fees or “optional” donations of several hundred dollars per season.

The fees pale in comparison to private club sport programs that have emerged over the past two decades. Many schools also offer fee waivers. Still, students from low-income families and communities of color often go unserved, for a variety of factors. On average, high schools populated predominantly by students of color have 25 roster spots for every 100 students; at heavily White schools, there are 58 spots per 100 students.<sup>6</sup>

**POLICY:** In the Aspen Institute’s national survey of nearly 6,000 high school students, the number one reason that students told us they don’t play sports is homework.<sup>7</sup> More than 4 in 10 said academic demands leave them with no time. Participating on a high school team doesn’t help much with college applications unless you’re a recruited athlete. Neither do PE grades.

Today’s students live with the legacy of No Child Left Behind, the 2002 federal law that promoted testing in academic subjects at the expense of other programs. It was amended in 2015, identifying PE as part of a “well-rounded education” and offering new funds for PE programs.<sup>8</sup> But many schools lack the capacity – or sufficient incentive – to seize the opportunity. While nearly all states have set standards for PE, most do not require a specific amount of instructional time and most allow exemptions, waivers or substitutions.<sup>9</sup> Many school districts lack a staffer dedicated to overseeing PE. Some people just don’t feel compelled to support PE, assuming it was delivered the same way it was back when they were in school.

Without regular PE, students sample fewer sports and work less on their physical literacy.



**KNOWLEDGE:** Superintendents, principals and school leaders are often unaware of innovations and alternate models that have found success elsewhere. They mostly work with what they are handed, a menu of interscholastic sports in which success is defined as winning championships, more than measures of student enjoyment and development. Membership organizations such as the National Federation of State High School Associations share promising ideas on their platforms but there’s a high churn rate of coaches and administrators, and universities increasingly focus on training sports business leaders instead of recreation professionals.

The absence of these assets threatens the historical bond that schools have with sports which goes back more than a century when the concept was introduced as a tool of nation-building. Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, public schools saw no growth in the participation rate of students despite an expanding economy, and the percentage of non-charter public high schools that offered sports decreased by 3%, according to an Aspen Institute-commissioned analysis of a U.S. Department of Education database.

Many schools with no sports programs have small student populations, making it challenging to field teams. Schools with fewer than five teams are three times more likely to eventually drop sports entirely than schools with five or more teams.<sup>10</sup> Charter schools are growing, but often lack athletic facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic very well could accelerate these trends, with students increasingly taking classes online or in small-group educational settings. Meanwhile, media opportunities have grown for schools with high-profile programs, creating more of a resource gap with other schools. So have opportunities for some high school athletes to market themselves through their name, image and likeness.<sup>11</sup> They face new pressures to specialize early in one sport.

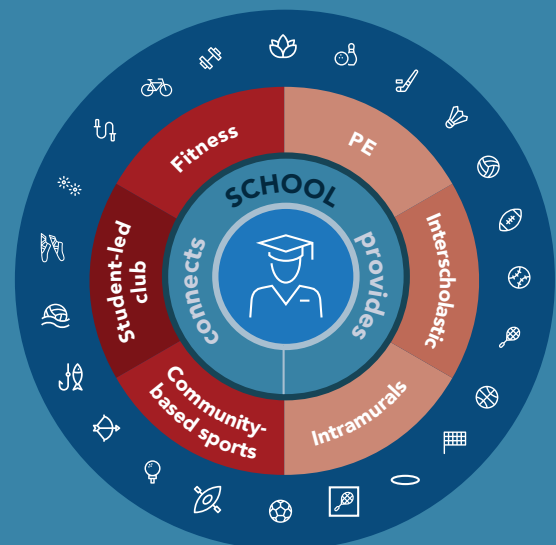
## TODAY'S TRADITIONAL MODEL

It's mostly about competing for your school



## STUDENT-CENTERED MODEL

Starts with health needs and offers more options



# THE SOLUTION

During the pandemic, physical activity rates among students fell. Obesity rates grew,<sup>12</sup> as did mental health challenges. Suicide rates spiked, especially among girls.<sup>13</sup> Families suffered, and policymakers distributed unprecedented federal aid to help students and schools recover.

The value of sports as a solution grew. Amid the shutdowns and limited seasons, high school students missed the competition, the exercise, playing with friends, and above all, the fun. In our national survey, 30% of students said their interest in sports had grown during the pandemic – nearly twice that (16%) of those whose interest had diminished. This finding was true across genders, races and ethnicities, school types, and grade levels.<sup>14</sup>

All of this presents an historic opportunity for schools to reimagine their approach to sports. To use sports more intentionally as a tool of human wellness and development. To align its purpose more tightly with the educational mission. To help every student move into adulthood with the skills to succeed in the 21st century.

The last time the school sports model was updated was 50 years ago with the enactment of Title IX. The federal law prohibited any school that receives

federal funds from discriminating by gender in the provision of educational opportunities, including sports opportunities. In 1972, just 1 in 27 girls played high school sports.<sup>15</sup> Today, it's more than 1 in 3.<sup>16</sup>

Implementation has not been ideal. Full enforcement of the law is lacking, and girls still lag boys in participation rates in school sports. But the gap is closing. Women now win more U.S. Olympic medals than men, and role models abound. Most women in C-Suites today were high school athletes.<sup>17</sup> Making sports more accessible to girls has delivered untold benefits to society.

The next version of school-based sports needs to build on the lessons of Title IX. Its core values of participation and non-discrimination must drive decision-making. So, too, must the principles of health equity, given the mountain of research on the benefits that flow to students whose bodies are in motion – and the gaps in access to sport for under-resourced populations.

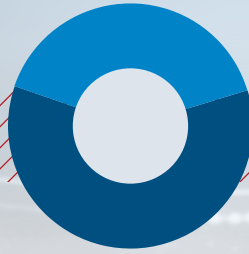
Then, school leaders must put in place a set of aligned strategies and tactics to bring that more robust model to life, tailored to the interests of its students and assets of its community.

**On the following pages, we offer a playbook to help schools not miss this moment.**





**IMPROVE SCHOOL SPORTS  
FOR THE 4 IN 10 WHO PLAY**



**INNOVATE TO ENGAGE  
THE 6 IN 10 WHO DO NOT**



### Sports Participation Rates by Type

Where youth ages 13-17 play their sport on a regular basis

→ **NO. 1 LOCATION TO PLAY**

Sport	Pick-Up Play	PE	School Team	Local League	Travel Team
Baseball	31%	18%	45%	30%	23%
Basketball	39%	36%	48%	22%	12%
Cheerleading	3%	23%	64%	8%	17%
Flag Football	29%	25%	44%	23%	17%
Tackle Football	24%	19%	69%	16%	11%
Ice Hockey	24%	14%	35%	31%	38%
Soccer	22%	20%	50%	39%	13%
Softball	7%	13%	55%	42%	32%
Track and Field	3%	19%	86%	6%	3%
Volleyball	20%	30%	75%	28%	14%
Wrestling	32%	18%	46%	23%	9%

Source: U.S. Trends in Team Sports 2021, Sports & Fitness Industry Association



## THE PLAYBOOK

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Project Play identified eight promising strategies that principals and local school leaders can use to give every student the opportunity to develop through sports.

### **DIVE DEEPER:**

An expanded version of this Playbook lives online, where you can find additional insights and supporting resources.

**Explore at:** [as.pn/playbook](https://as.pn/playbook)

Each strategy is outlined on the following pages and includes four components:

**CHALLENGE:** A significant barrier to participation and development

**THE PLAY:** Proposed solution

**WHO CAN HELP:** Sectors or entities that can support schools to implement the solution:



#### **Membership Organizations**

National Federation of State High School Associations, state athletic associations, nonprofits representing coaches, PE teachers and other stakeholders



#### **Policymakers**

Federal, state and local public servants who help set school policy



#### **Local School Districts**

School boards, superintendents, school district staff



#### **Agencies**

U.S. Department of Education, accrediting agencies, other entities



#### **Families**

Students, parents and caregivers



#### **Sports Organizations**

High school athletic conferences, National Governing Bodies, universities, professional leagues and teams



#### **Business & Industry**

Media, technology, marketing communications, retail



#### **Philanthropy**

Foundations and individuals who fund initiatives

**FINDING SUCCESS:** School leading by example



## **CHALLENGE: THE PURPOSE OF ATHLETICS ISN'T ALWAYS CLEAR**

# THE PLAY

## Align School Sports with School Mission

In most high schools, sports are treated as extracurricular, a one-off activity that supplements but can differ from the educational philosophy that guides the provision of classroom activities. Schools must provide all students with academic opportunities. But in sports, athletic directors and coaches are given more latitude to focus resources on the best athletes, sometimes at the expense of other students who also want to play and would benefit from quality sports activity.

The ideals that guide athletic departments can be found in snippets in various places, painted on the walls of gyms or buried in the pages of a school website. They represent an array of values – “Excellence”, “Character”, “Commitment” and so forth – that if developed in the student can help them succeed in school and life. But how to define such concepts? And how well do they line up with the language that describes the educational mission of the school?

In the absence of such reflection, it’s too easy for coaches and athletic personnel to think their main job is to win championships. Winning games is important to many students, too. Just over half (53%) said it’s one reason they play sports in high school, according to our national survey of students. But far more say they play

to have fun (81%), exercise (79%), learn and improve skills (66%), and play with and make new friends (64%).

Administrators should ensure that all sports activities map to the school’s mission and vision. If helpful in building consensus, they should go through a process of crafting a symbiotic mission statement specific to the athletic department. Seek the input of administrators, PE teachers, parents and students – and not just those who currently play sports. Design commitments and actions aligned with the mission. Highlight the level of behaviors needed to make the mission statement effective. Place the statement below the signature in emails from all athletic personnel and hold them accountable to it via group discussions and performance reviews.

### Top Reasons Students Engage in High School Sports

Having fun	81%
Exercise	79%
Learning and improving skills	66%
Playing with and making new friends	64%
Competing	59%
Winning games	53%

Source: National Student Survey Analysis, Aspen Institute and Resonant Education

## WHO CAN HELP

### Membership Organizations

The National Federation of State High School Associations can create a toolkit to help schools and their athletic departments build a mission statement. Identify the central questions to guide the conversation and the right people to engage. Bring evidence to the conversation (participation rates, dropout rates, sports budgets, anecdotal feedback, etc.). Recommend a process to formulate the mission statement and get decision makers to sign off.

### Sports Organizations

While every school is different, members of an athletic conference often share characteristics and values. Their interscholastic teams play each other. So, conferences can draft language that their schools can use to develop a mission statement or explain how sports supports the school mission. Use relationships and levers to encourage adoption. Create shared expectations.

### Agencies

Many high schools seek the blessing of accrediting agencies who review their activities. Some agencies already ask questions of how sports are contributing to the school mission. They should get evidence, along with data and insights, that map to other strategies in this report.

### Families

Many parents get frustrated with the decisions made by their child's coach. Before reaching out to complain, they should read the school's mission statement so they understand the values that underpin program activities. If the school doesn't have a clear one, advocate for an update. It's key to getting parents and coaches on the same page and respecting each other.

### Policymakers

State high school associations should be encouraged by state legislators to create generally accepted standards of an exemplary high school athletic program (see Play 8 on measurement and evaluation). Identify evidence-based practices that can help athletic personnel align their behavior with and activate a mission statement with feedback loops.

## Finding Success

In updating the mission statement for sports at **Currey Ingram Academy** (Brentwood, Tennessee), school leaders started with three questions: Who are we? What do we want to accomplish? How do we intend to accomplish these goals? They identified the school's core values and defined them, and then refined the language with eight groups of stakeholders, from students to coaches to alumni. They landed on a simply worded statement that can be found on its website, next to a program handbook that offers additional details and behavior expectations.<sup>18</sup>

### MISSION OF CURREY INGRAM ACADEMY ATHLETICS

"Mustang Athletics is an educational-based athletics program that provides a competitive and safe environment. Student-athletes connect with caring coaches and experience physical, social and emotional growth leading to positive transformation."

# 2

## **CHALLENGE: THE UNDERREPRESENTED LACK VOICE**

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# THE PLAY

## Understand Your Student Population

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Sport interest surveys are one way that high schools can demonstrate compliance with Title IX. For decades, administrators have used them to show the U.S. Department of Education that their school is meeting the interests and abilities of the underrepresented sex – girls – in a student population. They can be a powerful tool, if utilized. Many schools don't bother; and, if they do field them, the results are rarely shared with, or easily accessed by, the public. They often are not made available on school websites.

That's a miss. Schools need to know what students want to participate in to design sport offerings. It can be essential in achieving gender equity, creating systems of accountability, and just building a menu of activities that is most likely to get and keep students physically active. Student voice and choice matter.

Our recommendation for school leaders: Conduct student interest surveys on an annual basis, regardless of whether needed for Title IX purposes. Bolster them with questions that tease out insights that include but are not limited to gender interests. Use surveys that allow analysis by disability, race or ethnicity, and grade level. Ask about the sports students play, want to play, and other health and fitness activities. Ask why they play and why they don't.

The Aspen Institute did with its national survey of students. We learned much: Among racial groups, Asian American students were highly likely to say their school doesn't offer a sport they want.<sup>19</sup> Among private school students who don't play sports, 25% of Blacks and 40% of Hispanics said they "don't feel welcome" on school teams. That's five times the rate of Black students at public urban schools and almost twice the rate of Hispanic students at public urban schools.

A template needs to be created or adapted for use by schools, with the necessary privacy protections. Embracing a common set of questions – on student sport preferences, rationale for participation or lack of participation, and youth/adult relationships in the context of sport – will be helpful for comparison with other schools, allowing aggregated data at the district, state, and federal levels. Right now, the grab bag of unstandardized, Title IX surveys in circulation lack consistency in form or an ability to capture historical or other trends.

By adding qualitative insights and the voice of students, a clear path to program improvement emerges.



## WHO CAN HELP

### Agencies

The U.S. Department of Education can create or endorse a survey instrument that any school can use to demonstrate compliance with Title IX while gleaning additional insights about student interests. Ensure the survey gets developed with input from a range of stakeholders, including youth, school leaders, equity advocates, survey experts, and technologists who can help allow the data to be aggregated and analyzed at multiple levels. Lessons should be learned from the last time the DOE went through this exercise, in 2005, when a Title IX template was rejected by gender equity advocates due to concerns about non-responses counting as a lack of interest in sports.<sup>20</sup>

### Local School Districts

Encourage the inclusion of these student surveys in the Local School Wellness Policy that must be created by schools that receive funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Then, recruit athletic directors or physical educators to participate in District Wellness Council activities where they can share results and collaborate with school health leaders in the development of physical activity goals and strategies.<sup>21</sup>

### Sports Organizations

National Governing Bodies of sports and professional leagues should treat the data as consumer research – opportunities to approach schools with partnerships to meet the demand for activities that schools may not have the expertise, facilities or human capacity to host.



### Business & Industry

Media outlets can expand the purview of the high school sports reporter to include coverage of survey results. Bring in the education reporter. The news and storytelling opportunities will help serve your community.



### Families

Know your rights. Beyond surveys, another way that the Department of Education can evaluate a school for Title IX compliance is whether it responded to student requests to add a sport. So, speak up. That doesn't always mean officials will add a team, but it can force action on how to accommodate student interests.<sup>22</sup>

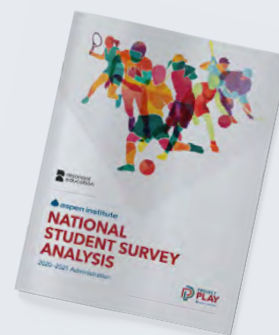
## Finding Success

If 80% of a potential roster for **Coliseum College Prep Academy** (Oakland, California) demonstrates interest in a sport, the school seeks a nonprofit partner to help generate interest for afterschool programming or physical education. Interest is demonstrated through an annual survey of students. “Our reputation as a district is if you have an initiative to pilot, come to us and we’ll figure out how to do it on the ground,” says Amy Boyle, athletic director. Sports and activities that have been introduced include dance, yoga, biking, soccer, baseball, softball, rowing, and lacrosse.

### INSIGHTS UNLOCKED

Discover what the Aspen Institute learned about student needs and interests in our national survey with Resonant Education of nearly 6,000 high school students.

Read: [as.pn/HSsports](https://aspeninstitute.org/HSsports).



# 3

## **CHALLENGE: EVERY STUDENT HAS UNIQUE NEEDS**

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### **THE PLAY**

## **Create Personal Activity Plans**

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When a student enters ninth grade at the Trinity School of Durham and Chapel Hill (N.C.), they sit with a counselor and chart an academic path forward. They explore educational interests and goals, review test scores and classes taken, and develop a plan that starts with freshman courses but keeps the end in mind – that moment four years from now when they walk at graduation, prepared for the world ahead.

This exercise is common in high schools across the country. In 2020, Trinity added a new layer: A four-year athletic plan. Students were asked what sports, if any, they had played. What sport and general fitness options might interest them at the school. How those offerings might integrate with any non-school club sport activities they are involved with, or that robotics club that is of interest. And how the adults at Trinity can help them achieve their personal vision, whether it be a college athletic scholarship or just making friends through sports. Some schools ask these questions informally. At Trinity, it's put down on paper.

We believe this simple innovation holds great promise. Call it a "Personal Activity Plan," or any name you prefer, to underscore its deeper purpose – for students to acquire and retain

the physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits from physical activity that will help them succeed in life. Formulating such a plan can be invaluable in identifying sport and physical activity options for the less athletically confident or inclined student. It can gently help the more ambitious athletes get realistic about their prospects of playing beyond high school (39% say they play to chase college scholarships yet less than 2% go on to get one).<sup>23</sup>

Injury and health history could be incorporated to help guide decision-making on sport options. Lots could be built on top of the plan if integrated with other extracurricular and academic activities – as it should. Our data show boys, especially, struggle to take on more than sports in the school environment.<sup>24</sup>

We recognize the capacity challenges. Do administrators have time to meet with each student? In most schools, right now, the answer is no. But some can. Others can start down this path by introducing materials in ninth-grade transition materials. Think of using advisory periods during the school day to introduce the concept. Ask athletic directors and PE teachers to support. It's a next-generation idea that school leaders just need help in puzzling out and resourcing.





## WHO CAN HELP



### Families

Demand that school districts recognize the benefits of sports and physical activity, and that they invest. Organizations such as SHAPE America have advocacy resources to help parents make their case. That means having enough PE teachers and athletic personnel on staff to get to know students and develop opportunities that meet their needs and interests. Advocate for all students, not just your own, by supporting bond issues that fund these capacities.



### Local School Districts

Recognize the value of school counselors and how truly overwhelmed most of them are. The average high school student-to-school counselor ratio is 311 to 1.<sup>25</sup> Nearly 1 in 5 students (about 8 million) don't have access to a school counselor at all.<sup>26</sup> Raise the minimum number of counselors required on staff, and better connect them with PE teachers, coaches or athletic directors who are best positioned to advise a student on sport and physical activity options.



### Business & Industry

Technology companies can develop a Personal Activity Plan platform that starts with students describing their interests and history playing sports. That way, the lift for school employees is in the review, not the creation of the plan. Add fields and functionality that make it easy for students and their families to evaluate the relative benefits of participating in various activities, and which can connect them easily to school coaches and approved local programs.



### Philanthropy

Take the lead in piloting this model within a geographic area of interest. This is what charitable institutions do best – provide the seed funding to develop promising ideas that government and schools can later scale.



### Agencies

As required by federal law, students with documented disabilities are already provided an Individual Education Program, a written plan designed to meet a child's unique education needs.<sup>27</sup> Parents, teachers and school staff come together to develop that plan, and progress toward goals is measured. Given the connection between exercise and educational performance, the U.S. Department of Education can add sport activities.



## Healthy Sport Index

**There's a sport for every student.** Find those that are right for your students and your school with the help of the Healthy Sport Index, a resource of the Aspen Institute and Hospital for Special Surgery that analyzes the relative benefits and risks of each of the top 10 sports played by boys and girls in high school. Data-informed insights are offered on physical activity rates, social and emotional benefits (psychosocial), and injury risks (safety), with an interactive tool that allows customization based on the needs of each student. Visit: [healthysportindex.com](http://healthysportindex.com)

### Top Sports

	PHYSICAL ACTIVITY	PSYCHOSOCIAL	SAFETY
<b>Boys</b>			
1	Cross Country	Soccer	Tennis
2	Track and Field	Football	Swimming
3	Swimming	Basketball	Cross Country
<b>Girls</b>			
1	Cross Country	Basketball	Tennis
2	Soccer	Softball	Cross Country
3	Swimming	Soccer	Swimming

## Finding Success

Learn more about the four-year athletic plans put in place by **Trinity School of Durham and Chapel Hill** in [our report on Private Schools](#). Said Jez McIntosh, associate head of school, "It reinforces our belief that every kid should have an opportunity to play a sport. We'll give you all the offerings and walk you through them. It increases opportunities to get them involved. It opens the door to say, yeah, you can be part of this program."

# 4

## **CHALLENGE: IT'S INTERSCHOLASTIC COMPETITION – OR BUST**

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### **THE PLAY**

## Introduce Other Forms of Play

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Playing varsity can be great. Wearing the school colors and representing your school is a uniquely American experience and the stuff of teenage dreams. But interscholastic competition isn't the only form of play that can meet student needs. Options include intramural sports – classmates playing against classmates – and club sports led by students. These formats, while popular on college campuses, are often underprioritized in high schools. That's unfortunate because they can offer many of the same benefits – exercise, teamwork skills, mental health and a sense of belonging.

These alternate forms of play are important to keep in mind, especially at schools where roster cuts are common for interscholastic teams. When 80 students try out for varsity basketball, and 15 make the team and 10 get real playing time, the supply of experiences is not meeting the demand for them. Maybe there's not enough gym space to create teams for all interested students, but schools can be more intentional about introducing them to attractive options.

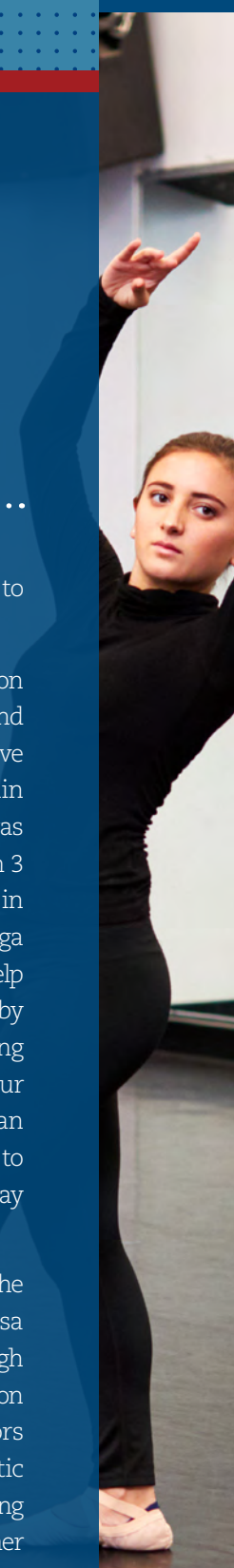
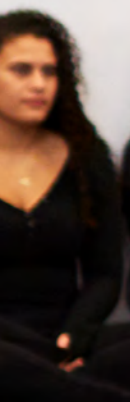
That includes sports they may not have thought about which costs little to host and can accommodate large numbers of students. Like Ultimate frisbee, which requires minimal equipment and no referees. Players negotiate and make the calls. That's not a bad skill to develop as students move into adulthood and must work with others

in our diverse, competitive and polarized society to create shared solutions to shared problems.

The sport menu could include pickup play, action sports, adapted sports, Unified sports, dance, and fitness activities. Math and reading curricula have changed through the years; sport options remain largely the same. The demand for new options was made clear in our national survey: More than 1 in 3 students expressed interest in strength training, 1 in 4 want biking, and 1 in 5 want skateboarding, yoga and dance. PE teachers and athletic directors can help develop, and connect students to, these activities by either expanding course offerings or connecting the students to community-based programs. In our national search, we found several schools that do an exemplary job at that, from creating bike clubs to hosting yoga classes to opening the gym each Friday for all-student free play.

However schools get there, they need to embrace the “something for all” approach proposed by Karissa Niehoff, CEO of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).<sup>28</sup> Address the perception of some students, parents and administrators that any form of play other than interscholastic competition is inferior. That starts with supporting activities that students consider fun or meet other expressed personal needs.

Knock down that barrier, and the opportunities to serve students expand measurably.



## WHO CAN HELP



### Local School Districts

Equity and inclusion are priorities of most school districts. Communities of color often have a smaller sport menu of options.<sup>29</sup> So, encourage PE teachers and athletic directors to work together closely to identify alternate sport options. They share facilities and students, but too often there is minimal coordination of efforts. Connect the silos.



### Policymakers

All forms of play must have policies for how students with disabilities can access these opportunities. Many students with disabilities receive door-to-door transportation that lacks flexibility around sports or other activities before or after school. Require that Individual Education Plans include transportation for sports, whether it's interscholastic, intramurals or some other activity.



### Membership Organizations

State athletic associations can create flexible policies allowing – and incentivizing – schools to offer club sports for both nontraditional activities and existing interscholastic sports. About half of the athletic associations already oversee performing arts, so the opportunity exists to expand their sports and physical activity offerings. Organizations like the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (mountain biking) offer ways to start leagues and help coaches.



### Business & Industry

Apparel and media companies, gyms, sports leagues and others can invest in introducing alternate forms of play – the more local the better (to align with company green initiatives, as local requires less travel). Imagine grants for intramural leagues, yoga, dance, and strength training classes. Brands may be rewarded with product loyalty by reaching a larger segment of the student population than only through interscholastic teams.



### Sports Organizations

National Governing Bodies of sports, pro sports leagues and teams, and universities can work with youth sports organizations to develop alternate forms of play at younger ages. These habits start early. Create programming and invest money in untraditional activities connected to the sports of their choice that could keep youth engaged by the time they reach high school.

## Finding Success

As Washington D.C. homicide rates increased and with students in remote learning during COVID-19, **Dunbar High School** PE teacher Alex Clark started the Stay Prime biking program to keep students active and out of trouble. About 60 students take weekly rides to landmarks around the nation's capital. Program partners teach bike safety and bike repair. School administrators find that biking, which occurs less in urban environments than other communities, helps students cope with their emotions after losing a loved one. D.C. Public Schools is now fielding a cycling team from students across the city, giving students more options to bike beyond a weekly ride.

### Most Requested Sports Not Offered at Their School

Archery	13%
Gymnastics	7%
Lacrosse	7%
Bowling	7%

### Interest in Participating in Physical Activities

	Male	Female
Strength training	44%	29%
Biking	26%	23%
Parkour	20%	9%
Skateboarding	17%	24%
Yoga	7%	33%
Dance	4%	32%

Note: Students in charter schools were more likely to report they want more sports options, especially swimming and football. Among all Black students, the most requested sport was gymnastics (13% vs. overall average of 7%).

Note: White students had higher interest levels in outdoor activities and climbing. Black students were most likely to be interested in dance (28% vs. 19% overall).

Source: National Student Survey Analysis, Aspen Institute and Resonant Education

# 5

## **CHALLENGE: SCHOOLS CAN'T DO IT ALL**

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### **THE PLAY**

## **Develop Community Partnerships**

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It's hard for schools today to be able to provide all the sport and fitness activities that students may seek. Awareness and interest in less mainstream sports has grown with the internet. On-site recreation spaces are limited, especially in charter schools, many of which move into small buildings that lack athletic facilities on campus. PE is rarely taken after ninth grade in public schools and even less often in private schools.<sup>30</sup> Students with intellectual, physical and other disabilities often rely on partnerships with non-school organizations to play sports.<sup>31</sup>

The smart move is to lean into community partnerships, in all forms. Schools should abide by all Title IX and other legal requirements tied to the provision of sport and physical activities (see Page 28), but also recognize that outside organizations often have expertise, equipment, cultural competencies, facilities, and human capacities that school staff may lack.

These entities often have great motivation to collaborate. Community-Based Organizations such as the YMCA, Special Olympics, Parasports programs, and Boys & Girls Clubs need to serve their local area to remain viable. Nonprofits like Soccer Without Borders must secure grants to host games and tutoring programs, which requires they work with schools to engage recent

immigrants often left out of school sports due to cost or language barriers. The past decade has seen the emergence of groups that donate used equipment. National Governing Bodies of sports always look to recruit new participants. Expensive private clubs are increasingly motivated to close access gaps through scholarships.

Shared-use agreements for facilities space remain an underutilized resource. Most fields and gyms in communities are owned by municipalities and schools. When doors are thrown open to each other for related programs, efficiencies and even higher program quality can emerge. By using the power they have to issue facility permits, parks and recreation departments and schools can set the conditions under which these public spaces are used, driving equity and safety objectives.

Creativity and persistence are the traits needed to secure partnerships. The winner of our Charter Schools category, ICEF View Park in south central Los Angeles, underscored as much when we asked how school leaders brought rugby, sailing, surfing, and snowboarding to students at their school, which must host almost every activity off-site. Look everywhere for opportunity and don't take no for an answer, they said.

## WHO CAN HELP



### Policymakers

Shared use agreements for fields and facilities can reduce race- and income-based health disparities by increasing access to safe, affordable opportunities for physical activity. It's especially helpful in under-resourced neighborhoods where a lack of funding might prevent development of new recreational spaces. These agreements can occur informally (based on historical practice) or formally (written legal document). ChangeLab Solutions has the [Shared Use Playbook](#) with helpful tools and resources to formalize these agreements.



### Sports Organizations

Often, sports programs for students with disabilities are one-time opportunities to play or segregated activities that can be seen as patronizing. Schools can work with organizations that have a track record of providing a more sustained or integrated experience, such as Special Olympics (Unified), American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, Move United, and Challenged Athletes Foundation.



### Local School Districts

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that schools create a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP). The CSPAP should include descriptions of coordination and synergy around quality PE, other forms of physical activity before, during and after school, and family and community involvement. CDC and SHAPE America created [step-by-step guidance](#) to develop, implement and evaluate their CSPAP.



### Business & Industry

Create hybrid PE models that include relevant homework or outside assignments. Since students want more fitness opportunities, they could receive PE credit through a fitness club membership as a club staffer attests that the student followed a curriculum. Create a school partnership with free or discount student access to the club – not unlike how schools use community pools for teams and PE. Or invite a fitness instructor to offer a service after school. Schools' role with student wellness should not be confined to the school day.



### Philanthropy

Invest in the training and shareable resources for afterschool fitness activities. A good example is BOKS, a free, physical activity program designed to get kids active. BOKS provides the lesson plans, training and support for free to schools. Other funders could make similar investments.

## Finding Success

A school of 4,100 students, **Alexandria City High School** in Virginia often has 300 students try out for 45 soccer spots. Players get cut with nowhere to play. So, the school partnered with the Alexandria Soccer Association (ASA) for students to play recreationally for free, and in exchange, ASA uses the school fields. Students can play ASA before school tryouts as a “feeder” team for the school. The hope is this reduces the chances students feel slighted and quit soccer if they get cut by Alexandria City.

### What is a Community-Based Organization?

The term means a public or private nonprofit organization of demonstrated effectiveness that is representative of a community, or a significant segment of a community, and provides educational or related services to individuals in the community.<sup>32</sup>

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**DIVE DEEPER:** Our research identified six best practices for effective partnerships between schools and community-based organizations. See page 32.

# 6

## **CHALLENGE: NOT ALL COACHES UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLE**

### **THE PLAY**

## **Bolster Coaching Education**

High school coaches are among the most important adults in the lives of students. They often spend more time with them than any teacher and can shape students' ideas about health, education, ethics, personal responsibility and initiative to succeed in society. In our national survey, one in three students said they play sports because of "a coach who cares about me."

Unfortunately, many coaches lack the knowledge to make sports a safe, healthy and positive experience for students. The need to better educate coaches is evident given the pressures that so many adolescents face from so many angles. Nearly half of all students (49%) say they play sports for their emotional well-being and mental health; it's 56% among females.

The requirements to coach are all over the map. Every state requires coaches to complete concussion training, and 92% of states require first aid and CPR.<sup>33</sup> Required trainings are lower for sudden cardiac arrest (57%) and heat illness acclimation (33%). Only six states require training in human development, development psychology and organization management.

In most cases, the state athletic association (65%) establishes coach training requirements. For others, the state department of education (19%), local school district (8%) or another association decides. Some schools use NFHS courses to

train coaches in areas such as fundamentals of coaching, concussions, first aid, bullying and hazing, sportsmanship, teaching and modeling behavior, engaging effectively with parents, and strength and conditioning.

Too often, coaches stop being trained after initial certification. Teachers must typically take professional development training as educators, though coaches often do not in sports. States differ on what they require to coach largely because high school sports are so decentralized and finding coaches is so challenging.<sup>34</sup> Many coaches today do not come from the teacher population, meaning they often do not have the background around learning and youth development.

Teachers need incentives to return to coaching. Although coaches are often penalized for not completing their training, only 17% of states provide incentives to do so. Incentives include professional development credit and college credit.<sup>35</sup>

Athletic directors should actively support effective behaviors of coaches through in-house teaching, required outside trainings, and coach networking. Just as importantly, ADs must hold their coaches accountable to the expected quality outcome – a positive experience that results in growing the student retention rate. Just don't make coaches go it alone. Give them the training they need and cover all costs.

## WHO CAN HELP



### Local School Districts

School districts could require coaches to take at least one training per year, so they are adapting with the changing times. School districts could work with schools to restructure teacher workloads to include coaching. And school districts could facilitate networking activities designed around teaching positive youth development and health interventions for coaches.



### Business & Industry

There's a need for the marketplace to develop cost effective and accessible learning activities for coaches that teach them the complex skills necessary to work with athletes. It's not unlike how strength and conditioning specialists get certified over six to nine months. Potential coaches need activities that are shorter and less expensive than a college degree while also being more in-depth than a short online course. Businesses could also create courses for professional development to improve retention and performance.



### Membership Organizations

Students generally appreciate their high school coaches, our survey shows. Still, too often reports surface of abuse perpetuated, or ignored, by coaches. The NFHS could create a template for a code of conduct that states could use to set expectations around physical and emotional misconduct. Lines are starting to be drawn across the sport ecosystem by anti-bullying laws, U.S. Center for Safe Sport standards, and other regulations.



### Families

Parents need to support coaches and maintain realistic expectations of their child and his or her playing time. That doesn't mean parents should stay quiet if a coach exhibits behavior that could harm students. It does mean parents should have positive sideline behavior, establish effective and appropriate means of communication with the coach, and remember coaches are humans too and need encouragement whenever possible.

### Sports Organizations



Though no national data appear to exist around the race and ethnicity of high school coaches, it's clear more people of color – especially women – are needed. National Governing Bodies of sports, professional teams/leagues and high school athletic conferences can help by creating pathways for more minorities to train together, mentor and network to become high school coaches or athletic directors, who typically make the coaching hires. Take a page from the National Organization of Minority Athletic Directors, which holds mentorship webinars for minority coaches, administrators and athletes who want to further their careers.<sup>36</sup>

## Finding Success

For years, **Jennings County High School** (North Vernon, Indiana) used an annual evaluation process of coaches that lacked consistency or real standards on what was being reviewed. The school switched to a more professionalized approach called the [Deserve to Win Grid](#), which covers 28 areas in which the coaches are evaluated. This includes creating a safe environment, increasing sports opportunities for younger children, understanding racial and gender discrimination, and demonstrating interpersonal relationships with athletes, parents, coworkers and administrators. Not on the list: wins and losses. Read more in our [Large Rural report](#).

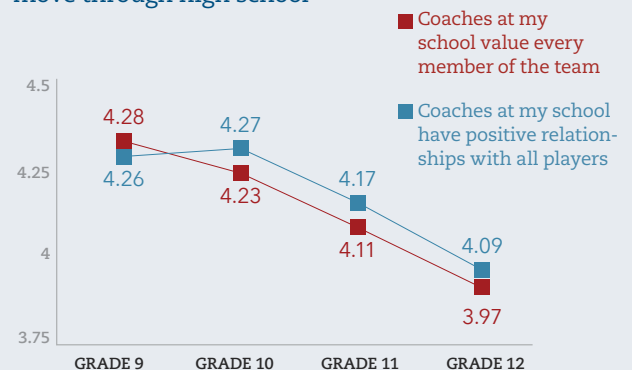
**DIVE DEEPER:** In our online Playbook, learn about the

National Standards for Sport Coaches and the state-by-state coach training requirements in high schools. Visit: [as.pn/playbook](https://as.pn/playbook).

### STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF COACHES BY GRADE

(1-5 scale with 5 being most favorable)

High school students lose respect for coaches as they move through high school



**CHALLENGE: SPORTS INJURIES CAN LAST A LIFETIME****THE PLAY****Prioritize Health and Safety**

Athletic trainers often serve as the main healthcare professionals trained in injury prevention and on-site treatment for high school sports programs. They coordinate care, conduct rehabilitation, and return players to games. They help with concussions, orthopedic injuries, eating disorders, heat illnesses, heart issues, weight management, diabetic episodes, and opioid and prescription drug abuse. They maintain a database of injuries and treatments.

To be clear: Athletic trainers alone don't solve all of the many challenges that schools face. Underpaid and overworked, they can only do so much, with so many students who need help.

Still, every high school should strive to have an athletic trainer, or access to an appropriate medical professional who can provide basic care. It should be a requirement in schools that offer collision sports. Almost 8 in 10 schools with low athletic trainer availability exist in rural and inner-city areas, and athletes in those communities are 50% more likely to have a concussion that goes unidentified or mismanaged.<sup>37</sup> Among all high schools, one in three lacks access to an athletic trainer.

We recognize the barriers: Budget constraints, lack of awareness about the role of the trainer, school size and remote locations. In many places, there aren't enough trainers to service schools. The profession is producing fewer of them out of school.

For schools that can't hire a full-time trainer, there are other options. Physical therapists have a board

certification in sports and the profession is evolving to attempt to mimic the skills of athletic trainers. The National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) and American Physical Therapy Association offer databases with certified professionals. Schools can meet with their local health care organization, nutritionist or exercise physiologist to identify a medical partnership.

Some schools and National Governing Bodies of sports use the [Go4 app](#), which connects schools with on-demand athletic trainers who are NATA members. It's a quick way to get medical coverage for games. Jobs get posted for free without contracts. Schools set their hourly or monthly rate.

In our survey, students generally feel looked after by athletic personnel when it comes to injury. Still, among students who don't play high school sports, 11% said they don't participate due to fear of injury or illness and 7% cited previous injuries. By junior year, nearly 1 in 10 students said they don't play sports due to previous injuries – almost double the rate for freshmen.

High school sports injuries can last a lifetime – chronic mental and physical pain, financial hardship, and impairment to stay active. While fatalities are rare, high schools lead the nation in sports-related deaths with more than 400 between 2008 and 2019.<sup>38</sup> While schools are often protected from successful legal claims by injury waivers, state caps on damages and other measures, they still have a moral obligation to help students feel safe when playing sports.



## WHO CAN HELP



### Policymakers

State and local governments could copy Hawaii and fund every high school to have a full-time athletic trainer. In 1993, Hawaii authorized \$371,000 to hire 10 athletic trainers for a pilot program. Hawaii is the only state with at least one trainer in every high school – most schools have two – by earmarking \$4.28 million for 74 positions. Hawaii is an outlier because of its small population and statewide educational model. If state legislatures won't fund this while tied to health and safety legislation, counties or cities might.



### Business & Industry

Research shows that telemedicine can work to diagnose concussions at sports events, though someone on the ground must still act on the diagnosis.<sup>39</sup> Multiple school districts could have one concussion specialist on standby for all of their games, checking in when needed through a robot or less expensive interface. This could especially help in rural areas.



### Membership Organizations

Organizations training coaches and PE teachers can offer education on preventive strategies to try to keep students physically healthy. Many free courses are available at [Hospital for Special Surgery Sports Medicine Institute Learning Center](#). Coaches can learn [how to lead a neurodynamic warmup](#) to reduce the risk of ACL knee injuries. PE teachers can learn curriculum on [how to get students moving better](#).



### Agencies

Poor air quality due to wildfires and climate change is now a regular consideration for high school sports across the western U.S. Sports medicine, public health and environmental health professionals should develop evidence-informed best practices for deciding whether to play outside. In the meantime, the NFHS Medicine Advisory Committee [offers considerations](#) for policy development at the school district level.<sup>40</sup>



### Local School Districts

Good health for students of color includes feeling welcome and safe, especially as racist slurs occur at high school sports events across the country. The Vermont Principals' Association developed a clear statement of expectations read at games, with the understanding that ejections or ending games early are possible. Vermont added an online system for anyone to report racist behavior, and officials and coaches are trained annually on implicit bias.

## Finding Success

With mental health challenges rampant among its students, **Center Moriches High School** in New York intentionally places every sports team with a coach who's familiar with social and emotional learning (SEL). That way there's balance among the coaching staff in case another coach lacks SEL skills. Center Moriches plans to create a "decision tree" with basic training for coaches to help any athlete struggling with mental health. Center Moriches finds simple training is best for coaches, so it's not overwhelming and they don't make a costly mistake.

### High School Access to Athletic Trainers

	Full-time	Part-time	No services
Public schools	37%	32%	31%
Private schools	27%	28%	45%

Source: *Athletic Trainer Services in the Secondary School Setting*, Korey Stringer Institute

**DIVE DEEPER:** In our online Playbook, we share high school injury rates by sport and tips to keep students safe.

Visit: [as.pn/playbook](https://as.pn/playbook).

# 8

## CHALLENGE: LACK OF FUNDING

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# THE PLAY

## Measure and Evaluate Programs

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Many of the ideas put forth in this playbook would benefit from additional budget support. A few depend on it to come online. Given the strain that schools are under to float their current programs, it's easy to think "we just can't do that now." But there is a way they can. They can demonstrate impact to untapped funders, giving them the incentive to unlock resources.

Right now, the measure of success in school sports is the scoreboard. Beat your rival, your community buzzes. Win a league or state title, and your accomplishment gets stitched into the banner that will hang on the gymnasium wall for generations. These have been the key performance indicators since the mass introduction of school-based interscholastic sports at the start of the 20th century, promoted by, among others, captains of industry who sought to encourage competition and even a winner-take-all ethos in American society.

The 21st century presents new opportunities and challenges. Corporations, foundations, philanthropists, and government all recognize the need to address the major problems of our time – from rising obesity rates to economic divides, immigrant assimilation to political

polarization. Some see sports as part of the solution, and everyone knows schools are where nearly all the kids are. But they need the evidence of positive outcomes at scale to invest. As one corporate grantmaker effectively told us, *We have dollars for those who have numbers.*

If sports are so great, prove it. Step one is defining athletic program standards that a school can be evaluated against, ideally by a third party. Step two is documenting how sports experiences contributed to the educational and health outcomes of students, through exit surveys and other tactics. Step three is presenting the impact of programs in a form that can compete with other worthy causes. In 2020, the philanthropic sector alone distributed a record \$471 billion, boosted in part by new commitments to racial equity.<sup>41</sup> The slightest fraction of that could probably cover everything proposed in this playbook, and then some. Along the way, your school will glean insights that will allow for continued program improvement and demonstrate value to the philanthropic sector.

There's game-changing opportunity out there, beyond bake sales and Friday Night Lights gate revenue.

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**DIVE DEEPER:** In the online Playbook, learn about Public Education Funds and other ways that schools can apply for philanthropic dollars. Visit [as.pn/playbook](https://as.pn/playbook).

## WHO CAN HELP



### Membership Organizations

State high school athletic associations should create Generally Accepted Standards of an Exemplary High School Athletics Program, as some states have done (see additional box on this page). Identify evidence-based practices that can help coaches and personnel organize their behavior and demonstrate adherence to objectives.



### Local School Districts

Require that schools audit themselves against the standards, conduct student impact assessments, and report the results to the district office. Then, hire a grant writer to package it all up for submission by an appropriate entity affiliated with the district. One reason that major foundations and corporations don't invest in sports is the space is too fragmented, with too many small providers. School districts can aggregate providers in a manner that is attractive to large funders.



### Policymakers

In Ohio, sports betting legislation included a provision calling for a cut of proceeds to go to school sports programs. That's great – if you're going to legalize it, make sure some goes to sports for youth who sit at the base of the larger ecosystem that allows that form of gambling to occur. More states should do this.



### Families

Sports-specific booster clubs are great but limited in scope. If all you do is solicit \$250 donations from parents to cover equipment, uniforms and other near-term costs, you may be missing the larger opportunity. If the school or school district isn't going to aggregate and capture the impact of programs, do it yourself and fund the necessary mechanisms. Turn one dollar into 10. Some family in your larger orbit may run an entity that is willing to invest.



### Sports Organizations

National organizations can learn from the U.S. Tennis Association (USTA) on how to measure and evaluate programs. Initially, the USTA provided grants to high schools that wanted to offer tennis in PE. The USTA realized these grants sometimes bought equipment that was never used. The USTA adapted by providing a grant for equipment and linking a school to a local club that can help support programming. This feature provides a level of accountability.

## Finding Success

In 2015, the governing body for high school athletics in Massachusetts had yet to articulate the standards of an exemplary athletics program. So, **Hopkins Academy** (Massachusetts) used the model from neighboring Connecticut and surveyed students, coaches and parents on awareness and program fidelity to its mission. Independent reviewers noted strengths and areas of improvement, laying the groundwork for Hopkins to get better at what it describes as the purpose of its athletics program.<sup>42</sup>

### THE GOLD STANDARD: STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference, the governing body for high school sports, reviews high school athletic programs against five standards. A high-level summary:

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES:** A mission statement that clearly defines what the school/program is seeking to achieve and delineates the expectations of the program for athletes, coaches, school administration, parents, and the community.

**CURRICULUM:** Programs, activities and curricula that enable the school to achieve its athletic mission and expectations.

**RESOURCES AND EQUITY:** Sufficient support and resources by its governing body and the community to assure the achievement of the athletic mission and expectations. Equitable and appropriate resources, facilities, and opportunities are afforded to all athletes and sports programs, including intramural programs.

**ADMINISTRATION:** The administrative structure, policies, procedures, and personnel in place to allow for the attainment of the athletic mission and expectations.

**PROGRAM AND PLAYER EVALUATION:** Reporting by the athletic department of its progress in meeting its mission and expectations to the school administration and an action plan for improvement.

More: [casciac.org/pdfs/athleticstandards2.pdf](https://casciac.org/pdfs/athleticstandards2.pdf)



# CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

## Tap the Power of Non-Discrimination

In our society, the word discrimination has many meanings. It's often used to describe the practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups based on racial, gender, religious or other group characteristics. When fans or opposing players at high school games taunt athletes with sexual or racial provocations, that's discrimination. It's wrong, and schools must have zero tolerance. Stop the game, if needed.

However, the broader, more formal meaning of discrimination, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the ability to recognize the difference between things that are of good quality and those that are not." It's the power to distinguish and select what is true or appropriate or excellent.

**Coaches** have that power when selecting a 15-person roster from a tryout of 80 players.

**Principals** have that power when they decide which sports and activities to offer.

**Policymakers** have that power when guiding the entities that oversee school-based sports.

How leaders use that power, going forward, is key to driving systems-level progress.

Students today are constrained by the limits of the prevailing template for school sports. A generation ago, freshmen might have been able to make their soccer or basketball team with no prior experience in the game. Not anymore. In many schools, roster spots often go to students who have played travel sports since grade school, a pathway that can cost thousands of dollars a year that effectively pushes aside youth from low-income and other backgrounds.

**Leaders should recognize that every student, regardless of background or ability, has a right to play sports.**

Too easily excluded are racial and ethnic minorities, late bloomers and below-average athletes. Students with chronic diseases. Those who may like sports but aren't that competitive with peers. Those who coaches may see as having the wrong body type. Those who are obese or overweight. Those who are LGBTQ and others who find the current model unwelcoming. Religious minorities. Refugees. Homeless students. Students with family or job responsibilities during the afterschool hours.



Title IX boosted participation rates and closed the gap for girls. Another federal law based on the principle of non-discrimination, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 created new opportunities for students with physical and other documented impairments. But progress has stagnated over the past two decades, with fewer than 4 in 10 public school students overall playing sports. Nearly 1 in 3 ninth-grade urban students, and 1 in 4 suburban students, said in the Aspen Institute’s survey that they don’t play school sports because they just are “not good enough.”

Leaders should recognize that every student, regardless of background or ability, has a right to play sports. Not just every student who tries out for a team – but every student in the school. That sports opportunity may be offered through interscholastic teams, intramurals, a student-led club, or a connection made with a fitness facility or other community organization.

State legislatures can establish through new or existing law that every public school student deserves access to a meaningful sports or physical activity opportunity provided or facilitated by the school. State departments of education should work with school districts to develop new opportunities, starting with data collection on equity, health and safety, and coach training measures. Superintendents and school districts also can act on their own, and not wait for state action.

Leaders should think of sports as part of the second half of the school day, not an add-on to the academic enterprise. They should allocate the resources to

organize appropriate activities, starting with a full-time athletic director in every school and more athletic trainers, PE teachers, and counselors. They should enforce the laws already on the books, including gender and disability requirements in sports. More than half of high school athletic administrators say they are unaware of who their Title IX coordinator is or feel unsupported by that coordinator.<sup>43</sup>

Discrimination can also appear based on sports opportunities by race and ethnicity. In New York City, Black and Latino students attend schools with about 10 fewer teams on average compared to other students. Black and Latino students sued, arguing the disparities violated the city’s human rights law. The legal settlement didn’t just lead to a redistribution of existing investments. New York will create 200 new teams by 2024.<sup>44</sup>

State athletic associations are also part of the solution. They create policies, rules and funding formulas that shape local priorities and enable participation on teams. But they should not be left alone to address gaps. Today, half of all students are minorities, but most board members and executive directors of state athletic associations are White, male, and middle age or older. More diversity of voices will bring greater knowledge, context, and advocacy for students.

Some fear messing with tradition. That ambivalence can be found even in government guidance on non-discrimination in school sports. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education declared, “a school district must provide students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in its existing extracurricular athletic programs.” The agency then explained what an equal opportunity does NOT mean, including “changing the nature of selective teams – students with disabilities have to compete with everyone else and legitimately earn their place on the team” and “giving a student with a disability an unfair advantage over other competitors.”

# CHILDREN'S RIGHTS & SPORTS

Released in 2021 by the Aspen Institute, the resource identifies the minimum conditions under which all youth ages 17 and under should be engaged in sports programs. The eight rights, all of which are positioned as normative (cultural agreement) rather than legal rights:

1. To Play Sports
2. To Safe and Healthy Environments
3. To Qualified Program Leaders
4. To Developmentally Appropriate Play
5. To Share in the Planning and Delivery of Activities
6. To an Equal Opportunity for Personal Growth
7. To Be Treated with Dignity
8. To Enjoy Themselves

Learn more at:  
[as.pn/childrensrights](https://as.pn/childrensrights)

Forward-thinking school leaders recognize that meritocracy only works where there is fairness. And fairness starts with treating each individual student as worthy of an opportunity to develop educationally with the benefit of sports, if not on varsity than through some other vehicle no less worthy of investment. It requires asking: How do we not discriminate in favor of the student who is privileged athletically, financially or in other ways?

In this report, we call for a paradigm shift in mindset and clarification about the real purpose of education-based sports in the 21st century. In most sports today, NCAA athletic scholarships and professional sports opportunities are acquired through elite training and competition opportunities provided by non-school private clubs. So let them have that lane.

For the rest, health equity should be the guiding principle.<sup>45</sup> School leaders should recognize the value of mental and physical health to student success, that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthy, and that sport is a key tool – especially with so many cuts to PE. Identify disparities, evaluate efforts to close gaps, and reassess strategies as you move along.

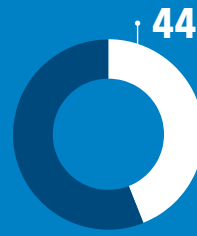
The path to addressing discrimination is a long game. It took decades for Title IX and disability efforts to gain traction and even their most passionate champions don't always agree on solutions. When to introduce inclusive and/or adaptive activities for students with disabilities? Should cheerleading count as a sport?<sup>46</sup> How to accommodate students who are transgender?

These are complex issues that deserve attention. But this much we know: Finding the right answers – and designing the best future for school sports – starts with a commitment to discriminating against no student, of treating each of them as worthy of a true opportunity.

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**DIVE DEEPER:** Our online Playbook offers tips for Title IX compliance and ways to get students with disabilities involved in sports. Visit [as.pn/playbook](https://as.pn/playbook).

# THE UNDERREPRESENTED

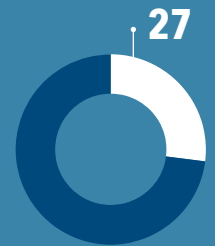


Girls make up **44%** of high school athletes vs. 56% who are boys<sup>47</sup>

Girls at heavily minority schools have **39%** of the sports opportunities as girls at heavily White schools<sup>48</sup>



27% of Asian American students don't play high school sports because no offered sport interests them<sup>49</sup>



## Male

HISPANIC 20%

BLACK 20%

WHITE 27%

## Female

BLACK 6%

WHITE 11%

HISPANIC 12%

Fewer male students of color meet physical fitness guidelines than White youth – and all female students fare even worse<sup>50</sup>

Native American adolescents are

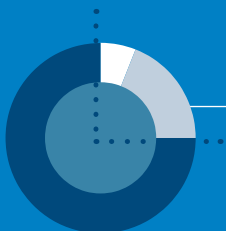
**30%**

more likely than White adolescents to be **obese**<sup>51</sup>

Nearly

**1 IN 3**

LGBTQ youth play sports (school, community league or club) – **lower than the broader youth population**<sup>52</sup>



An estimated **6%-25%** of students with **disabilities** participate in high school **sports**<sup>53</sup>

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## How Schools Can Partner with Community-Based Organizations

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### Effective Communication

- Formalize agreements by outlining the frequency of meetings, contact information, and programmatic needs that will sustain beyond the current staff.
- Find out what the needs and wants are at the school level.



### Go Beyond Transactional

- Connect the staff of both the CBO and school, so they know about each other's culture and what gets taught on and off the field.
- Include the CBO in important school meetings and family nights. Invite the school to attend important CBO events.



### Partnership Transparency

- Develop time for school staff to collaborate with CBO staff and coaches to build a united culture.
- Communicate honestly about capacity for the program, time for students and school staff, cost, funding, and long-term goals.



### Make it Co-Curricular

- Explore ways sports can tie in classroom and on-the-field learnings to develop quality social emotional skills.
- Use sports as the bridge between education and career development opportunities beyond school.



### Expand the Partners

- Invite other local government organizations, including parks and rec or the local health department, to collaborate.
- Get local and bring in partners who can lead a national initiative at the local level.



### Explore the Possible

- Find ways that make physical activity fun and offer nontraditional routes to healthy lifestyles.
- Use PE to create a place where youth identify with sports and physical activities they might not traditionally be exposed to that meet their needs.

Source: [How Community-Based Organizations Can Support in Reimagining School Sports](#), Aspen Institute Project Play



# GLOSSARY

How we define key terms in this report:

**SPORT** All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. Participants may be motivated by internal or external rewards, and competition may be with others or themselves (i.e. personal challenge).

**COMMUNITY SPORTS** Non-school programs that provide organized and unstructured sport activities. These opportunities may be provided by local parks and recreation departments, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, private club sports, and other entities.

**SCHOOL SPORTS** Any form of sports and physical activity that is organized or facilitated by schools in the context of the educational setting. This includes but is not limited to interscholastic competition, intramurals, student-led club sports, and physical education.

**YOUTH SPORTS** Adult-organized sports programs for children and adolescents which have designated coaches, formal practices and scheduled competitions.

**ACTION SPORTS** Used to encapsulate a group of individual sports on a continuum from leisure to adrenaline pulsating, such as BMX, snowboarding, skateboarding, surfing, mountain biking, skiing, wakeboarding, motocross, wakesurfing and stand-up paddling.

**COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAM** A multicomponent approach by which schools and districts use all opportunities for students to be physically active for at least 60 minutes per day. A CSPAP includes PE, physical activity before, during and after the school day, family and community engagement, and staff involvement.

**DISTRICT WELLNESS COUNCIL** It's comprised of district, school and community members who meet at least four times per year to establish district goals and to oversee school health and safety policies and programs, including the development, implementation, evaluation and updates of the district's Local School Wellness Policy.

**HEALTH EQUITY** It's achieved when every person has the opportunity to attain his or her full health potential and no one is disadvantaged because of social position or other socially determined circumstances. Health inequities are reflected in differences in length of life; quality of life; rates of disease, disability, and death; severity of disease; and access to treatment.

**INCLUSIVE/ADAPTIVE SPORTS** Inclusive means including athletes with a disability on teams involved in existing mainstream sport competition. These teams mix athletes with and without disabilities, such as Unified Sports through Special Olympics. Adaptive means creating sport opportunities for athletes with a disability that often require some adaption of sport competition rules or equipment. Adaptive includes wheelchair sports and use of a sport prosthetic. Adaptive can be applied to both individual and team sports.

**LOCAL SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICY** A written document of official policies that guide a local educational agency or school district's efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students' health, well-being and ability to learn by supporting healthy eating and physical activity.

**PHYSICAL LITERACY** The ability, confidence and desire to be physically active for life, as defined by the Aspen Institute and a panel of experts in a 2015 project supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

**SHARED USE AGREEMENT** A formal agreement between two separate government entities, often a school district and a city or county, setting forth the terms and conditions for the shared use of public property. Through SUAs, schools can continue to provide their students and the local community with the facilities needed to maintain active and healthy lifestyles after school hours while incurring little to no additional costs.

**SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING** SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities.

# METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

This playbook was co-written by Tom Farrey and Jon Solomon of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, with contributions from staff members. It represents the final report in the Reimagining School Sports series, which launched in 2020. More than 60 experts who work in education, high school sports, government, public health, community foundations and other sectors contributed insights during our reporting process as members of the Aspen Institute's advisory group. Additional interviews with other experts, an analysis of student survey results, and examinations of high school data, published research and media articles also guided the reporting process.

In 2021, the Aspen Institute conducted nine virtual roundtables with advisory group members and high school athletic directors and principals. Eight roundtables focused on a specific topic to assist in producing this report. The roundtables also evaluated high school finalists for the Aspen Institute's exemplary awards from eight different school types. The ninth roundtable discussed ideas for the final report.

Through support provided by Adidas/BOKS, The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation, and Hospital for Special Surgery, the Aspen Institute awarded \$20,000 each to eight exemplary high schools. Each winner was recognized in a report that highlighted innovative strategies to grow sports participation and physical activity.

Information for this report was also guided by results from a national high school student survey conducted during the 2020-21 school year. The online survey was created by Resonant Education in collaboration with the Aspen Institute to ask students about their participation in sports as well as other perceptions about sports in high school. Nearly 6,000 students responded to the survey from schools representing all regions of the country as well as all school types (Public, Private and Charter) and urbanicity (Urban, Suburban and Rural). [Read the full analysis of the survey results here.](#)

To identify the percentage of high schools offering sports and the participation rate of students, Resonant Education analyzed data drawn from the 2017-18 and 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) public use file. Data within this file was collected at the school level and includes school names and IDs, Title I status, school type (Special Education, Magnet, Charter and Alternative), enrollment breakdowns, grade-level information, student demographics, urbanicity (rural, city, town or suburb), and single-sex athletics information.

To be included in the analysis, schools must have offered grades 9 through 12 in 2017-18 and have entered complete data for the CRDC. Data was also pulled from the 2019-20 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core Data in order to capture school urbanicity. The final dataset for analysis includes 23,172 schools from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and excludes Puerto Rico. Due to discrepancies between data sources, urbanicity analysis was able to be conducted on 80.5% of schools within the population; however, Resonant Education notes that the final results and sample size suggest no reason for concern regarding the integrity of any analysis conducted.

Thank you to our Reimagining School Sports advisory group members who offered guidance throughout the project:

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**SPORT**  
FOR  
**ALL**  

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**PLAY**  
FOR  
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**A Playbook  
to Develop  
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Through Sports**

