

STATE OF PLAY

Tacoma-Pierce County

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program analyzed the landscape of youth sports and physical activity in Tacoma-Pierce County from June 2022 to June 2023. *State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County* offers a snapshot of how well adults are serving youth through sports, play and other physical activities, regardless of race, gender, income or ability.

Findings for this report were guided by the Aspen Institute through multiple methods: individual interviews with more than 70 stakeholders and community members whose work touches the lives of children; 14 focus-group discussions with young people, coaches, sports administrators and parents; surveys conducted of youth; media accounts; and existing reports, policy analyses and publicly available data collected by the Aspen Institute.



Some key findings in the report:

Pierce County youth are less physically active than the nation and state. Only 19% of youth in Pierce County meet the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, below averages for the nation (24%) and state (23%). Pierce County girls (15%) are less likely to be sufficiently physically active than boys (24%). Bethel School District youth report having no physical activity at a higher rate than Tacoma and Peninsula children.

Disabled and nonbinary youth are far less likely to be physically active. Children with a physical disability are almost two times more likely to have zero days with 60 minutes of physical activity than young people without a disability. Youth with a disability take P.E. classes less frequently than their peers and are far more likely to strongly disagree that they learned skills in P.E. to help them be active. Also, only 7% of nonbinary youth—those who do not identify with either gender—receive the recommended daily physical activity.

Increased physical activity translates to better mental health. Youth who are physically active report more excitement, happiness and motivation, and those who are inactive report greater levels of nervousness and anxiety, worry, malaise, and depression or hopelessness. For instance, 1 in 4 youth who have zero days with 60 minutes of physical activity feel depressed nearly every day vs. 1 in 10 who are active daily.

Youth have strong interest in trying individual and nontraditional sports. The top sports boys most want to try for the first time are boxing, fencing, snowboarding, archery and martial arts. Girls most desire horseback riding, archery, ice skating, fencing and surfing. Nonbinary youth most want to try fencing, archery, horseback riding, snowboarding, ice skating and rock climbing.

More turf fields, field lights and indoor facilities are needed. This was the most common need we heard in every community we spoke with (Tacoma, Puyallup, Bethel) and at every competitive level (rec, travel and school sports). Wet weather and dark winter months limit availability options for fields.

There's not a one-size-fits-all model for Pierce County. The county is both a mountain community and a maritime community, and geography factors into what activities are tried. The county offers a regional ice rink and equestrian center, which communities across Tacoma Narrows Bridge may not access much. Capacities and resources enjoyed by Tacoma don't exist in rural parts of Pierce County, where growing populations in unincorporated communities create greater demand to expand the county parks system.

The commitment to the whole child is this community's greatest asset. A whole-child approach is the way schools, community partners, families and neighborhoods wrap their collective arms around children to care for them 24 hours a day, everywhere they are. The region embraces concepts such as social-emotional learning, physical and mental wellness, positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), trauma-sensitive practices, restorative practices, and equity and inclusion.

Tacoma and Pierce County's efforts to address the whole child serve as the inspiration for our main recommendation, located in the Game Changer section starting on page 35. Youth are struggling with their mental health, especially after the pandemic. Sports, recreation and play

can assist. Research shows physically active children have better mental health.

But the opposite can be true as well: If sports are not a youth-centered experience, they can damage a child's mental health. In our analysis, the most promising opportunity is to use sports and recreation to help improve children's mental health through these strategies:

- Train coaches and recreational professionals to promote good mental health.
- Align sports and recreation with state and local efforts around mental health.
- Create public awareness about mental health in youth sports.

In addition, our Call for Leadership section (page 42) recommends that Tacoma-Pierce County promotes sport sampling with events and equipment-sharing initiatives; pilots travel and rec soccer partnerships to grow the quality of programming; and invests in new public sports facilities, especially in Bethel. All of our recommendations are based on the unique characteristics of Pierce County and informed by feedback from key stakeholders in the community. Through collaboration, more children can enjoy the physical, social, emotional and academic benefits that can come from playing sports and being physically active.



State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County is the Aspen Institute's 12th community report. The Aspen Institute has produced county reports on Seattle-King County, Washington, and Mobile County, Alabama; a state report on Hawai'i; regional reports on Southeast Michigan, Western New York, Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes, and Central Ohio; and local reports on Oakland, Baltimore, Harlem, New York, and Camden, New Jersey. Stakeholders in those communities have taken actions based on the recommendations and are seeing results.