

STATE OF PLAY

Tacoma-Pierce County

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS



TABLE OF CONTENTS



1

WELCOME

2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

4

SCOREBOARD

6

THE 8 PLAYS

35

GAME CHANGER

42

CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

46

APPENDICES

51

ENDNOTES



**NAMES
FAMILY
FOUNDATION**

The Aspen Institute thanks our partner for its support of this report.

WELCOME

The Names Family Foundation and Metro Parks Tacoma are committed to providing opportunities for youth to be active and healthy. We appreciate the value of sports, outdoor recreation and all forms of physical activity, especially in light of the increased challenges facing our children's mental health coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE VISION

A Pierce County in which every child has the opportunity to be active through sports, play and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability.

Over a one-year period, we co-hosted an advisory group of 19 community leaders whose work revolves around play, sports, recreation and healthy communities. The result is this *State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County* report that assesses the state of youth sports and physical activity in Pierce County. Authored by the Aspen Institute as part of its Project Play initiative, the report includes key findings, recommendations and children's voices on their experiences.

Project Play's work is anchored in national research that has emerged over the past decade establishing the many benefits of physical activity, including greater cognitive function, positive mental health, better educational outcomes, and lower health care costs in adulthood. A virtuous cycle gets unleashed if children engage in regular sport and physical activity.

One of the most significant findings from *State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County* is the clear value of physical activity to mental health, which is a growing challenge in our community. Physically active youth in Pierce County reported feeling more excited, happier and more motivated. Those who are physically inactive said they felt more nervous, anxious, sad, depressed or hopeless.

Unfortunately, only 19% of Pierce County youth receive 60 minutes of daily physical activity as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, below the national (24%) and state (23%) averages. Our advisory group aspires to increase Pierce County's physical activity rate to at least the national average, if not higher, through collective and individual actions. Imagine the health benefits so many more young people would receive.

We firmly believe all children have the right to enjoy the benefits of sports and physical activity in safe and healthy environments. We all play a role in making that happen.

Sincerely,



Patricia Shults

Names Family Foundation, Executive Director



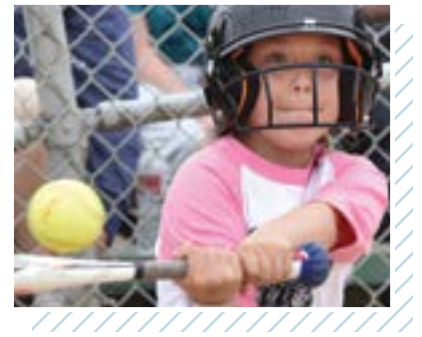
Shon Sylvia

Metro Parks Tacoma, Executive Director

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.

THE **STATE OF PLAY** IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

SCOREBOARD

FEW YOUTH ARE ACTIVE ENOUGH

Percentage in Pierce County who meet CDC's recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity daily.

All Youth	19%
Boys	24%
Girls	15%
Nonbinary	7%
Peninsula	26%
Bethel	16%
Tacoma	12%
High Income	23%
Medium Income	14%
Low Income	13%
White	20%
Black	18%
Latino/a	15%
Asian	12%
Elementary School	33%
Middle School	22%
High School	12%

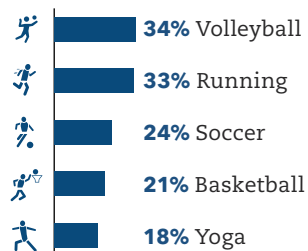


Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County Youth Survey

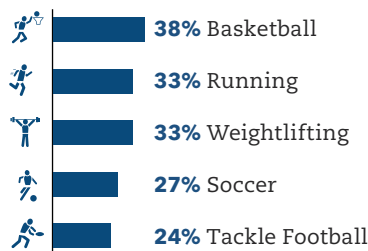
TOP 5 SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES PIERCE COUNTY YOUTH REGULARLY PLAY

Results from Aspen Institute's survey of 3,395 youth. Multiple answers were allowed.

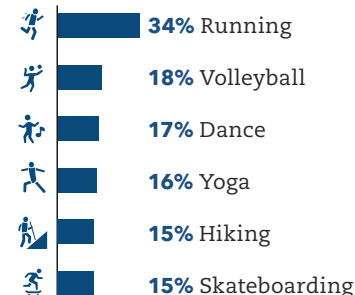
GIRLS



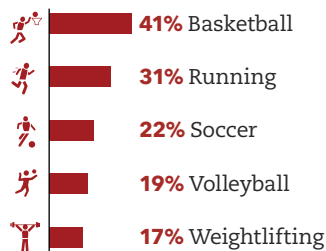
BOYS



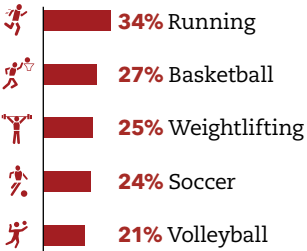
NONBINARY*



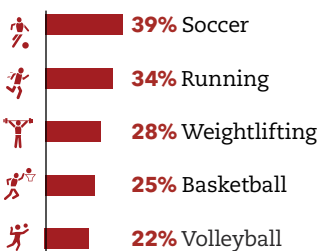
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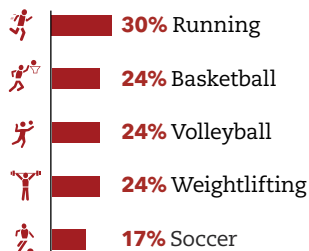
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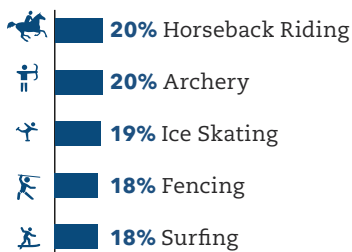


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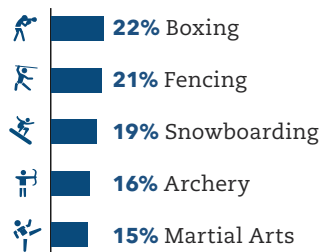


TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH WANT TO TRY

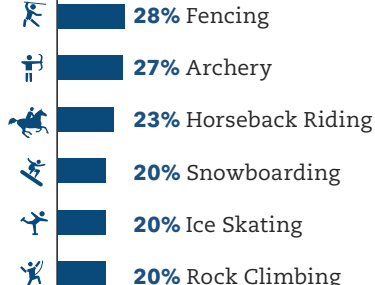
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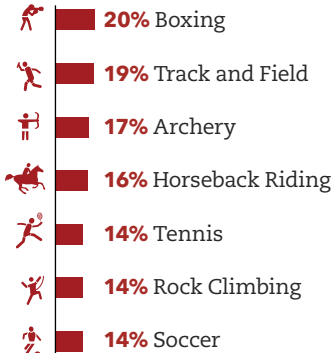
BOYS



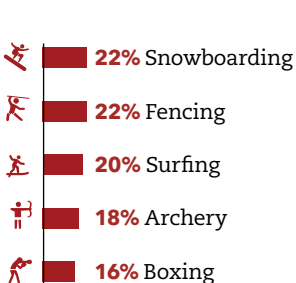
NONBINARY*



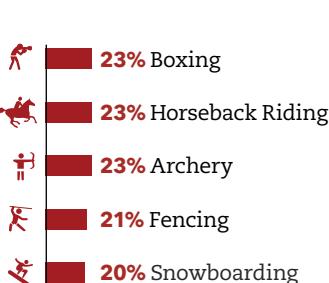
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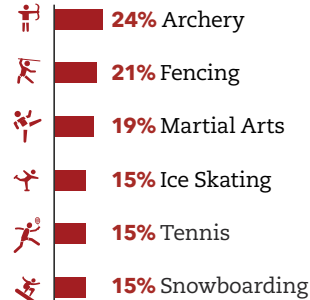
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LATINO/A



ASIAN



* Nonbinary refers to people who do not identify with any gender. In the survey, 20% of nonbinary youth reported they do not participate in any physical activities regularly.

Note: Regular participation is defined as participating in the sport/activity at least 20 days in the last year.



- Ask Kids What They Want
- Reintroduce Free Play
- Encourage Sport Sampling
- Revitalize In-Town Leagues

- Think Small
- Design for Development
- Train All Coaches
- Emphasize Prevention

For more on the framework of each play, see the Project Play report at projectplay.org/youth-sports/playbook

1

Challenge: Youth sport is organized by adults

The Play: Ask Kids What They Want

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

To get and keep kids involved in sports, build the voice of children into the design of activities.

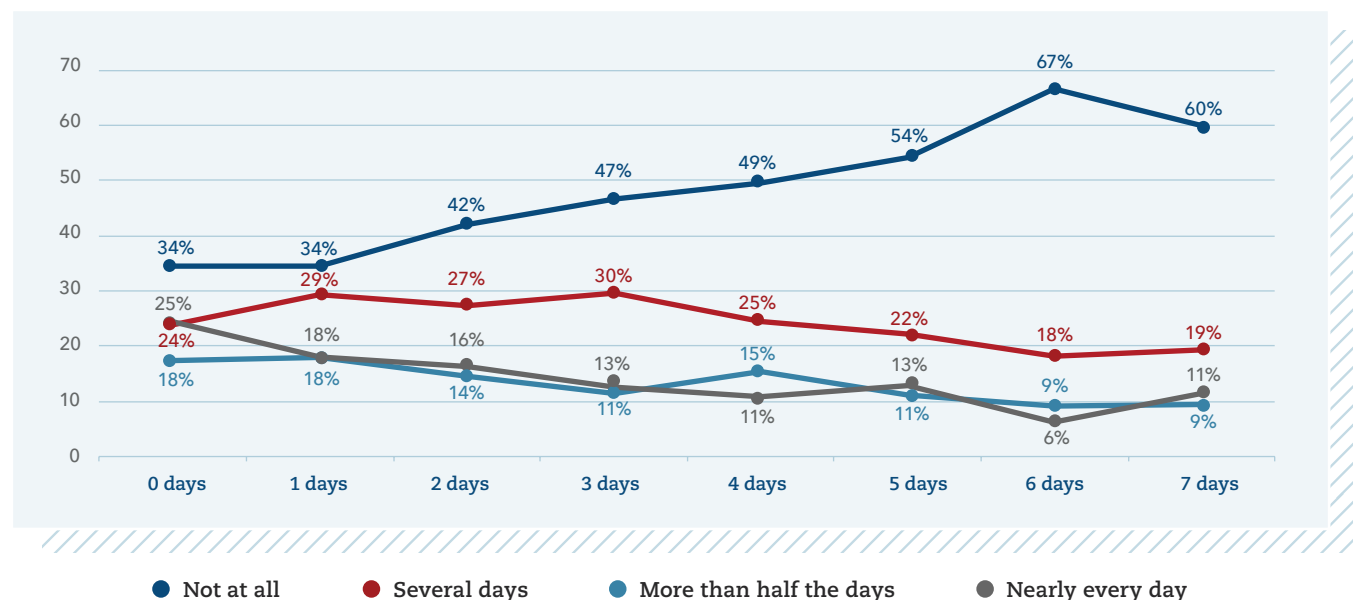
FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

Increased physical activity translates to better mental health.

Children who are physically active reported more excitement, happiness and motivation, and those who are inactive reported greater nervousness, anxiety, worry and depression, according to our youth survey. The analysis compared the number of days youth reported 60 minutes of daily physical activity in the last week with how frequently they felt certain emotions over the prior two weeks. For example, 25% of youth who said they had zero days of physical activity reported feeling depressed or hopeless nearly every day, more than twice the rate

(11%) of those who reported being active every day. More youth who are active on a near daily basis reported feeling excitement (32% active vs. 9% non-active), happiness (39% vs. 11%) and motivation (32% vs. 12%) than non-active youth. The results also suggested that youth who play an organized sport or physical activity have better mental health, although the differences were minimal compared to doing any form of physical activity. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated mental health challenges: In 2022, [58% of 10th graders reported feeling sad or depressed on most days, more than twice as many as before the pandemic](#).¹

FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION BY NUMBER OF PHYSICALLY ACTIVE DAYS PER WEEK





Pierce County youth receive less physical activity than the U.S. average.

Our survey showed only 19% of Pierce County youth meet the CDC's recommendation of 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Nationally, 24% meet the standard²; the state rate is 23%.³ Local high school students were five times more likely to be physically inactive than elementary students. Meanwhile, 58% of all youth regularly play organized sports, with higher participation in the Peninsula (72%) and Tacoma (68%) school districts than Bethel (47%). Nationally, [56% of children ages 6-17 played on a sports team or took sports lessons in 2018-19](#), the most recent year of available government data before COVID-19.⁴ The gap locally between daily physical activity and organized sports participation may be due to youth being less active in sports offseasons, especially during wet and darker months, and not enough options for other forms of fitness. Almost two-thirds of children who don't play organized sports said they are not interested (35%) or believe they are not good enough (29%). Teens told us cuts by school and

travel teams embarrass many adolescents, discouraging them to try out and leaving them with limited organized options to be active. Schools could adopt no-cut intramural teams and clubs tied to fitness, such as running, hiking, yoga, dance and weightlifting. Parks departments could increase offerings and marketing of activities beyond traditional sports.

“

I hate to say it, but sometimes coaches don't even know who they're cutting. They saw the player for one drill in two minutes and the player is in line for 90% of the practice because there's no gym space. Players are getting cut who are talented.”

—HIGH SCHOOL COACH IN BETHEL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Youth are motivated most by fun and friendships, not wins and scholarships.

In our survey, the clear top two reasons youth said they play sports are to have fun (48%) and play with friends (47%), followed by improving skills (30%) and exercise (24%). Youth of all ages consistently said they enjoy the peer connections made by playing. Winning (20%) ranked fifth and earning a college scholarship (7%) rated 15th for reasons they play. Youth from high-income households were almost twice as likely as low-income youth to indicate they play sports to earn a college scholarship. Black youth were about twice as likely as White children to play for this reason. Tacoma and surrounding areas are a hotbed for basketball, the No. 1 sport Pierce County boys said they regularly play.

[The likelihood of a high school basketball player reaching Division I college basketball is 1%.⁵](#)

Girls play volleyball more than basketball – a change from years past.

Almost 6 of 10 Pierce County girls said they played volleyball at least once in the past year. Just 4 of 10 girls said they tried basketball once. Girls are also more likely to regularly play volleyball (34%) than basketball (21%). The Puyallup and Bethel school districts have more girls playing volleyball than basketball.⁶ Tacoma middle and high school girls ask to play volleyball more than any sport.⁷ (Boys are also interested in volleyball, but it's rarely offered to them.) Pierce County mirrors national trends. [High school girls basketball lost 19% of its participation since 2002](#), dropping to the fourth-most popular girls sport, while track and field, volleyball and soccer grew.⁸ Several factors are driving girls basketball's decline: specializing year-round in one sport; fewer affordable and local rec options due to the privatized travel model; and some coaches' belief that more girls now view basketball as too difficult to play.

Parent influence is helping and hurting children's enjoyment of sports.

The majority of surveyed youth (59%) said their parents help them enjoy sports more. Parents can provide valuable support and motivation. But high school students were five times more likely than elementary students to cite parents as a reason they enjoy sports less. Sports can become a large part of a child's identity, causing shame and stress. Many young people worry about disappointing their parents when they do not perform well, said Courtney Chandler, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department teen mental health coordinator. Sports can become a large part of a child's identity, causing shame and stress. Many young people worry about disappointing their parents when they do not perform well, said Courtney Chandler, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department teen mental health coordinator. A high school athlete told us her parents are the main reason she still plays a sport she no longer enjoys. "I would feel guilty if I stop playing because of all the time and money they spent," she said. Pressure can be felt in public settings. Puyallup Parks and Recreation periodically stages "Silent Saturdays" for basketball in which parents can't cheer or talk, only clap. The effort started because too many parents holler confusing instructions from the sidelines. Children find "Silent Saturdays" games are far more enjoyable, said Deon Moyd, Puyallup Parks and Rec supervisor. "It puts in perspective for parents what youth sports is supposed to be about," he said.





Myrell Benz, 14

Myrell Benz had never talked about his feelings with AAU basketball teammates. “I was kind of like, I don’t want to do it, but when my teammates opened up, I was like, why don’t we give it a try?” Myrell says. “As it went on, it just got better and better.”

Myrell’s coaches on his Game Time AAU team, Darren DeLeon and David Stewart, started mental health forums in Tacoma because they noticed young people struggling mentally. “Get Your Mind Right” allows about 75 sixth- to 12th graders to meet biweekly and talk about what they’re experiencing, especially given a rash of suicides and shootings in their community. Game Time partners with Kids’ Mental Health Pierce County and Safe Streets to facilitate the forums. Any young person is welcome, not just basketball players.

Myrell says some teammates talk about family members dying, going to jail or not being around in their lives. “One thing I talk about is not having my dad,” Myrell says. “I’ve had a stepdad most of my life, and having my mom as a single parent, I’ve had to really help her a lot – watching

my siblings and doing chores so when she goes to work, she can come back to a clean house and she doesn’t have to worry about anything.”

Myrell, who attends Curtis Junior High School in University Place, used to live in Tacoma near Stewart Middle School. His mom rarely let him play outside due to shootings. “It was scary to live over there so we had to move,” he says.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, “I was on video games for hours,” Myrell says. “I quit basketball for a little bit because of video games. When I didn’t play basketball, I didn’t feel right. I didn’t want it as bad as I do now. Game Time changed me. It kind of brought me back as a person.”

Myrell dreams of reaching the NBA to give his mom, Ashley, a better life. Ashley simply appreciates that his coaches give Myrell and his friends a space to express their feelings – too often a rarity among boys and men.

“As a parent, I am so thankful they are doing this for their players and community,” says Ashley, who recently lost a family member to suicide. “For Game Time to come together and create a space for teenagers that is cool to talk about mental health is heaven sent. Even if kids don’t express themselves while they’re there, just knowing it’s OK to do so and to take steps to get help if needed is so important.”

2

Challenge: Overstructured sports experiences

The Play: Reintroduce Free Play

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Make sure there's room not just for organized play but experiences that children can own.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

Parks are more accessible in Tacoma than other parts of Pierce County.

Access to parks and open space can positively impact health, well-being, livability and community connectedness. In Tacoma, [77% of residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park](#), slightly above the average (74%) of the 100 most populous U.S. cities.⁹ [Also, 80% of Tacoma residents live within one mile of a community park and 73% live within a half mile of a neighborhood park.](#)¹⁰ Access is lower for all of Pierce County, which includes more rural and unincorporated communities: [53% have community park access and 43% have neighborhood park access.](#)¹¹ In our youth survey, more than half said they play at nearby parks or green spaces at least once a week during warmer months. High-income youth play there more frequently (63%) than medium-income (50%) and low-income (47%) youth. Bethel children play at parks at a lower rate than Peninsula and Tacoma youth. Children in Tacoma and Bethel were four to five times more likely than Peninsula youth to report avoiding parks due to safety concerns.

New state law guarantees K-5 students at least 30 minutes of daily recess.

Championed by local state Sen. T'Wina Nobles, [the recess law starting in 2024-25 will be one of the strongest in the country.](#)¹² The law defines recess as

WHY YOUTH DON'T GO TO PARKS AS OFTEN AS THEY WOULD LIKE

I don't have as much time as I want to	33%
I have no one to go with	31%
Weather makes fields/surrounding area hard to play on	23%
There is not enough to do there	18%
I don't have a way to get there	17%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County Youth Survey

supervised and student-directed, requires recess be held outside whenever possible, and maintains that use of screens should be avoided. The Washington State School Directors Association is charged with creating a policy encouraging physical activity breaks for middle and high schools, where youth are less physically active. In our survey, 70% of Pierce County elementary school students reported having played sports at recess vs. 39% in middle school and 27% in high school. Importantly, the law prohibits the use of physical activity as punishment and discourages withholding recess for disciplinary or academic reasons. Physical activity helps build vital social skills and problem-solving abilities while improving concentration and stress management. When used as punishment, physical activity can be viewed negatively by young people.

Incentives are helping encourage youth to be active.

While running as punishment disincentivizes physical activity, incentives tied to activity can be useful. One example is a running club with 100 K-5 students at Lowell Elementary in Tacoma. Ladd Wolfe, who started the club out of frustration with childhood obesity, recruits students with free prizes like T-shirts, water bottles, medals and shoes donated by local race organizations. The ultimate prize: connecting six weeks of student training to a local race, Sound to Narrows, to run their final mile. “If I didn’t have a race at the end, I don’t think I would get the turnout,” Wolfe said. Students write in journals about healthy food groups and how they feel as they run. Their running skills are all over the map at the beginning; some sprint, others barely walk. “We tell them running is just a walk with a hop and we’re running for our lives,” Wolfe said. “The most common thing kids say at the end is, ‘Are you sure that was a mile? I don’t think it was.’ I say, ‘That’s because you trained. You can do it again.’”

Smartphones and social media are negatively impacting children’s play.

Many parents, coaches and administrators told us the main reason they see fewer physically active children is their activity on smartphones. It’s always at their fingertips to text, post or stream; nationally, [95% of people ages 13-17 use a social media platform](#) and more than a third say they use social media “almost constantly.”¹³ [U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory](#) in 2023 cautioning that while social media may offer some benefits, many indicators show it can also pose harmful risks to the mental health and well-being of children, who are in a critical stage of brain development.¹⁴ In Pierce County, 43% of surveyed youth said they are on screens for three or more hours daily for something other than schoolwork. “It’s parents too,” said one teacher and coach.

“Since COVID, parents have become more involved in their screen time and disengaged with their children. I’ve never seen it this bad in my 27 years of teaching.”



But technology is complex and can offer lessons for outdoor play.

[One study](#) suggests that smartphones can enrich children’s outdoor experiences, expanding the sense of security to play outside and drawing young people outdoors while listening to music or communicating with friends.¹⁵ Metro Parks Tacoma and Pierce County offer Agents of Discovery, a free educational app to get youth active outside and visiting parks.¹⁶ Interactive challenges are offered, and prizes are rewarded for solving “missions” tied to nature, culture, science and technology. Meanwhile, the rise of esports reflects uneasy tension between digital devices and traditional sports. Gig Harbor and Peninsula are among roughly 40 high schools in Washington with an esports team. School officials found that [esport participants typically don’t play mainstream sports](#), so it’s an opportunity to engage with different students.¹⁷ On the other hand, esports offer little to no physical movement for long periods of time. “I’m torn over it,” said Jose Gorospe, YMCA of Kitsap and Pierce County regional executive director. “I’ve watched venues sell out overnight, but it’s also not fitness and it’s often gender exclusive to males.” Ultimately, the YMCA is wading into esports programming to increase engagement.

3

Challenge: Sameness and specialization

The Play: Encourage Sport Sampling

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Resist early sport specialization that limits overall development. Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

Youth most want to try archery and fencing.

When we asked young people what sports they want to try for the first time, archery and fencing made the top 5 in every analyzed demographic. Skookum Archers in Puyallup, an all-volunteer club, offers introductory archery classes but doesn't rent equipment as people progress in skill level. The National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) has programming in 220 state schools, with limited penetration in Pierce County (Lakes, Steilacoom, Evergreen Lutheran, Lincoln and Silas high schools). If a parks department wants to develop a new archery range, the Washington Recreation and Conservation Office provides grants from its Firearms and Archery Range Recreation Program, which is funded with \$800,000 every two years and is undersubscribed.¹⁸ Fencing has gained interest among youth in part because of "Wednesday," Netflix's spinoff series of the Addams Family, according to officials with the Metro Tacoma Fencing Club, the only fencing organization in Pierce County. Monthly membership starts at \$140 for one class a week. Equipment is provided for beginners, but that changes as people progress within the club, which previously partnered with Metro Parks Tacoma on beginner summer camps. The biggest challenges for archery and fencing providers are convincing schools and

parks departments that their sports are safe given liability concerns. Archery's national injury rate ranks between the low rates of golf and bowling.¹⁹ NASP offers curriculum on how to safely teach archery in schools.²⁰



We found fencing because my son watched 'Princess Bride' and wanted to learn how to sword fight. Now he's hooked. It's an alternative sport for kids who haven't found their niche in traditional sports."

**– DIANE BARTELS, VICE PRESIDENT,
METRO TACOMA FENCING CLUB**

There's interest in snow sports if access could improve.

Mount Rainier and surrounding areas offer options for skiing and snowboarding at resorts and in the backcountry. Pierce County youth expressed interest to try snowboarding (18%) and skiing (11%). High-income youth are far more likely than their peers to have participated in either activity.



“They’re sports of privilege,” said Dean Burke, CEO of Travel Tacoma – Mt. Rainier Tourism & Sports. More mountains, easier transportation and lower prices would increase access. But ski season is too volatile for operators to find a cheaper model, Burke said. “All it takes is one good storm to ruin the hill for 10 days and you’re scrambling with payroll,” he said. “The big challenge with snow sports is there are no more ski resorts being made. A ski resort might be able to add a run every 10 to 20 years, if they’re lucky.” SOS Outreach has organized snowboarding clinics with Metro Parks Tacoma’s Beyond the Bell program. Metro Parks may offer Friday ski bus trips at every Tacoma middle school, in partnership with the Summit at Snoqualmie Ski Resort and REI.

Sampling different physical activities is igniting learning.

As more research [links school-based physical activity with academic performance](#),²¹ Hilltop Heritage Middle School offers an example in Tacoma of putting the concept into practice.

The school’s Thrive program started about 12 years ago under Principal Christine Brandt with three activities: swimming, because the school is near water; martial arts, because students requested it since they live near crime; and dance, because Brandt wanted to make students uncomfortable. “I sold it to boys that the NFL makes players do ballet for balance,” she said. Thrive has also taught running, yoga, swimming, kayaking, rowing and lacrosse through local partnerships. About 120 of Hilltop Heritage’s 550 students are enrolled for free activities during the school day, arriving 30 minutes before class starts to be transported nearby for activities. Brandt’s philosophy: find physical activities happening in the community that schools can tap into. “Physical activity can be anywhere anytime,” she said. Brandt would like to extend the program to Hunt Middle School, although Hilltop hasn’t tracked whether grades have improved under Thrive. Measuring success could help make the case for wider adoption.

To try or stay with a sport, youth want to see themselves represented.

Many young people told us they want to see teammates and coaches who look like them and understand their experiences in order to feel welcome in a sport. Only 39% of surveyed Latino/a youth said they regularly play organized sports, far lower than White (65%) and Black (64%) youth. “It feels like you’re expected to be rich and White in some sports,” said a Latina teenager who quit golf in high school because she felt disconnected. “I didn’t know that brands mattered, like what you’re wearing or equipment you use. I like golf but I didn’t like being around those people.” Nationally, a larger participation gap exists between White (54%) and Black (42%) youth than in Pierce County.²² “There are some Black kids on my team, and that gives me confidence I can play too,” said a Black teen who plays baseball, a predominantly White sport.²³ Lacrosse, golf and cross country are examples of other sports in Pierce County with higher participation rates among White youth than young people of color. Volleyball, tackle football, flag football and tennis have greater diversity. Representation also means feeling comfortable playing at opposing schools. Coaches and parents of Native American youth said young athletes sometimes encounter racism from opponents and referees. “The only thing we can do is teach our kids how to walk in both worlds,” said a coach at Chief Leschi Schools.

Families like introductory multisport and fitness programming at young ages.

YMCA of Kitsap and Pierce County offers a relatively new multisport program called Skills and Drills that introduces kids ages 3-12 to new sports. The five-week class, with 600 children registered for soccer, basketball and fitness, is an entry point so kids build movement and coordination through active play. “In the early 2000s, I used this model at one YMCA site, but

we didn’t replicate it,” said Jose Gorospe, YMCA of Pierce and Kitsap Counties regional executive director. “Our mentality now is let’s replicate this with trainings at all of our locations. Parents want this.” Gorospe cautions his staff not to make Skills and Drills into a feeder program for YMCA leagues. “This is standalone to teach kids how to socialize with other kids, follow directions and keep them moving,” he said. “It allows them to feel successful in a sport and not be dominated by one or two kids.” In addition, Greentrike hosts a free Play to Learn program throughout Pierce County for families with youth under 6 to engage in both individual play and group activities to get their bodies moving. Pierce County offers a learn-to-skate program and Metro Parks Tacoma has a learn-to-swim program.





Joey Bambrick, 16

Nothing prepared Joey Bambrick for the pressure he felt at showcase lacrosse tournaments the summer before his junior year of high school. “You look at all these (college coaches) and you’re like, ‘Oh my God, this is it,’” says Joey, a student at Bellarmine Preparatory School. “It feels like this is what your future rides on. It can be pretty scary.”

A top-50 prospect nationally, Joey verbally committed to play at Notre Dame, the 2023 NCAA men’s lacrosse champion. He will receive the equivalent of about 40% of a full athletic scholarship — the culmination of a long journey. In the fourth grade, Joey’s parents told him he could use sports to get into a college that might be difficult otherwise, such as Notre Dame.

Joey says he has no regrets aggressively pursuing lacrosse — not the 28 straight summer days he played on the East Coast, or the speed and agility trainer he meets with once a week, or the weightroom his dad built at their home for regular lifting during the pandemic. “As I got older, I realized I’m pretty good in the sport and can go somewhere with it,” Joey says. “The fact that I love it and enjoy it made it that much better.”

Joey started lacrosse in a Puyallup rec league in second grade, adding travel lacrosse four years later. He now plays for West Coast Starz, comprised of elite prospects who travel to the East Coast at costs that can easily reach \$15,000 a year. Because of Joey’s talent, some clubs reduced his price in order to promote a star recruit’s association with them.

Joey equates his club team to a pro sports team; it’s where his future exists. He views his high school team as where his friends are; it’s where his passion exists.

“High school sports really are a brotherhood, like a family,” says Joey, who also plays high school football to enjoy the camaraderie. “On our West Coast Starz team, the roster changes every tournament. There are no practices. You just show up for a tournament the day before, have a quick practice, play the tournament, go home and don’t talk to them for a while.”

Jeff Bambrick, Joey’s dad and high school coach, says “it’s incredibly sad” how travel coaches sell exposure to college coaches for thousands of dollars families have to pay. “Youth sports have just become a money grab,” Jeff says.

Joey’s experience paid off with admission to Notre Dame, although he’s not sure yet what he wants to pursue academically. “I’ve been super focused on lacrosse that I don’t see much past college lacrosse right now, which kind of sounds bad,” Joey says. “But that’s the reality.”

4

Challenge: Rising costs and commitment

The Play: Revitalize In-Town Leagues

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Provide community-based, low-cost leagues and programs that are accessible to all kids – not just youth with the resources and ambition to participate on travel teams.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

The marketplace lacks cheaper, local and quality program options.

Nationally, the [average youth sports family pays \\$883 annually](#) in one child's primary sport, with the wealthiest families spending four times more than the lowest-income families.²⁴ Travel sports price out families – high-income Pierce County youth are five times more likely to play travel than low-income youth, according to our survey. Some families want an option in between travel and rec sports. "Sports are too expensive and eliminate some children who don't have money," said a Tacoma father who spent \$4,500 for his daughter's AAU basketball trips in one summer. "When a lot of coaches say they need \$3,000 for this, \$4,000 for that, where's

the money going?" Too often, travel coaches recruit a core group of elite athletes and then add to the bench with children who won't ever play, said a frustrated Puyallup travel-sports father. Some parents told us they reluctantly keep paying for travel because they don't know other options or perceive that local programs lack quality instruction and competition. This factor contributes to rec programs hemorrhaging volunteers and money as families leave.

Rec sports organizations must adjust to a more fragmented landscape.

Bethel Recreation Association, an affordable home for children to play multiple sports since the 1960s, reflects how community leagues have changed. Bethel Rec had 4,861 participants in 2022-23, up 37% from a year earlier and nearly back to pre-pandemic levels.²⁵ Still, it's half of what it was in the early 2000s when Bethel Rec was the only community league in town.²⁶ "You had multiple teams in the same age group and people were fighting to be the coaches," said Peggy Walker, the association's secretary. As unincorporated communities popped up and the population grew, many nearby communities like Spanaway Lake and Graham started their own local teams that serve as feeder programs for high schools.



“Most of our better young athletes leave the area to compete in a better league to try to make it in high school,” said Bethel School District Athletics Director Bryan Streleski. Bethel Rec once advertised heavily through flyers in schools. Now emails get lost in a person’s inbox – if it’s even clear who to target. “It’s hard getting to those people who just moved into the community who never participated with us,” said Jolie Moxley, Bethel Rec executive director. “I think we could reach more youth if we could get to more of those new parents or introduce sports offerings at school assemblies.”

Tacoma’s Beyond the Bell program brings community sports to schools.

Metro Parks Tacoma initially saw a 72% increase in rec sports participation after starting Beyond the Bell, a nationally recognized program that’s reimagining community-based sports within schools. Beyond the Bell offers access to after-school activities at elementary and middle schools, including sports, arts, science and the environment. It’s a large-scale community collaboration between Tacoma Public Schools, Metro Parks Tacoma and various community partners, such as Greentrike, YMCA and Boys and Girls Club, to provide families with a consistent activity schedule for after-school care. “Before Beyond the Bell, we were part of the declining national trend for rec sports,” said Shon Sylvia, Metro Parks Tacoma executive director. “The east side of Tacoma had the least amount of participation because people couldn’t drive to attend practices.” Metro Parks took its traditional rec sports league and stopped expecting the participant to come to the sport, bringing the sport to the participant as an after-school club with games on Saturdays. Criticisms we heard of Beyond the Bell the inability of parents to volunteer during the workday, limited program communication, the inability for some outside partners to fit their curriculum standards and schedule within the model,

and limited workforce to administer activities. “It’s not perfect and we are working to fill the gaps,” Sylvia said. “As we continue to tweak the program in order to accommodate the demand, we are on to something that is pretty incredible for our community.”

Managing partnerships are difficult and key to replicating Beyond the Bell’s success.

It’s important to acknowledge that Tacoma has more capacity and resources than other communities in Pierce County to pull off large, complex programming. [Beyond the Bell worked with 51 partners to offer 1,120 programs in 2021-22.](#)²⁷ On top of that, philanthropist MacKenzie Scott announced a one-time donation to Tacoma Public Schools to invest in out-of-school support for students, including Beyond the Bell. Other Pierce County school districts and parks departments periodically ask Metro Parks Tacoma how to replicate Beyond the Bell in lesser-resourced communities. No one agency is able to provide all the necessary program activities and infrastructure. “Partnerships can be a challenge, and if your organization’s culture isn’t inherently built around partnerships, it’s going to be tricky,” cautioned Mary Tuttle, former Metro Parks Tacoma program manager. “Knowing what I know now, it’s much easier to build capacity than jump into everything all at once.” Tuttle said neighboring jurisdictions, such as Lakewood and Federal Way, could participate at school sites close to them.

Community providers can help recreate intramurals in schools.

That’s a goal of Carrie Holden, CEO of Boys and Girls Club of South Puget Sound, which offers flag football, soccer, basketball and baseball leagues, plus various summer athletic camps and clinics. “The big gap we’re missing is once kids start middle school,” Holden said. “The leagues dry up in elementary. If you can’t make



your middle school team, you don't have a lot of options." Holden said she wants to explore how to help activate nontraditional sports through intramurals, such as examining the role of accessible trail systems and transportation hubs

and the design of parks and other play spaces. [One study](#) found that females attending schools that added individual and team intramurals achieved significantly more moderate to vigorous physical activity compared to females attending schools that removed programs.²⁸

WHERE YOUTH PLAY SPORTS BY FAMILY INCOME

	Low Income	Middle Income	High Income
Home	61%	66%	71%
P.E. at school	51%	60%	63%
Park	44%	51%	52%
School team	39%	48%	55%
Playground	34%	34%	40%
Recess at school	30%	33%	39%
Rec center team	15%	25%	36%
After-school program	13%	22%	29%
Rec center not on a team	7%	11%	16%
Travel team	5%	10%	25%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County Youth Survey

Note: Family affluence was assessed through proxy questions for family household income.

5

Challenge: Not enough spaces to play **The Play: Think Small**

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Large sport centers are great — but people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away. Be creative in the use and development of play spaces and how kids can be transported there.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

More turf fields, field lights and indoor facilities are needed.

Better fields were the most common need we heard in every community and at every competitive level. Children, parents, coaches and administrators dislike scheduling challenges due to rainouts, difficulties playing outside in winter months with limited daylight, and muddy grass fields that leave major divots and cause injuries. In our survey of Pierce County youth, 23% said they don't go to parks as often as they would like because the weather makes the fields and surrounding area hard to play on. "We're constantly digging in mud trying to make our fields semi-playable," said Puyallup High School Athletic Director Kelly Susee. In Bethel, a baseball coach described his muddy field as "a real danger," and a football coach said he sends players to train outside the county in Olympia and Lacey because of damaged local fields. Outdoor covered fields like one in Puyallup could be the future locally, said Charlie Davis, YMCA of Pierce and Kitsap Counties CEO. Open-air fields or gymnasiums, commonly called airnasiums, are a key concept of the YMCA's vision for outdoor education and learning centers. Indoor facilities are needed given the popularity of basketball and volleyball and interest by youth to try many activities that are played indoors.

Pierce County Parks and Rec identifies a need for more facilities in Bethel.

[Pierce County's 10-year parks, recreation and open space plan](#) from 2020 highlighted the need for more park acres and associated facilities in the urban areas of the South and Central regions of the county by 2030.²⁹ Parts of the South and Central regions comprise the Bethel School District and include South Hill, Frederickson, Graham, Parkland, Spanaway, Midland, Summit-Waller and North Clover Creek Collins.



“It’s a real uphill struggle to build things here,” said Tom Seigel, Bethel School District’s superintendent since 2001. “It would be nice to see the county develop something in this area. Frankly, it’s due. But they need the political will to pull it off. There is a very strong feeling from members of the community that this area has been under-resourced for generations.” For instance, the Bethel community has no swimming pool, no Boys and Girls Club or YMCA, limited bus service and sidewalks for transportation, and no sports complex. Pierce County Parks and Recreation intends to build additional sports fields in Bethel in addition to improving complexes that reside just outside Bethel’s boundary – if the funding and political will come through. (See Call for Leadership recommendation on page 44.)

Lack of state oversight of youth sports allows facilities money to disappear.

[A new revenue source to build facilities became depleted](#) in 2023 when the state passed a budget allowing minor league baseball stadiums to be renovated with money previously dedicated to youth sports fields.³⁰ The decision angered youth sports advocates, who planned to access this fund that was created in 1997 as part of \$300 million in bonds to build the Seattle Seahawks stadium. In 2021, \$42 million in leftover bond proceeds was deposited for use with the state’s new Community Outdoor Athletic Fund Account. Instead, state lawmakers took \$30 million from the account for MLB-mandated upgrades to minor league ballparks, leaving \$12 million for youth sports facilities in 2023-25 and promising \$12 million in 2026-28. The change became known to the general public late in the budget process. State Sen. Mark Mullet said the [minor league renovations are more time sensitive](#), and grant programs that benefit youth facilities take longer for money to be distributed.³¹

If youth facility projects can start construction sooner, Mullet said he would revisit providing additional funding to prevent project delays. About \$4.5 million will be available to Pierce, King and Thurston counties, less than anticipated, said Roxanne Miles, Pierce County Parks and Recreation director. “It’s disappointing to have them turn \$42 million into \$24 million,” she said.

Building community support is vital to address sports facility needs.

Tacoma learned this the hard way. In February 2023, Metro Parks Tacoma and Tacoma Public Schools proposed to turn the Stanley Playfield into much-needed fields for the Stadium High School baseball and softball teams. The teams travel for practices and home games, and the commute time and field conditions result in cancellations and impact participation. The \$6 million project, which was included in the school construction bond measure approved by Tacoma voters in 2020, also included a basketball court and turf soccer/lacrosse field. However, the working-class Central Tacoma and Hilltop residents in that neighborhood were never asked on the front end what they wanted. [They view Stanley Playfield as their last sizable open space in the neighborhood to enjoy on sunny days](#).³² Tacoma Public Schools and Metro Parks Tacoma listened and shifted plans after the opposition became public. [The new plans](#) call for an all-season multisport field for baseball and soccer, as well as a less formal “Sports and Play Park” at Peck Athletic Complex.³³ They may add a concession area that checks out sports and play equipment. Additionally, an all-season softball field will be built at Hilltop Heritage Middle School for Stadium High athletes. Stanley Elementary will still get a new playground while the playfield remains unchanged until the city better understands the community’s priorities.

Finding and securing fields for organized sports can be a challenge.

One of the region's strengths is collaboration to share sports and physical activity spaces between parks departments and schools. But equity with permitting is an issue, often leaving lesser-resourced providers scrambling to find access. According to athletic directors in Tacoma, Silas High School is the most rented school for sports in the city, often going for \$20 to \$40 per hour compared to \$150 per hour at other high schools. "Weekends go to the highest bidder," said one athletic director. "People with deeper pockets usually can get the facilities much quicker." Special Olympics teams often get "pushed aside in importance for fields compared to other community-based athletics," said Angela Smith of Sound Athletics, a nonprofit Special Olympics team.

To receive a permit in Puyallup, "you have to be really established because you're competing against big pockets who have been there forever," said Cynthia Ricks-Maccotan, who works for Virginia Mason Franciscan Health and serves on the King County Play Equity Coalition. "If I'm not associated with a league connected to Puyallup, I can't get in." [Puyallup first prioritizes city parks and recreation programming](#), followed by the Puyallup School District and then nonprofit youth organizations located in city limits or school district boundaries.³⁴ Puyallup lists past field-use history, impact on surrounding neighborhoods and diversity of recreational opportunities among other factors that may be taken into consideration.





Alex Jennings, 10

"Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change."

– Stephen Hawking

"Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives."

– Judy Heumann

"Be the role model YOU need." – Ali Stroker

These quotes and others from people with disabilities decorate the walls of Alex Jennings' bedroom in Gig Harbor. Cut neatly into hearts, the messages remind Alex that she's capable of so many things in a wheelchair. Disability is not inability.

Alex loves basketball. But at one point she was shy and unsure about herself. She even took a break from the sport she now loves.

"There's not enough words to describe what it's like to see your child fit in," says Sara Jennings, Alex's mother. "I took her to a dance group in Los Angeles for all-female wheelchair users. It was the first time that I ever lost her in a crowd. It was a little scary because she normally stands out. But at the same time, I'm like, 'How awesome is this?' I stood out in that room and she didn't. We need more of this here."

The value of representation can't be overstated. Alex is friends with Paralympic basketball player Megan Blunk, who attended Peninsula High School. Sara happened to find a Facebook post about a going-away party for Megan before the 2016 Paralympics. When Megan returned from the Games, Sara blindly messaged Megan to explain that both her daughters are in wheelchairs and would love to meet her and watch her play. The relationship took off.

Megan introduced Alex to basketball and other adaptive sports. Megan comes to many of Alex's practices, teaching her how to toss the ball, catch it and roll.

"One time I did 400 dribbles in a row," Alex says proudly, a fact her mom didn't know.

"Were you tired?" Sara asks.

"Uh, no," Alex responds. "Dribbling is my strong suit."

So is advocating for herself and others. The outdoor trail at Harbor Heights Elementary School, where Alex attends, was often used as a track but was inaccessible to wheelchair users. After multiple attempts at fixes, the school district replaced the trail with a smooth blacktop track so students could run and roll together. Alex spoke to school board members when they visited "and was an amazing advocate," Sara says.

Alex now plans to educate her school during Disability Awareness Month, possibly interactively to give students and staff a feel for what it's like to live with a disability. Alex is becoming the role model she needs.

The Play: Design for Development

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Age 6 is not 16. Offer programming that is age and developmentally appropriate while tailored to the population served and needs of the individual child.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

Youth with physical disabilities face more challenges to be physically active.

Pierce County youth who have physical disabilities were almost twice as likely to have zero days of physical activity in a week compared to young people without disabilities, according to our survey.³⁵ Youth with physical disabilities reported taking P.E. classes less frequently than their peers and were four times more likely to “strongly disagree” that they learned skills in P.E. to help them be active. Children with physical disabilities were also less likely to have any adult encourage them to be active. Rainier Adaptive Sports in Tacoma offers seasonal programs in wheelchair basketball, goalball and beep baseball, and serves about 50 youth on a regular basis. However, families often don’t know that sports opportunities exist for children with disabilities and learn by word of mouth. “We hear about (opportunities) in Seattle because we go to Seattle Children’s, but we can’t drive there all the time,” said the mom of a wheelchair basketball player. “Rainier has been really life-changing for us.” Youth with physical disabilities reported higher rates of depression and anxiety. They were about two times more likely than those without disabilities to enjoy playing sports to get away from problems and for the ability to compete.

TOP 5 SPORTS/ACTIVITIES YOUTH WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES PLAY

Running	34%
Weightlifting	33%
Basketball	30%
Volleyball	28%
Yoga	23%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County Youth Survey

Special Olympics Unified Sports are growing in the county.

Pierce County manages a county-wide recreational program for 420 residents with developmental disabilities, including Special Olympic sport training. Columbia Junior High School and Foss, Silas, Lincoln, Puyallup, Rogers and Mount Tahoma high schools are [recognized as Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools](#).³⁶ Unified Sports join people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. Unlike adaptive sports, which addresses people with physical disabilities, Unified Sports generally enjoy more participation due to the infrastructure built by Special Olympics.

In 2022-23, Puyallup High School had 22 students with disabilities and 15 peers participating in bowling, basketball, softball, softball and cycling. “When you walk onto that field or court, you don’t have a disability. You leave that at the door,” said John Anderson, Puyallup’s Unified coach. “They appreciate not getting talked down to and treated like an athlete.” Anderson said finding gyms locally for Unified athletes to train can be challenging due to liability concerns and availability, and limited funding comes from the school district. Anderson said he’s appreciative that he recently began receiving a coaching stipend of \$1,800. His budget for the teams is usually \$300 to \$500. “We fundraise a lot,” he said.



Winning games and chasing scholarships are overemphasized.

Although having fun and playing with friends were overwhelmingly the top reasons youth told us they play sports, winning ranked higher in Pierce County (fifth) than in most of the Aspen Institute’s previous State of Play communities. Competition in and of itself is not necessarily harmful. In fact, 1 in 4 youth said their team’s losing rate makes them enjoy sports less – by far the most influential factor cited. But parents, administrators and young people told us the region’s competitive culture can result in adults pressuring youth into sports activities that aren’t developmentally appropriate. “I quit travel sports in seventh grade because it was draining mentally on my body,” said a female high school athlete. Since returning from COVID-19 shutdowns, youth have even higher expectations to be elite athletes, said Emerald Ridge High School Athletic Director Jesse Kase. “A lot of club sports have instilled this mentality that you need a Division I scholarship, you’re going to get it, and if you don’t, you’re a failure,” Kase said. At many high schools like Emerald Ridge, students usually can’t make a team without specializing early in one sport through travel sports. “There’s now a social stigma around (junior varsity) in high school sports,” Kase said. “When a kid has played club ball forever and gets to ninth grade, JV is viewed as a demotion and like something is wrong with you. It’s crazy.”

Girls are involved in sports and recreation but are less physically active than boys.

In our survey, Pierce County girls and boys reported nearly identical participation rates in organized sports. But only 15% of girls said they meet the CDC’s recommendation of 60 minutes of daily physical activity vs. 24% of boys.

Girls were more likely (43%) to report taking no physical education classes at school than boys (36%), and obtaining waivers to avoid P.E. One valuable organization is Girls on the Run WestSound, a school-based program to inspire girls through running to build their confidence, kindness and decision-making skills. Girls on the Run operates in Tacoma, Gig Harbor, University Place, Lakewood, Spanaway, Graham and Franklin Pierce to varying degrees. The program begins in third grade because research shows that's when girls start to evaluate themselves and apply self-talk. "We want girls to feel like they have a safe space," said Jane Duea, the organization's local executive director. "It's important that they're not worried about how fast boys are running. Everybody is the master of their own pace and their own number of laps."

Pierce County embraces a commitment to the whole child.

The 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. Perhaps this region's greatest asset is how it embraces this concept's

eight pillars, such as social-emotional learning, physical and mental wellness, positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), trauma-sensitive practices, restorative practices, and equity and inclusion. More than a decade ago, [Tacoma Public Schools began rethinking its educational approach](#) to get kids to want to come to school and feel they belonged.³⁷ Tacoma enlisted child development academics, community leaders and the heads of local nonprofits. In 2022, [the school district had a record 90% graduation rate](#) – a 23% increase from 2012, when the school board set a goal of graduating 85% of Tacoma students by 2020.³⁸ Puyallup School District uses multitiered systems of support for students and has proclaimed Whole Child months. Bethel School District promotes social and emotional learning. In 2023, the region's Joint Municipal Action Committee – a consortium of representatives from eight local agencies – quickly created Summer Teen Late Nights with pickup basketball and other activities to address youth violence. With an ability to adapt quickly, Pierce County is positioned as well as any community to use physical activity to help children's mental health. (See page 35 for Game Changer recommendation.)





Breannah Bartlett, 18

Savannah Bartlett, 19

Sisters Breannah and Savannah Bartlett represent a promising opportunity to find more youth sports coaches. They spent half their time at Mount Tahoma High School coaching soccer, flag football, baseball and basketball to elementary school children.

“Not a lot of people want to coach, and a lot of kids will look at an adult and say, ‘Oh, they won’t connect with me as much,’” Breannah says. “When I was around adults, I was nervous and didn’t want to say the wrong thing. When I’m with children, I really enjoy their company.”

Turning students into coaches is part of the Beyond the Bell initiative by Tacoma Public Schools and Metro Parks Tacoma that provides after-school programming, including free sports for middle schoolers. The sisters grew up in Graham physically inactive due to the costs of playing sports. They didn’t start playing until the fifth grade when they moved to Tacoma.

“When I got to middle school, I didn’t think I would be good or have the athleticism to

play because everyone else already played,” Breannah says. “My mom is like, ‘You’re going to play basketball because it’s free. You’ll join and maybe you’ll like it.’”

Breannah played three years on Mount Tahoma’s varsity softball team. She says coaching kids inspired her to pursue occupational therapy at Pacific Lutheran University in fall 2023.

Savannah, who is headed to the University of Washington in Seattle, loved playing softball through middle school. She stopped in high school in order to continue coaching. “I’m going to be a pediatric nurse, so having this experience with children and all varieties of behaviors is really helpful for my life,” she says.

Adult supervisors support the teen coaches on site. Teens are given a curriculum with skills they can teach each week, but it’s up to the teens to decide. Breannah and Savannah often create games with less structure because they find young children like that more.

The sisters say Tacoma’s student-coaching model could improve with better advertising, especially emphasizing student voice on social media and the ability to help resumes and make money. Breannah and Savannah each received a \$500 stipend as coaches when they were under 16; as they got older, they made an hourly wage of around \$19.

“We just sort of found out about it on our own, and it shouldn’t be left up to students to find out,” Breannah says. “It’s hard when you see an older person say, ‘You’ll make a lot of money.’ It kind of sounds like a scam, but this is a wonderful opportunity. If you have people like us advocate for it, a lot more people would definitely get involved.”

7

Challenge: Well-meaning but untrained volunteers

The Play: Train All Coaches

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Coaches can create athletes for life — or wreck their enthusiasm for sport altogether.

Get them trained in key competencies, including safety, sport skills and general coaching philosophy.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS IN TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY

Young athletes appreciate coaches who help them improve skills.

A key theme emerged in our conversations with youth—they want help to get better as athletes. They dislike coaching expectations to perform at a certain level when they haven't been taught the right skills or trained properly. A male high school basketball player said a caring coach will tell him how to improve; in his mind, an uncaring coach will say nothing. Too many coaches avoid uncomfortable conversations about improvement, said a female high school athlete. "They ignore you when you're not doing something right and don't tell you what's going on with playing time," she said. Several youth said coaches who apply different playing-time standards create fear, leading to more mistakes. "If a bench player makes the same mistake as the starter, the bench player gets pulled out and they don't get back in the game and the starter stays in," said a male athlete. "That creates fear for those who don't start. When they get the ball, they think, 'I better not mess up.'"

Students are becoming coaches as fewer people volunteer.

Tacoma's Beyond the Bell program uses about 50 high school students as coaches for after-school sports activities at elementary schools.

Students are trained by Metro Parks Tacoma in behavior management, schedule management and social-emotional learning. Coaches include a social-emotional component in every session, with a check-in before practice starts and time afterward for meaningful conversations. Students are paired with an adult supervisor and can eventually become mentors to other coaches. Depending on their age and experience, students can either earn a stipend funded by the City of Tacoma or an hourly wage paid by Metro Parks, and they receive school credit. Nationally, [formal volunteer participation in the U.S. fell from 30% in 2019 to 23% in 2021](#) – the largest decline since the statistic began being tracked in 2002.³⁹ The rapid fall is further straining nonprofits, including rec sports organizations that rely heavily on volunteer coaches. With support, teenagers can be an effective option.

Many coaches struggle to help young people's mental health.

In Pierce County, 58% of surveyed coaches said they feel extremely or moderately prepared to work with athletes' mental health concerns – a slightly higher rate than the state (55%) and the U.S. (52%).⁴⁰ Almost 7 in 10 Pierce County coaches expressed interest in taking more mental health training. There's a need to evolve coaching tactics

and skill sets related to mental health. One thoughtful strategy applied by a Bethel School District coach is weekly mental check-ins with players, who are also told they can visit the team practice field as a safe place to talk with the coach at any time. Few coaches intentionally build these types of environments.

“We have some older coaches who are complacent – they’re here for the check and they are the problem,” the Bethel coach said. “Why would a kid go talk to a coach they can’t stand? I wouldn’t. But the problem is our coaches are so burned out.” In conversations with other Bethel coaches, some acknowledged their own stress and limitations. As suicide rates for young people increase, “we have to show a more sensitive side of ourselves as coaches to proactively help our players,” said the coach with mental health check-ins. “If you save one kid, you’ve done well.”

High school coaches face a litany of certification requirements.

There’s a need for more trained coaches – and hopefully without overwhelming them. [The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association requirements](#) to coach are lengthy.⁴¹ There’s first aid certification, concussion recognition and management training, and sudden cardiac arrest awareness training. Before every coach’s third year, they must complete a school-district-approved coaching principles training with at least one hour each in health and welfare; legal aspects of coaching; psycho/social foundations (including mental health and suicide prevention); and diversity, equity and inclusion. “There are so many check boxes to get on the field, it’s exhausting,” said one Tacoma athletic director.

MOST CONFIDENT COACHING BEHAVIORS IN PIERCE COUNTY

- 1. Teach basic techniques/skills
- 2. Debrief with athletes after a competition
- 3. Make strategic decisions in pressure situations
- 4. Give constructive feedback to athletes
- 5. Make any athlete feel welcome on a team

LEAST CONFIDENT COACHING BEHAVIORS IN PIERCE COUNTY

- 1. Help athletes navigate the pressures of social media
- 2. Link athletes to mental health resources
- 3. Set team expectations related to social media
- 4. Refer athletes to supports for unmet basic needs
- 5. Utilize mindfulness exercises with athletes

TOP TRAININGS PIERCE COUNTY COACHES WANT HELP IN

- 1. Performance Anxiety
- 2. Coaching Tactics and Strategy
- 3. Leadership Development
- 4. Sport Skills and Techniques
- 5. Motivational Techniques
- 6. Mental Health
- 7. Effective Communication
- 8. Team Dynamics
- 9. Stress Management
- 10. Life Skill Development Through Sport

Source: National Coach Survey conducted by Aspen Institute, Ohio State University LiFEsports Initiative, Susan Crown Exchange, Nike.

“Sometimes the coaches or candidates say it’s too much and leave.” Mental health training exists for coaches but “it’s checking the box,” a Puyallup AD said. “Meaningful training in that area does not currently exist. That’s a direction we need to go in.”

Youth generally like their coaches, but perceptions vary.

Asked by our survey how much their most recent coach influenced their enjoyment of that activity, 67% of Pierce County youth said they had more enjoyment due to the coach, 23% said the coach had no influence, and 10% said the coach caused

them to enjoy it less. White children (69%) reported enjoying the team more thanks to the coach than young people who are Asian (64%), Black (61%) and Latino/a (60%). The older the child, the more they said their coach caused less enjoyment (14% high school, 9% middle school, 6% elementary school). In Bethel, 13% of youth said their coach caused them less enjoyment – a higher rate than in Peninsula and Tacoma (8% each). Other survey questions showed Latino/a youth, nonbinary youth, and youth from low-income households had the least-positive perception of their coach throughout Pierce County. (See page 31 for results.)



YOUTH PERCEPTION OF COACHES

Coach Made Me Feel Good When I Improved a Skill	
High Income	70%
White	67%
Girls	65%
Boys	64%
Black	61%
Medium Income	58%
Asian	56%
Latino/a	55%
Nonbinary	44%
Low Income	43%

Coach Told Us Trying Our Best Was Most Important	
High Income	66%
Girls	65%
Black	65%
Asian	64%
Boys	63%
White	63%
Medium Income	60%
Latino/a	57%
Nonbinary	48%
Low Income	48%

Coach Encouraged Me to Learn New Skills	
High Income	73%
White	71%
Girls	69%
Boys	69%
Black	66%
Asian	63%
Medium Income	63%
Latino/a	61%
Nonbinary	58%
Low Income	51%

Coach Told Us We All Were Important to Team Success	
High Income	65%
Black	65%
White	62%
Asian	62%
Girls	62%
Boys	62%
Medium Income	58%
Latino/a	57%
Low Income	47%
Nonbinary	46%

Coach Told Us to Help Each Other to Get Better	
High Income	68%
Black	67%
Boys	66%
Asian	65%
White	64%
Girls	63%
Medium Income	60%
Latino/a	57%
Nonbinary	50%
Low Income	48%



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County Youth Survey

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Children deserve environments that limit injuries and offer protections against emotional, physical and other forms of abuse. And today, many parents demand as much.

[Only 47% of Washington high schools have access to an athletic trainer \(AT\)](#). Nationally, 56% of high schools have one, down 10% since 2017.⁴² For part of the 2022-23 academic year, Tacoma Public Schools had only one AT for its five high schools while struggling to find applicants. “Coaches tape ankles. I’ll tape ankles and get ice,” said one Tacoma athletic director who was without an athletic trainer. “We’ll do what we can. If it’s serious enough, we have to dial 911 and have them come out and assess.” The district previously contracted ATs through Seattle Children’s Hospital before switching to Olympic Sports and Spine, which also provides ATs for Bethel, Bonney Lake, Clover Park, Puyallup and Sumner. Seattle Children’s Hospital pays ATs more money, according to one high school AT. The athletic training profession now requires a master’s degree to be certified instead of only a bachelor’s degree. Some athletic directors said this reduces their available pool as more ATs take private-sector jobs or work at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The National Athletic Trainers’ Association says historically underpaid ATs now have many options and [school districts that financially prioritize ATs don’t struggle with hires](#).⁴³

In June 2023, Olympic Sports and Spine advertised a Tacoma high school job for \$53,040 to \$76,423 annually, plus a \$5,000 signing bonus. AT salaries vary greatly depending on the hiring organization, geographic location of the job and experience of the candidate.

Nearly 1 in 4 Pierce County boys surveyed (24%) said they play tackle football. Only 10% of boys and 3% of girls said they play flag, which has seen rapid growth nationally due in part to parent fears of brain injuries. Tackle players sustain 15 times more head impacts than flag players.⁴⁴ [The Seattle Seahawks are providing \\$250,000 in grants](#) over five years to grow flag.⁴⁵ In 2022, the Seahawks began supporting Tacoma Public Schools by launching girls flag high school teams. Stadium High School had 80 girls playing to start the 2022-23 year. For younger ages, the Seahawks are launching an all-girls division of NFL Flag in Tacoma at a reduced cost of \$75. The season consists of seven practices and six games held on Sundays, with team sizes limited to 10-11 players to maximize playing time. Practices are one hour before the game to create more convenience for families.

Up to 900 boys and girls have participated in NFL Flag's coed seasons at Silas High School. As parents make decisions about tackle, flag is becoming a crossover sport that boys and girls can play equally and more safely.

More local children should learn to swim for water safety.

Pierce County and Tacoma offer waterways to boat, paddle, fish and swim. Understanding the dangers of water can help prevent drownings. In the past five years, [34 lives in Pierce County have been lost due to drownings](#).⁴⁶ In our Pierce County youth survey, 32% indicated they tried swimming at least once in the past year. White children (37%) reported trying swimming at a higher rate than young people who are Black (23%) and Latino/a (20%). "What amazed me is my students live at the top of this hill and didn't even know at the bottom of the hill there was water," said Hilltop Heritage Middle School Principal Christine Brandt, whose partnership with Tacoma Rowing Club helps teach water safety. Nationally, Black children ages 5-9 are 2.6 times more likely to drown in swimming pools than White children, and those between ages 10-14 are 3.6 times more likely to drown, [according to the CDC](#).⁴⁷ Disparities also exist in most age groups for Asian and Pacific Islander, Latino/a, and Native American and Alaska Native children. [A parent who has never learned to swim yields an 87% chance that a child won't either](#).⁴⁸

LGBTQ youth feel less welcome and safe in sports.

Nationally, [more than two-thirds of LGBTQ youth have never taken part in any school or community sports](#), in part due to discrimination or fear of being discriminated.⁴⁹ In Pierce County, 52% of nonbinary youth said they had not participated on an organized team or athletic activity in the previous year, higher than those who identify as male (33%) or female (35%). Nonbinary youth were far more likely to report feeling unwelcome on teams as a reason they don't play sports. The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) created a [gender diverse inclusivity toolkit](#) for leaders who interact with youth athletes.⁵⁰ The toolkit, designed to address the national dialogue around transgender and nonbinary students, teaches best practices and provides resources to develop nondiscriminatory environments for young people. In 2007, the WIAA became the first state activities association to enact policy regarding transgender participation. The policy evolved through the years, and now the WIAA allows athletes to participate on teams consistent with their gender identity.



Families and coaches share minimal information to prevent overuse injuries.

In conversations with youth sports parents, athletes and coaches, there appears to be very little communication between all parties regarding how much a child plays one sport so preventive measures can be taken. Consider the case of a high school baseball player in Tacoma with aspirations to pitch in college. He estimates playing about 20-25 games for his high school, 55-65 games for his summer travel team, and 10-15 extra games for showcase events and fall ball. That's 85-105 games in a calendar year for a high school junior; most Division I college teams play 56 regular-season games over four months.

The Tacoma player said he and his coaches don't talk about his usage in games for other teams. "I'm dealing with tendinitis in my shoulder from throwing," he said. "If I take Advil, it goes away a little bit. I just try to ignore it. Probably not the best strategy, but it's been working."

“

There's too much emphasis on specialization and not enough focus on being healthy and active into adulthood.”

—DR. JOSHUA PURSES, MULTICARE SPORTS MEDICINE SPECIALIST



Game Changer

Use sports and recreation to help address mental health crisis

The Problem

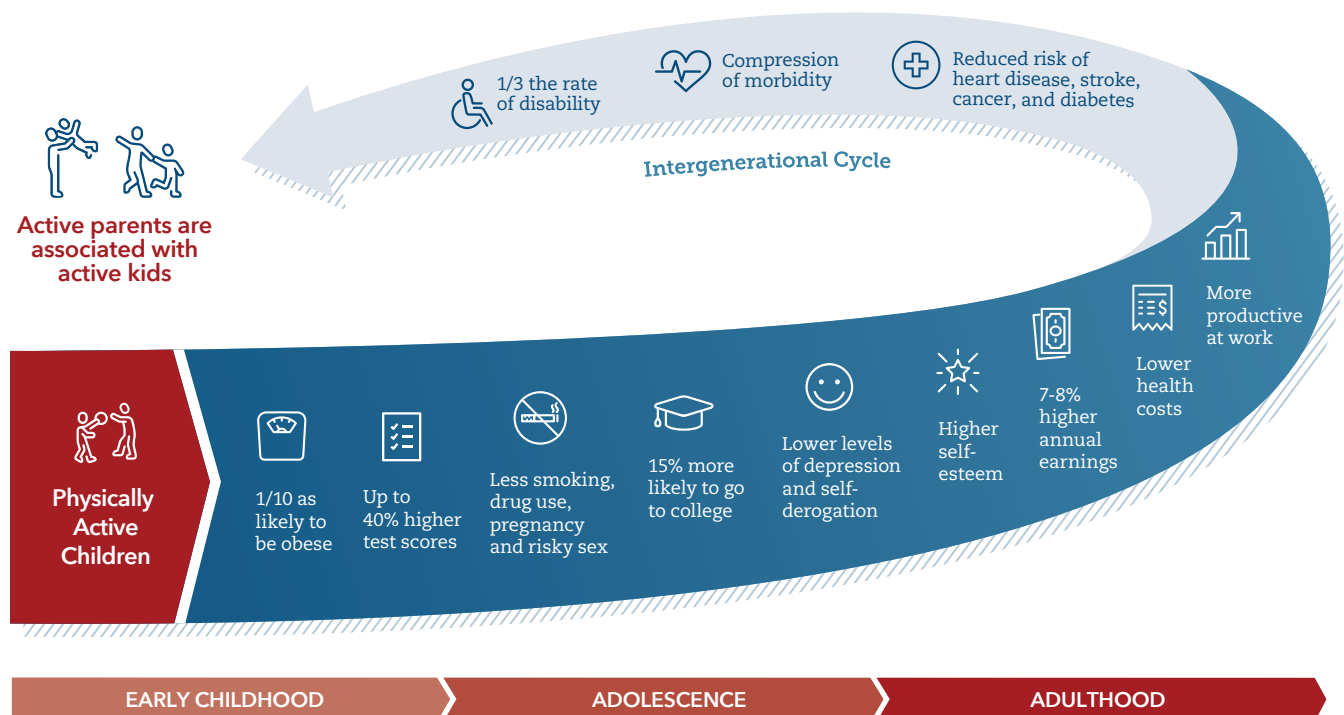
Youth are struggling. After COVID-19 hit, 58% of 10th graders in Pierce County reported they feel sad or depressed on most days, according to the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. Children of all ages also expressed to us concerning levels of anxiety and depression.

Importantly, the Aspen Institute's survey of Pierce County youth confirmed locally what we

know nationally – increased physical activity translates to better mental health. Pierce County children who were physically active reported feeling more excited, happy and motivated, while children who were physically inactive said they feel more nervous, anxious, sad, depressed or hopeless. Unfortunately, only 19% of Pierce County youth receive the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, below the national (24%) and state (23%) averages.

ACTIVE KIDS DO BETTER IN LIFE

What Research Shows on the Lifetime Benefits





The Opportunity

In recent years, the federal government's Healthy People 2030 program [introduced youth sports participation as a public health goal for the first time](#).⁵¹ The government set a target of 63% of youth playing on a sports team or taking sports lessons by 2030, up from the 58% baseline taken in 2016-17. Our 2023 survey showed 58% of Pierce County youth regularly play organized sports at least 20 days in a year.

Achieving the 63% goal could save the U.S. nearly \$94 billion in social and economic benefits, according to results from a computer simulation model by researchers at the City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy. The model shows mental health outcomes would contribute to 38% of the total costs savings through reduced medical costs and worker productivity. Most importantly, children would have more quality years of life due to a reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms.

Within days during January 2023, two high school baseball players in western Washington from the same travel club tragically committed suicide. Not long after, a recent Puyallup High School baseball player also took his own life. The suicides sparked conversations about mental

health and pressure in youth sports that coaches and administrators said rarely occurs in the Tacoma-Pierce County area.

Many factors impact depression, anxiety and loneliness, and there is not one easy solution. The Tacoma News-Tribune editorial board advocated for Pierce County to create a functional youth mental health system coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Right now, what we have is a patchwork of underfunded providers working in silos, often competing for limited resources—or, just as counterproductive, forced to shape the services they offer based solely on what the government has decided to pay for," [the editorial board wrote](#).⁵²

Sports and recreation can play a role to assist. Research shows that physically active children report lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-esteem. But the opposite can be true as well; if sports are not a youth-centered experience, they can damage a child's mental health.

Through infrastructure already in place, Tacoma-Pierce County works diligently to develop the whole child – the way a community cares for kids 24 hours a day everywhere they are, including sports and recreation. Pierce County's [Birth to 25 Advisory Board](#) collaborates on the whole child. This group could pursue more regional initiatives to support young people's mental health through sports and recreational programming.

Many coaches, sports administrators and recreational professionals want to help. But they often don't know where to turn, efforts are not coordinated, or they are paddling upstream in a youth sport system that too often pays more attention to the scoreboard than the child in front of them. Efforts identified on the following pages reflect some promising possibilities for sports and recreation to become an asset – not a detriment – to a child's mental health.

Train coaches and recreational professionals to promote good mental health.

Many people in this region who coach, administer and parent young athletes notice that organized sports – especially at the elite level – too often negatively impact young people. They add unnecessary pressure despite youth telling us by far the main reasons they participate in sports are to have fun (48%) and play with friends (47%).

More than half of surveyed Pierce County youth sports coaches said their least-confident coaching skills are helping athletes navigate the pressures of social media and linking athletes to mental health resources.⁵³ Among surveyed coaches,

58% from Pierce County said they feel extremely or moderately prepared to work with athletes' mental health concerns – a slightly higher rate than the state (55%) and the U.S. (52%). Almost 7 in 10 Pierce County coaches expressed interest in taking more mental health trainings.

Coaches are often volunteers and should not be expected to become trained therapists. But the reality is children are trying to tell us they need help while struggling to receive timely mental health access to a trained provider. Coaches can become a line of first defense, equipped with some basic skills to manage situations until a professional can be made available.



Minimum Mental Health Skills for Coaches

Medical experts suggest starting here

1. Identify signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis. Coaches should be able to recognize when a situation may be more than a typical behavioral issue.
2. Understand how to have an honest and compassionate conversation in a nonjudgmental way. Practice reflective listening, hold space for players to talk, and process the information to determine next steps. Teach coaches how to validate the athlete's emotions and how to react, including body language, if mental health concerns are expressed.
3. Learn how to eliminate or decrease coaches' own stigmas around mental health. Coaches can only help their athletes if they're comfortable talking about the subject.

The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department (TPCHD) wants to explore training athletes and coaches through its teen and youth mental health first aid programs. This could be inclusive of the department's efforts to train more school staff like bus drivers, cafeteria workers, counselors, nurses and front desk workers, who often get bypassed for school trainings.

Municipalities that rent field and gym space can set standards on coach training in exchange for a permit. This practice is generally referred to as “the power of the permit” – and there's no reason meaningful coach training related to mental health can't be attached.

“We have to find an avenue for people just to talk, to be vulnerable,” said Marc Wiese, Puyallup High School baseball coach and director of New Level 360. “I grew up having to be strong – no emotion and if you're vulnerable it means you're weak. When I first started coaching, I was kind of hard on players. I still have expectations, but you've got to coach differently now.”

Align sports and recreation with state and local efforts.

It's not necessary to reinvent the wheel. What's missing is greater awareness of resources and efforts that already exist locally. Not enough people in the mental health and sports provider spaces talk to each other.

Efforts are being made by Kids' Mental Health Pierce County, a coalition of people and agencies that started in 2018 to address the crisis. For instance, the group supplies clinicians to biweekly “Get Your Mind Right” forums for sixth- to 12th-graders organized by two Game Time AAU basketball coaches. The connection only happened organically because Ashley Mangum, director of Kids' Mental Health Pierce County, grew up with the coaches. (Learn more about these forums on page 10.)

One promising opportunity is Metro Parks Tacoma's early-stage effort to have medical providers prescribe outdoor and recreational activities to children with costs covered by the family's health insurance. Could we reach a day where a child's therapist or physician prescribes outdoor time such as sports teams or classes, nature hikes or outdoor art classes to benefit physical and emotional health?

Metro Parks Tacoma sat on a state task force focused on developing a statewide health and wellness program through Park Rx, a national nonprofit aiming to decrease chronic diseases by encouraging health care providers to prescribe nature time as part of routine health care visits. Utah and Tennessee have state Park Rx programs that started at the park district or county level and grew over time through state, private and grant funds. Tennessee's program is unique in that it uses a mobile app for state residents to track outdoor activities and earn rewards, including gifts from Nike, which helps to underwrite the program.

Metro Parks Tacoma envisions prescriptions beyond park access; it dreams of prescribing sports and recreational activities too. “Literally, it's a prescription for play – whatever play means for that person,” said Shon Sylvia, Metro Parks Tacoma executive director. “We're trying to say, don't forget about the mental health side, and keeping kids and all people socially engaged and coming together.”

One challenge identified by Washington's task force is that reimbursement for park prescriptions is not supported by the current insurance system since there are no billing codes or other payment models. Insurance providers won't provide reimbursements unless the Washington State Legislature requires them, said Hunter George, Metro Parks Tacoma's policy and governmental relations officer, who is lobbying the legislature to fund competitive Park Rx pilot programs across the state.



Create public awareness about mental health in youth sports.

Kids' Mental Health Pierce County grew out of a 2018 children's mental health summit organized by Mary Bridge Children's Hospital and partners in the medical, school, police and family services spaces. Imagine local entities associated with sports and public health sponsoring public initiatives around mental health in youth sports, such as a media campaign or annual conference. Think of the candid conversations, trainings, resources and new initiatives that could come from intentionally addressing this in youth sports.

Local public awareness efforts could be aligned with Greentrike's Child and Youth-Centered Community initiative. Greentrike could bring a coach-training pathway to its Promise of Play Symposium, an annual conference to inspire Pierce County to be "the best place for children to grow up." Pacific Lutheran University could play a role

through its annual Coaching Education Institute, a one-day conference for youth coaches to enhance their skills beyond X's and O's, especially mental skills in sports. PLU identified a comprehensive health and wellness facility as a key objective for its 2021-25 strategic plan and is pursuing a project with partners that serves the community.

There's precedent nationally for using sports and recreation to help children's mental health. On Our Sleeves was created by Nationwide Children's Hospital to provide free access to children's mental health resources and raise money to create expert-informed tools for parents, teachers and coaches. The website for On Our Sleeves includes specific resources devoted to [children's mental health in sports](#). The initiative asks community groups, schools, youth sports leagues, foundations and other nonprofits to partner on fundraisers benefiting the effort.

On Our Sleeves partners with health care organizations across the country. Health care partners are able to present On Our Sleeves under their organizational brand in their select local market, while being recognized as a participant in the national network. Educational partners that distribute content include Boys and Girls Club of America, GoNoodle and CBS.

Any public awareness effort on mental health in sports will need to include parents as a target audience. "Some cultures are very against talking about mental health and receiving help," said Courtney Chandler, teen mental health coordinator for the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. "When we're not providing the same information to parents, sometimes it can backfire and make things worse for a child because they go home and their parents don't have that skillset."

Take action

The gravity of the mental health problem – and the role a positive sports and recreational experience can play – were reflected in many anonymous comments shared by youth in our survey. One young person discussed getting a counselor due to feeling “somewhat super suicidal and depressed.” Another person, struggling with mental health, described being convinced by a friend to try out for soccer for the first time to help. The tryouts were a “stress

reliever,” but the person returned to old, anxious habits once cut by the team.

Tacoma-Pierce County has an opportunity to collaboratively change the conversation around mental health for young people in sports and recreation. In doing so, the community can turn our children’s games into an important asset to help fight a crisis that’s not going away. Only then can sports truly accomplish its mission.



Local Resources for Mental Health in Sports

Kids’ Mental Health Pierce County: Organizations on its steering committee include Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department; Tacoma Public Schools; Puyallup School District; Coordinated Care; Mary Bridge Children’s Hospital; HopeSparks; Greater Lakes Mental Health; Developmental Disabilities Administration; Puyallup Tribal Health Authority; Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families; Catholic Community Services; and Carelon Behavioral Health.

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department’s Mental Health First Aid: The county health department has a list of mental health first aid instructors in Pierce County.

CoachUp! Washington: It’s a strategic partnership between the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association and the University of Washington’s Center for Leadership in Athletics to provide online coach-development courses to all school-based coaches in the state. The first two courses focus on creating physically and emotionally safe environments and centering the social, emotional and physical needs of athletes.



National Resources for Mental Health in Sports

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#): 988 is the three-digit dialing code that will route callers to the Lifeline for 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress.

[Doc Wayne](#): This nonprofit provides sport-based group therapy interventions for at-risk youth.

[Center for Healing Justice through Sport](#): Its Nothing Heals Like Sport toolkit helps coaches center athletes and support them through adversity.

[The Trevor Project](#): Its #REFORMTheLockerRoom digital educational course helps adults in sports support LGBTQ youth.

[NBA Mind Health](#): This initiative positions mental health as an essential element of wellness and excellence.

Call for Leadership

Based on our analysis of the unique characteristics of Pierce County, here are three additional recommendations of systems-level interventions that can help leaders to grow access to quality sport options for children.

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Promote sport sampling

Specializing in one sport at a young age increases the risk of overuse injuries and burnout. The more sports and recreational activities that young people try, the more likely they will remain physically active when their bodies, minds and interests are more fully developed. Some ways to expose children to more sports:

Host sport-sampling days across the county.

Build a youth cohort to design sport-sampling days around their desire to have fun and be with friends. Introduce new sports – and promote positive mental health – through one-day clinics in communities where a variety of options may not always be offered. Intentionally focus on underserved populations, especially youth from lower-income homes and those with disabilities, making equipment available for them to participate. Youth with disabilities are almost twice as likely to have zero days with 60 minutes of physical activity compared to their peers.

In Canada, Calgary’s popular “All Sport One Day” events annually help more than 4,000 youth ages 6-17 try new sports for free.⁵⁴ Costs are kept low by utilizing volunteers and donated sports facilities. In 2019, local organizations representing 77 sports hosted sessions at 20 facilities across the city. [Families report that children become more comfortable trying new sports due to these annual events.](#)

Create equipment-sharing initiative. Parks and green spaces have less use if a child doesn't have a ball to kick, throw or shoot. Project Play Southeast Michigan has a [free sports equipment sharing program](#) for metro Detroit called SportPort.⁵⁵ It's similar to checking out a book at the library. Kids and their families can borrow equipment for a set period, such as basketballs, baseballs, gloves, soccer balls and footballs. There are 15 locations to borrow equipment, including community centers, libraries, parks and recreation departments, and churches.

Have police pass out equipment to kids. That's what the Colorado Springs Police Department Community Relations Unit does through its Play COS program, which tries to create more opportunities for positive interactions between officers and community members. Through donations, each of the police department's patrol divisions is supplied with sports balls for officers to keep in their cars to give to children during their shift. Since launching in 2021, the program has [given away more than 6,000 balls to local youth](#), held 96 events and made donations to three community centers and 30 local schools.⁵⁶ Policing is a high-stress occupation. Every free ball or pickup game between an officer and child is a positive interaction they otherwise would not share.

Grow quality of programming with partnerships between travel and rec soccer

The No. 3 reason Pierce County youth said they participate in sports is to improve their skills. Many parents involved in travel sports told us they would like to spend less money and time on their child's sports experience – if there was a local, affordable and quality option. What if travel sports teams could help improve the quality, and there was a way to measure this while not hurting the mission of rec sports to let kids have fun and receive playing time?

Soccer, the second-most-played team sport for boys and girls locally, could be the pilot sport to test knowledge-sharing partnerships. Washington Premier Football Club (WPFC), which owns a large soccer complex in Puyallup, wants to help. Seth Spidahl, the WPFC director of coaching, said he would like clubs such as his to provide coach training and curriculum to local rec soccer leagues at an affordable price. The idea: help families identify different pathways into soccer based on the costs and competitive level while still learning skills.

“A lot of parents say the local leagues they're in are a waste of time, so they drive 45 minutes (one way) to us instead of staying in their community,” Spidahl said. “How can we create a better soccer model for Tacoma and Pierce County instead of everybody doing their own thing and siloed off?”

Low-income youth in Pierce County are more than five times less likely to play travel sports than high-income youth. To be clear: travel coaches aren't necessarily any better than rec coaches simply because parents pay more. In some cases, travel coaches are worse. But the current U.S. model to develop athletes is broken. Often, “developing” an athlete's skills involves plucking

a child who's a highly skilled outlier away from a local organization in order to receive a scholarship to play two towns away. Clubs should invest more into helping entire communities, not taking away a handful of their children.

Spidahl said his offer of support is not an attempt to grow the WPFC, which he characterized as maxed out. He said he previously was unsuccessful offering local rec clubs WPFC's coach-education services and running programs at no cost. “Everybody's very territorial, which I get,” he said. “The premier club can be viewed as the big, bad wolf. I think we could really help them and create opportunities.”

Evaluating the quality of shared programming would be important. Public health leaders could create a centralized portal that sports providers could opt into to receive a star rating, similar to the [Safe Stars Initiative in Tennessee](#), where youth sports programs receive one to three stars based on specified state guidelines.⁵⁷ Ratings would be based on medically informed best practices, especially long-term athlete-development models that focus on participation over competition at young ages.

WPFC generated \$3.5 million of revenue in 2018-19 and spent \$3.4 million, almost half of which was employee compensation, according to its income tax form. That's night and day from the finances rec clubs work with to teach kids. Given these fundamental differences, partnerships may be challenging, and in some cases, perhaps impossible. Still, the reality is that travel sports clubs aren't going away, and they use a model that diverts resources and volunteers away from rec sports. Exploring a partnership could lift all boats.



Invest in new public sports facilities, especially in Bethel

Pierce County needs more turf fields, field lights and indoor facilities. Many facilities are outdated and do not meet the demands of sports providers. Some parents spend many hours driving their children to play in communities where they don't live. Among the communities we extensively surveyed (Tacoma, Peninsula and Bethel school districts), Bethel needs the most infrastructure to help children play sports and be physically active. Compared to Tacoma and Peninsula, Bethel youth are:

- Far more likely to have no days with 60 minutes of physical activity
- More likely to spend time on digital devices unrelated to school
- Less likely to play sports on a rec center team or on a travel team

Pierce County Parks & Recreation intends to partner with Bethel on a new complex near Bethel high and middle schools for school and community use, according to parks director Roxanne Miles. More indoor sports facilities at Sprinker Recreation Center are also being considered.

The Bethel project could cost about \$20 million and take more than four years to build. Pierce County Parks & Rec will hold a summit in fall 2023 to define community needs for the complex in addition to planned improvements at the Sprinker and Heritage recreation centers.

In our youth survey, young people from Bethel said they most regularly participate in running, basketball, weightlifting, volleyball and soccer. The top activities they most want to try for the first time are fencing, boxing, archery, snowboarding and horseback riding.

Of the 876,000 people who live in Pierce County, over 42% reside outside of a city or town –meaning [unincorporated areas represent a population that's greater than the city of Tacoma](#).⁵⁸ Growth in unincorporated areas like Bethel creates greater demand to expand the Pierce County parks system, which includes regional parks and trails, open space, tournament-quality athletic fields and regional special-use fields. The unincorporated areas are served primarily by Pierce County Parks, except where local park districts have formed (Anderson Island, Key Peninsula, Gig Harbor Peninsula).

[About 1.2 million people participate in programs or rent facilities annually from Pierce County Parks](#).⁵⁹ Facility rentals, league sports and special events are the top programs used, but the county estimates that program participants only account for about 20% of annual system use. Still, with over 200,000 ballfield users annually, the parks department said five to 10 community groups can't be accommodated annually at Heritage. Sprinker is also well-used and sometimes takes overflow demand from Heritage. Baseball and softball represent approximately 57% of the county's ballfield use, soccer 32%, and other rentals of the fields 11%.

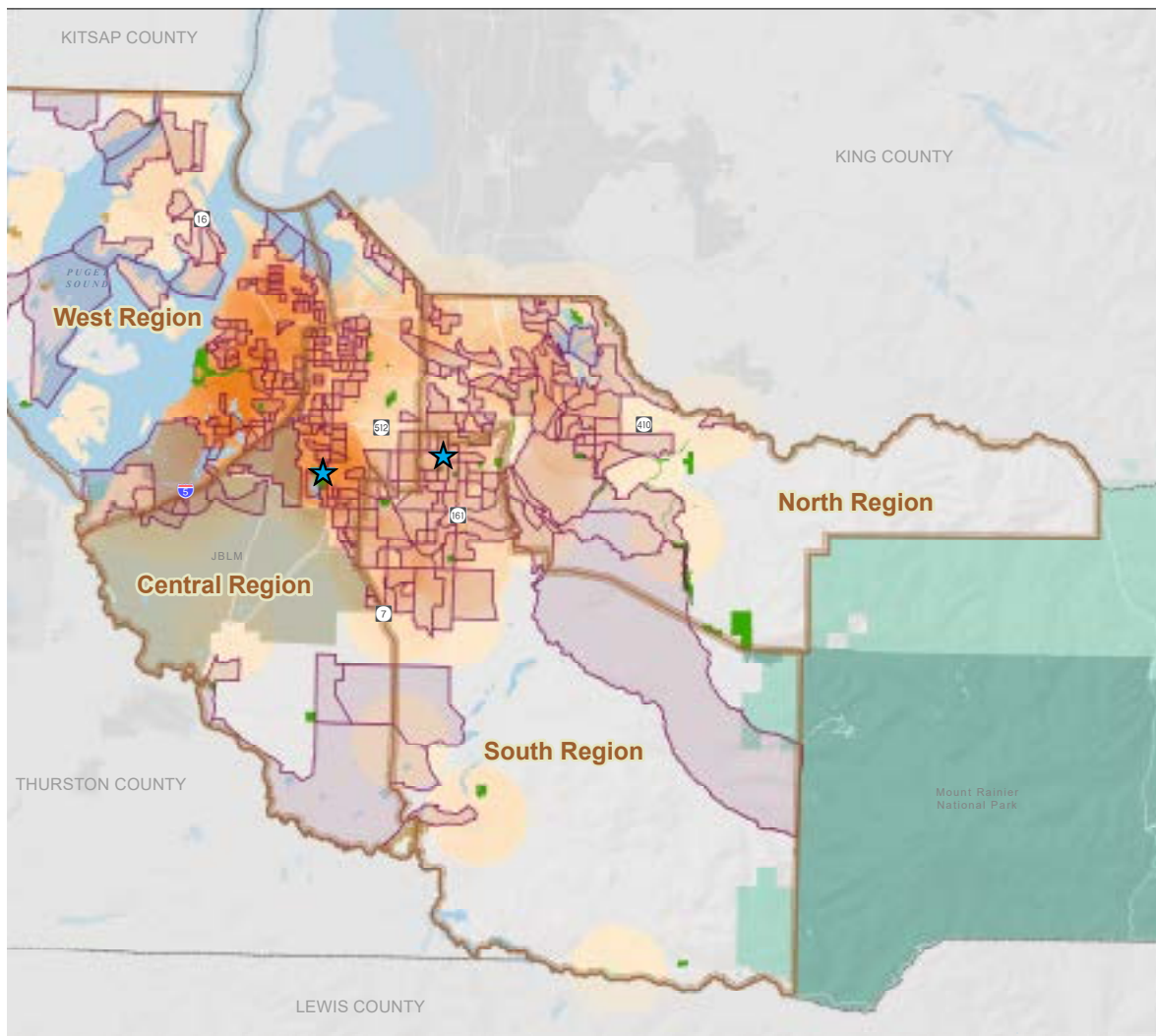
Pierce County has \$2 million programmed for design of a sports complex in Bethel, and no cash

at this time for construction, Miles said. Funding could come through increased grants by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, cost-sharing with the Bethel School District, and community partners. A public-private partnership for development would help get much-needed sports facilities available to youth in Bethel.

Investing in Bethel recreational facilities aligns with Spanaway and Parkland joining the Blue Zones Project, a collaboration of local health care systems and Pierce County to improve health outcomes for residents. Examples of implementation ideas in other communities include increasing physical activity in schools and getting residents of all ages to walk and bike more. Pierce County ranks 20th out of Washington's 39 counties in overall health outcomes.⁶⁰ Heart disease is worse in the Parkland area than elsewhere in the county or the state.⁶¹



APPENDIX A | SPORTS FIELD DENSITY FOR CENSUS BLOCK GROUPS WITH UNDER 18 POPULATION ABOVE COUNTY AVERAGE



- Recreation Management Regions
- Incorporated Cities
- Unincorporated UGA
- Pierce County Parks
- ★ Major County Sports Facility

- Other Parks and Open Space**
- National Park
 - National Forest or Wildlife Area
 - Federal Other
 - Department of Defense
 - State Park

- Other State Lands
 - Census Block Groups with Population Under 18 above County Average
- Sports Fields per Square Mile**
- High : 4.4818
- Low : 0

Source: Pierce County, BERK Consulting

APPENDIX B | WHAT YOUTH LIKE MOST ABOUT PLAYING SPORTS

Having fun	48%
Playing with friends	47%
Improving my skills	30%
Exercising	24%
Winning	20%
Competing	15%
Challenging myself	15%
Supporting teammates/friends	12%
Making my family proud	11%
Getting away from problems	11%

APPENDIX C | WHY SOME YOUTH DON'T PLAY ORGANIZED SPORTS

I am not interested in sports	35%
I'm not good enough to play	29%
I don't have time due to schoolwork	26%
I don't have time due to family responsibilities	15%
I don't feel welcome on sports teams	15%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County Youth Survey



APPENDIX D | TOP SPORTS BY COMMUNITY

Bethel	
Regularly Play	
Running	31%
Basketball	26%
Weightlifting	25%
Volleyball	23%
Soccer	22%

Bethel	
Want to Try	
Fencing	19%
Boxing	19%
Archery	18%
Snowboarding	16%
Horseback Riding	16%

Peninsula	
Regularly Play	
Running	34%
Basketball	31%
Soccer	29%
Volleyball	25%
Weightlifting	21%

Peninsula	
Want to Try	
Fencing	20%
Surfing	19%
Snowboarding	19%
Track and Field	16%
Archery	16%

Tacoma	
Regularly Play	
Running	34%
Volleyball	25%
Basketball	25%
Weightlifting	24%
Soccer	23%

Tacoma	
Want to Try	
Archery	29%
Fencing	27%
Boxing	22%
Snowboarding	21%
Surfing	20%

APPENDIX E | SIGNIFICANT PARTICIPATION GAPS BY COMMUNITY

Sport/Activity	Bethel	Peninsula	Tacoma
Skiing	1%	10%	7%
Lacrosse	1%	6%	2%
Paddleboarding	2%	9%	3%
Cross Country	4%	13%	8%
Kayaking	3%	10%	4%
Pickleball	3%	9%	5%
Mountain Biking	3%	8%	4%
Snowboarding	3%	7%	2%
Golf	3%	7%	3%
Archery	3%	7%	4%
Badminton	5%	12%	7%
Dance	7%	9%	14%

PHOTOS

Photos were provided by Bellarmine Preparatory School, Boys and Girls Clubs of South Puget Sound, Greentrike, Metro Parks Tacoma, Outdoors for All Foundation, Pierce County Parks & Recreation, Puyallup High School, Puyallup Parks and Recreation, Rainier Adaptive Sports, Skookum Archers, and Tacoma Public Schools.

CREDITS

The *State of Play Tacoma-Pierce County* project was managed by Jennifer Brown Lerner, deputy director of the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, and the report was written by Jon Solomon, the program's editorial director. Linda Kaye Briggs, president and founder of The Briggs Group, served as the local consultant with additional insights from Scott Heinze from Heinze & Associates. The report was designed by The Hatcher Group. Tom Farrey, executive director of the Sports & Society Program, provided editorial guidance. The report was generously funded by the Names Family Foundation.

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ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops, applies and shares knowledge that helps stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

www.ProjectPlay.org

ABOUT NAMES FAMILY FOUNDATION

For 26 years, the Names Family Foundation has provided over \$36 million in grants in Pierce County to nonprofit organizations that champion initiatives focused on sports, physical education, health and wellness. Scott and Evelyn (Sis) Names started the Names Family Foundation as a way to combine their passion for philanthropy and athletics. Scott and Sis owned and managed an athletic store in Tacoma and saw firsthand the transformative effect that sports and play have on individuals and the community.

www.NamesFoundation.org



REPORT METHODOLOGY

Throughout the report, “sports” refers to all forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aims to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. The term “youth” refers to 6- to 18-year-olds. The term “parent” is used to refer to the caregivers with whom youth reside. The term “coach” is used broadly to include those who instruct youth in both sports and other physical-activity programming.

Youth survey results identified in the report came from our State of Play youth survey, administered online from January-April 2023 through the Resonant Education platform. The survey was completed by 3,395 Pierce County youth in grades 3-12 affiliated with the Bethel School District (55% of the responses), Peninsula School District (31%), Tacoma Public Schools (11%), Puyallup Parks and Recreation (1%), Bellarmine Preparatory School (1%) and Carbonado School District (less than 1%). Every Pierce County school district had the option to participate and was contacted three times. A handful declined to participate, and some did not respond.

The demographics of survey respondents were: 47% female, 46% male, 4% nonbinary; 40% White, 21% two or more races/ethnicities, 9% Latino/a, 6% Black, 6% Asian, 3% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 2% American Indian or Alaska native; 63% middle school students, 32% high school students and 4% elementary school students.

Family affluence was assessed using a scale validated for use in youth populations. Youth were asked three questions that served as proxies for family household income. 53% of respondents scored as high affluence, 36% medium affluence, and 9% low affluence.

Survey data related to Pierce County youth sports coaches came from a separate survey called the National Coach Survey. In 2022, LiFEsports at The Ohio State University, the Aspen Institute’s Project Play initiative, the Susan Crown Exchange and Nike partnered to conduct the first-ever youth sport coach survey of over 10,000 coaches in the U.S. State of Play-Tacoma-Pierce County used survey results from 74 coaches who reported coaching in Pierce County. To see the full National Coach Survey report, click [here](#).



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