

STATE OF PLAY

Portland

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	WELCOME
2	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
5	SCOREBOARD
	5 Which Kids Play 6 Sports Kids Play 11 Sports Kids Want to Play 12 Where Kids Play 15 Why Kids Play
17	STATE OF PLAY OBSERVATIONS
	17 Fragmented Youth Sports System 19 Household Income & Sports Participation 22 Black & Latino/a Youth Disparities 26 Girls' Sports 30 Field Maintenance Backlog & High Demand 34 Youth with Disabilities 37 Physical Education 39 Transportation Barriers to Play 41 Unique & Rising Sports 45 Continuing Education for Coaches
47	COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION PROFILES
49	RECOMMENDATIONS
60	MAPPING STORIES OF RECREATION IN BEAVERTON
62	CREDITS



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

Welcome

“State of Play Portland” assesses youth sports and physical activity in Portland, a city where play is ingrained in the local culture. A vast network of community programs, schools and youth sports providers serves the region’s children with sports and recreational activities that also leverage play to feed, educate, mentor and protect underserved youth. By integrating these services, Portland utilizes sports as a holistic tool for child well-being, creating a powerful mechanism to inspire and support the next generation.

However, access to quality sports and play is unequal, largely because a family’s income becomes the main predictor of whether a child participates. The Aspen Institute’s Project Play initiative, supported by Nike, is proud to release “State of Play Portland” to highlight local successes and challenges while providing a roadmap for making youth sports accessible to every community in the city. Project Play develops insights, ideas and opportunities to help build healthy communities through sports and play. Three frameworks guide Project Play’s work:

Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports as.pn/childrensrights

The Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports recognizes that all youth should have the opportunity to develop as people through sports. Created in 2021, the bill of rights also serves as a statement of the minimum conditions under which children should be served by adults through sports. Children have the right to:

- ✓ Play sports
- ✓ Have safe and healthy environments
- ✓ Work with qualified program leaders
- ✓ Engage in developmentally appropriate play
- ✓ Share in the planning and delivery of their activities
- ✓ Receive an equal opportunity for personal growth
- ✓ Be treated with dignity
- ✓ Enjoy themselves

School Sports Playbook as.pn/playbook

Developed in 2022, this school-focused report recognizes that students need more options for physical activity, whether through community partnerships, intramurals, student-led clubs or other innovations that supplement the standard menu of interscholastic teams. The report offers eight strategies to help principals and school leaders develop more students through sports with the educational, social, emotional and physical benefits that will serve them in life.

Youth Sports Playbook projectplay.org/youth-sports/playbook

Released in 2015, our seminal framework offers guidance on how different sectors can create supportive conditions and opportunities that help children thrive through sports. The framework has catalyzed activation by many organizations across the landscape, and shaped or unlocked more than \$100 million in grants.

“State of Play Portland,” published in 2026 as Project Play’s 18th community report, uses these frameworks to identify key findings in Portland and outline strategies for the community to collaboratively address systemic deficits while leveraging existing strengths. Crucially, this report prioritizes the voices of young people through surveys and profiles. A high-quality youth sports system must center these voices at every stage.

We applaud the desire of Portland community members to improve the lives of youth through sports and physical activity. There is no single solution to create more opportunities; it requires people from across sectors who understand how to work together to serve the interests of children, communities and public health. We hope this report guides the collective, long-term effort needed to ensure every child can enjoy the benefits of play.

Jon Solomon

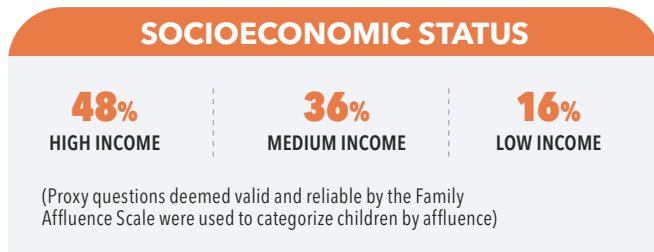
Research Director, Aspen Institute Project Play

Findings for “State of Play Portland” came from individual interviews with more than 50 key youth sports providers and community members whose work impacts the lives of children; focus group discussions with youth, parents and coaches; surveys conducted with more than 1,600 youth; maps using predictive models for local sports participation and interest based on national parent survey results; local media accounts; and existing reports and public data collected by the Aspen Institute. Research occurred from December 2024 to May 2026.

+

Youth survey results identified in the report came from the Aspen Institute’s State of Play Portland Youth Survey, administered online from May to October 2025 through the Resonant Education platform. The survey was completed by 1,638 youth in grades 5-12 who live in Multnomah County. White and Latino/a youth were underrepresented in the survey compared to Multnomah County’s demographics for youth under age 18.

Listed from highest to lowest surveyed percentages



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Surveys were distributed primarily through Portland Public Schools, which accounted for 72% of the responses. These 12 PPS schools participated in the survey:

Student Body Demographics of Schools Participating in Youth Survey

Schools	White	Latino/a	Black	Asian	2+ Races
Beaumont MS	61%	25%	4%	1%	9%
Benson HS	41%	27%	11%	6%	12%
Cleveland HS	67%	8%	2%	8%	12%
Harrison Park MS	27%	17%	15%	23%	13%
Ida B. Wells HS	70%	10%	4%	3%	11%
Jefferson HS	19%	22%	43%	2%	12%
Kellogg MS	41%	34%	4%	10%	10%
Llewellyn ES	75%	12%	1%	2%	10%
McDaniel HS	37%	26%	13%	11%	9%
Mt. Tabor MS	58%	8%	2%	4%	28%
Sunnyside Environmental	70%	11%	3%	1%	15%
Woodland ES	37%	19%	26%	N/A	18%
All PPS Schools	54%	17%	8%	6%	12%

Note: The Aspen Institute's youth survey collected the most school responses from Beaumont Middle School (30% of all Portland Public Schools responses), Mt. Tabor Middle School (19%), Harrison Park Middle School (14%) and McDaniel High School (14%).

Source: U.S. News & World Report from Portland Public Schools data

Additional surveys were collected through a partnership with TeenVoice, which surveyed teens ages 13-18 in Multnomah County, and separate distribution by nonschool organizations that serve youth. The survey had three pathways based on two questions that children answered:

- Do you engage in physical activity at least once per week? (86% said yes, totaling 1,397 youth).
- Within the past 12 months, have you played sports as part of an organized group or team? (78% said yes, totaling 1,092 youth).



Kinetica Predictive Mapping Analysis

This report also used predictive analysis by the Aspen Institute's partner Kinetica through national parent surveys to assess youth sports participation and interest in Portland. The models create unique datasets to understand sports and recreation behavior, interest and engagement across 84,000 small local areas (census tracts) in the U.S. The models utilize the complex relationship between demographic and socioeconomic profiles and behavior and apply these results to each community. Additional factors are incorporated to account for geographic differences not otherwise explained by demographic profiles.

The output is a set of sport and recreation participation, interest, and behavioral data for each small local area, which can then be aggregated to other geographic boundaries. The methodology is similar to that employed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in its estimation of diabetes, physical inactivity, life expectancy and obesity. Kinetica also brings in additional data layers such as census and health and well-being data, as well as sport and recreation supply-side elements like facilities, workforce and programming to deliver a comprehensive picture for each community.



Additional Research

Other datasets included in our quantitative findings came from:

- **CDC Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System:** 2023 sports participation and health data from survey results of Portland Public Schools students.
- **Oregon School Activities Association and National Federation of State High School Associations:** 2024-25 Portland and national high school sports participation data analyzed by the Aspen Institute along with high school student enrollment figures.
- **American College of Sports Medicine:** Analyzed the most recent data collected for the annual American Fitness Index results released in 2025.

THE STATE OF PLAY IN PORTLAND

SCOREBOARD

We need a new scoreboard in youth sports, one that measures success based on youth health and how many children stay active rather than just who wins. The Aspen Institute collected quantitative data from multiple sources, including our youth survey and mapping analysis with Kinetica, to help understand the sports experiences of Portland children. Data from multiple sources were compiled into five sections — Which Kids Play, Sports Kids Play, Sports Kids Want to Play, Where Kids Play, and Why Kids Play — to provide an overview of the quantitative findings.

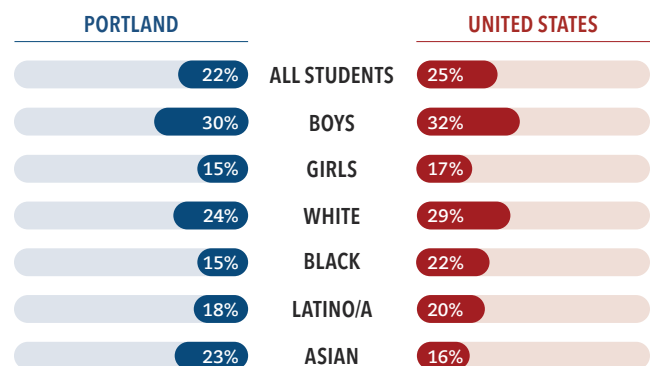
Which Kids Play

KEY TAKEAWAY

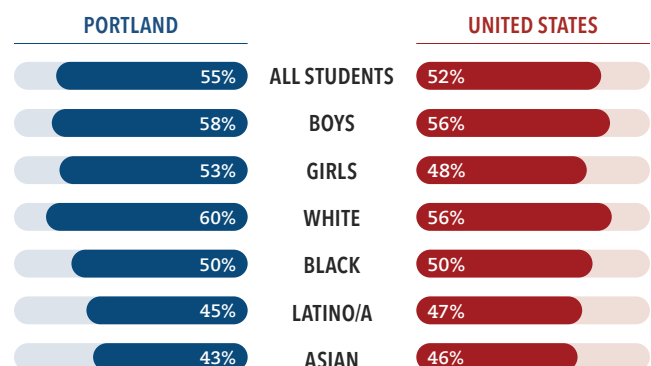
Portland youth play team sports at higher rates but are less physically active than the national averages.



Physically Active at Least 60 Minutes Per Day



Youth Participation on Sports Team in Past 12 Months



Note: All youth surveyed were high school students. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity for children.

Source: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 2023.



Sports Kids Play

KEY TAKEAWAY

Soccer is the top sport played by most surveyed boys and girls. Surveyed Latino/a, White and Asian youth primarily play soccer, while surveyed Black youth favor basketball.

Top Physical Activities Tried in Past Year

50%
SOCCER

46%
SWIMMING

45%
BASKETBALL

45%
BIKING

44%
PLAYGROUND

40%
VOLLEYBALL

35%
TENNIS

35%
KICKBALL

34%
HIKING

32%
BADMINTON

Note: Physical activities included those in PE class, recess and/or outside school.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Top Organized Sports Played in Past Year

BOYS

47%
SOCCER

33%
BASKETBALL

15%
BASEBALL

14%
FUTSAL

11%
TRACK & FIELD

11%
SWIMMING

10%
TACKLE FOOTBALL

9%
CROSS COUNTRY

9%
FLAG FOOTBALL

8%
BIKING



GIRLS

45%
SOCCER

29%
VOLLEYBALL

20%
BASKETBALL

18%
TRACK AND FIELD

17%
DANCE

16%
SWIMMING

11%
TENNIS

11%
CROSS COUNTRY

11%
FUTSAL

7%
SOFTBALL

LATINO/A

66%
SOCCER

24%
BASKETBALL

15%
BASEBALL

15%
VOLLEYBALL

10%
DANCE

BLACK

26%
BASKETBALL

17%
SOCCER

16%
VOLLEYBALL

10%
TRACK AND FIELD

10%
CHEER/STOMP AND SHAKE

ASIAN

48%
SOCCER

27%
BASKETBALL

18%
VOLLEYBALL

16%
SWIMMING

12%
BIKING

WHITE

47%
SOCCER

26%
BASKETBALL

16%
VOLLEYBALL

16%
TRACK AND FIELD

15%
SWIMMING

Note: Based on 1,098 youth who reported playing organized sports in the past year. Sample breakdown: 569 boys, 473 girls, 612 White, 120 Black, 98 Asian, and 82 Latino/a youth.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Organized Sports Participation by Household Income

Some of Portland’s most popular sports show gaps in participation based on a child’s family income. This is particularly true for soccer.

Sport	Low Income	Medium Income	High Income
Soccer	34%	42%	49%
Basketball	22%	24%	29%
Volleyball	17%	13%	18%
Track and Field	16%	12%	15%
Swimming	11%	10%	17%
Dance	10%	6%	10%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Participation Rates Differ for Girls vs. Boys in Select Sports, Ages 6-17

	BOYS	GIRLS		BOYS	GIRLS
SOCCER	22%	12%	TRACK AND FIELD	6%	6%
BASKETBALL	21%	13%	JOGGING/RUNNING	11%	12%
VOLLEYBALL	2%	6%	TENNIS	7%	7%

Source: Kinetica Localized Dataset - 2025

High School Sports in Portland

The Aspen Institute analyzed high school sports participation in 2024-25 compared to 2018-19 for these public high schools in Portland: Grant, Ida B. Wells, Lincoln, Cleveland, Franklin, McDaniel, Roosevelt, David Douglas, Reynolds, Centennial, Parkrose, Benson and Jefferson. Portland’s boys’ and girls’ participation each increased by 8% compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, marking larger increases than the Oregon (+7%) and the U.S. (+4%) averages.



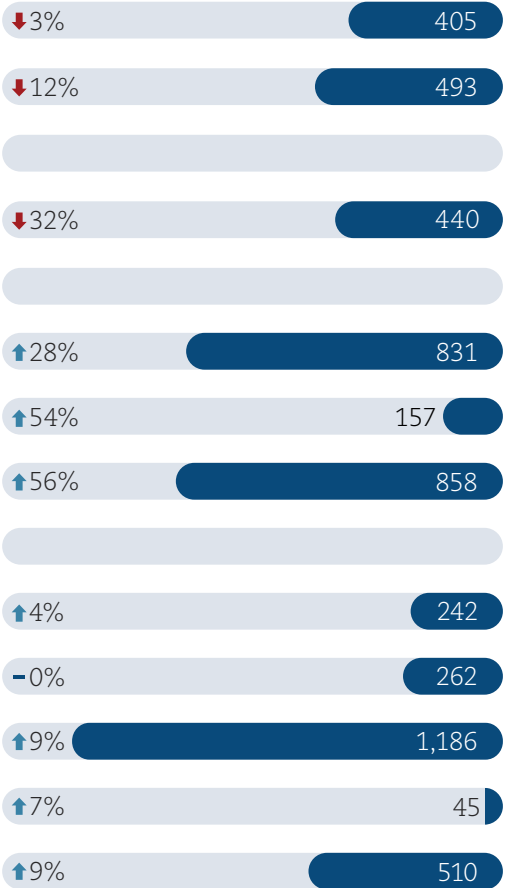


Sport-by-Sport Participation Changes

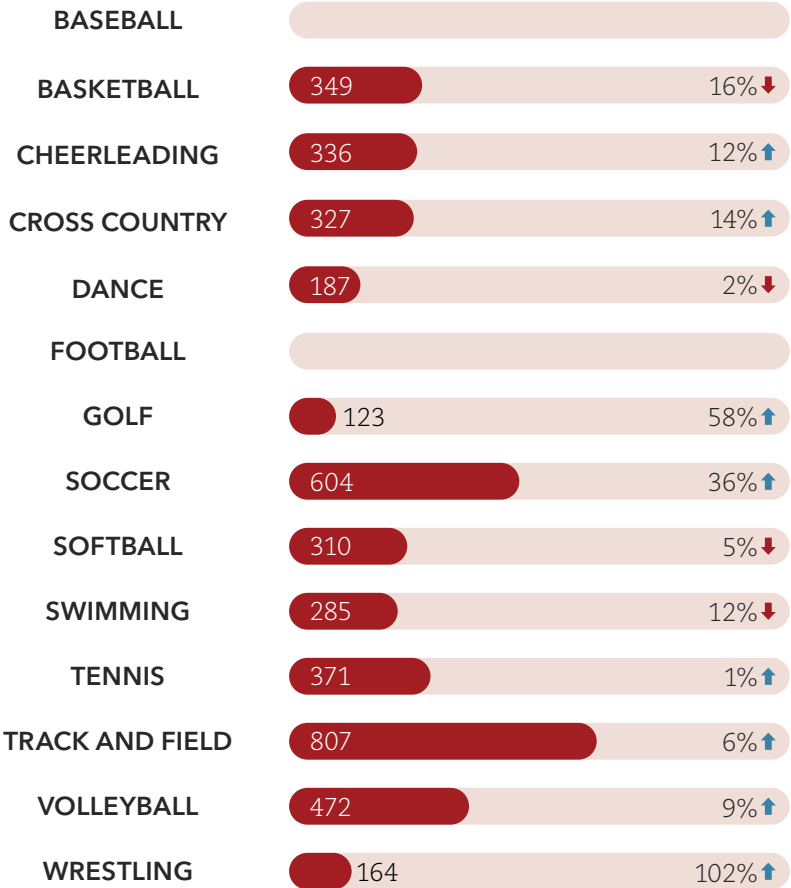
Participation in 15 of the 23 sports offered at Portland high schools improved in 2024–25 compared to six years earlier. Each sport listed below identifies the total number of 2024–25 participants (located inside the red or blue bar) and the six-year percentage increase or decrease (located next to an arrow).

BOYS

↑ Increase % 6-Year Change
↓ Decrease % 6-Year Change
— No % 6-Year Change



GIRLS



Source: Aspen Institute analysis of Oregon School Activities Association data.

Gender Balance in High School Sports Participation

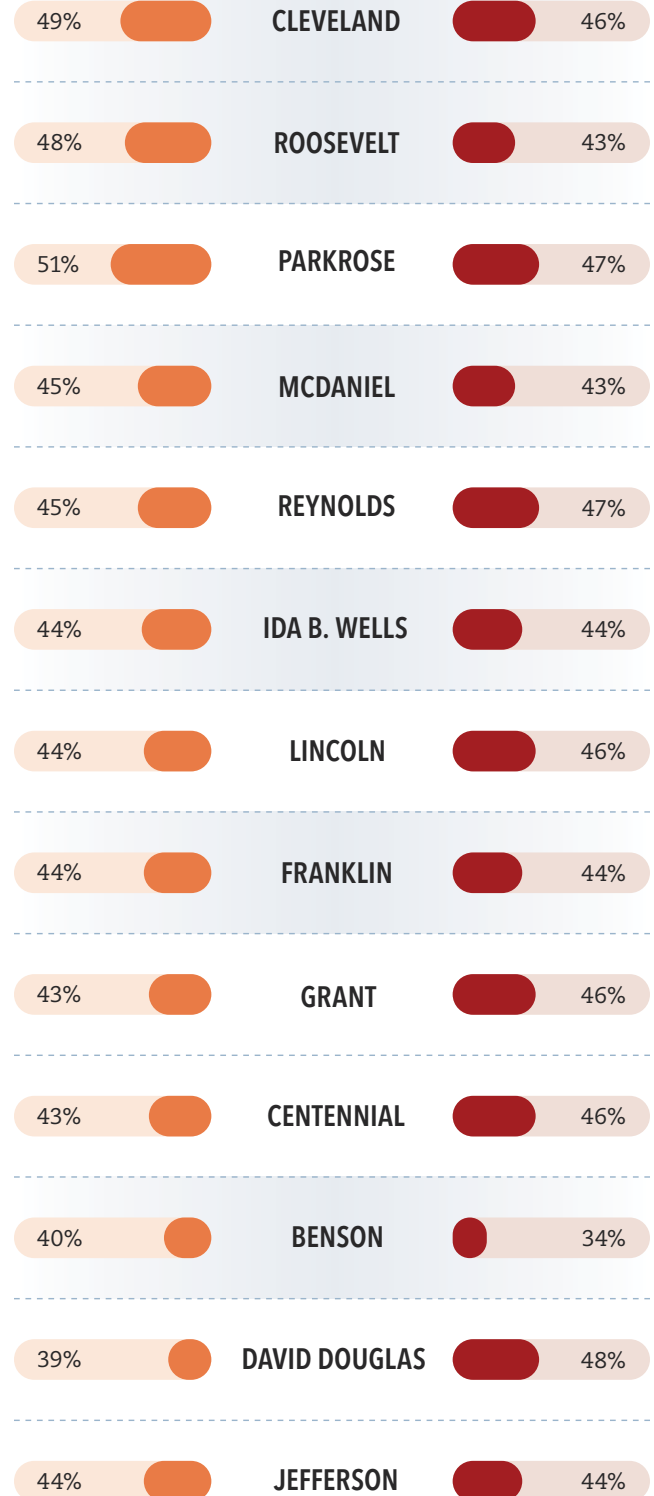
Among the 13 Portland high schools analyzed, male students were overrepresented on sports teams at 11 schools, with their share of the athlete population exceeding their total student enrollment. By contrast, female students reached or exceeded proportional representation in only six of the 13 schools.

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of Oregon School Activities Association data.



**% OF ATHLETES
WHO ARE GIRLS**

**% OF STUDENTS
WHO ARE GIRLS**



Sports Kids Want to Play

KEY TAKEAWAY

Youth are interested in both traditional team sports and less common ones — boxing, cheer/stomp and shake, dance, and ice skating all rank high.



Top 10 Sports/Activities Youth Most Want to Try

BOYS 1. Soccer 2. Basketball 3. Tackle Football 4. Baseball 5. Boxing 6. Track and Field 7. Snowboarding 8. Surfing 9. Golf 10. Parkour	GIRLS 1. Volleyball 2. Soccer 3. Cheer/Stomp & Shake 4. Dance 5. Ice Skating 6. Track and Field 7. Archery 8. Horseback Riding - T-9. Gymnastics - T-9. Flag Football	LATINO/A 1. Soccer 2. Volleyball 3. Boxing 4. Basketball 5. Rock Climbing	BLACK 1. Basketball 2. Volleyball 3. Soccer 4. Flag Football 5. Track and Field
		WHITE 1. Volleyball 2. Track and Field 3. Snowboarding 4. Tackle Football 5. Surfing	ASIAN 1. Soccer 2. Badminton - T-3. Swimming - T-3. Tennis - T-3. Karate/MMA - T-3. Snowboarding - T-3. Archery - T-3. Parkour
LOW INCOME 1. Soccer 2. Volleyball 3. Basketball 4. Baseball 5. Boxing	MEDIUM INCOME 1. Soccer 2. Volleyball 3. Track and Field - T-4. Flag Football - T-4. Swimming	HIGH INCOME 1. Volleyball 2. Soccer 3. Surfing 4. Snowboarding - T-5. Basketball - T-5. Tackle Football	Note: "T-" indicates a tie for that rank. For example, T-9 means multiple sports tied for 9th place. Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Where Kids Play

KEY TAKEAWAY

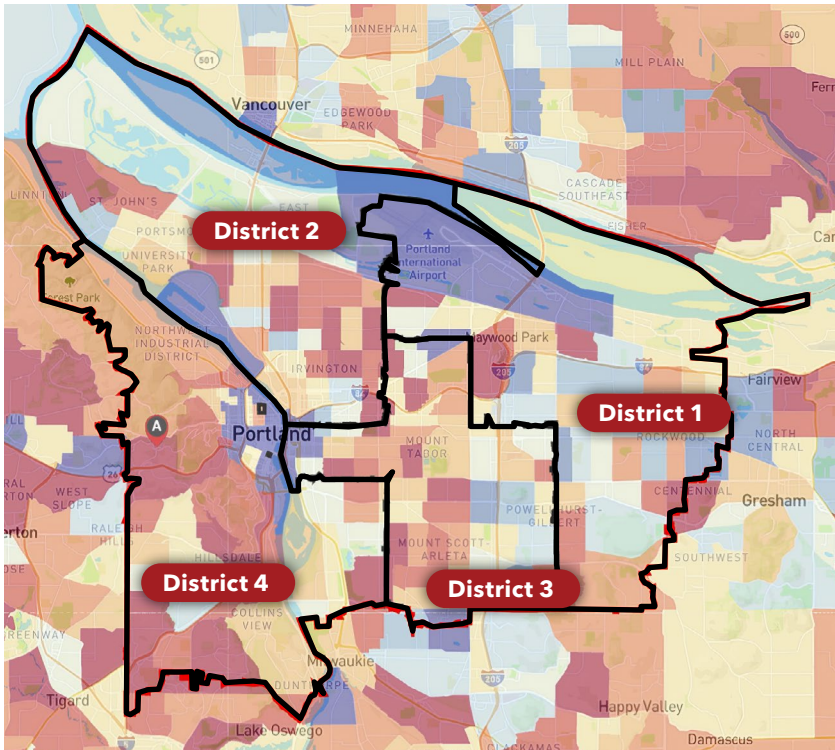
Organized sports participation for children is lowest in the eastern area of Portland.



Sports Participation Varies by Communities in Portland

Portland children generally play sports above the U.S. average, but their participation rates vary based on where they live locally, according to research conducted by Kinetica separately from the Aspen Institute's youth survey. Participation is lowest in Portland's District 1, home to the city's highest percentage of youth and lowest household incomes. District 1 includes the neighborhoods of Argay Terrace, Centennial, Glenfair, Hazelwood, Lents, Mill Park, Parkrose, Parkrose Heights, Pleasant Valley, Powellhurst-Gilbert, Russell, Sumner, Sunderland, Wilkes and Woodland Park. District 1 has higher participation than the U.S. average in 24 of 58 analyzed sports and recreation activities, including soccer, volleyball, football, softball and tennis.

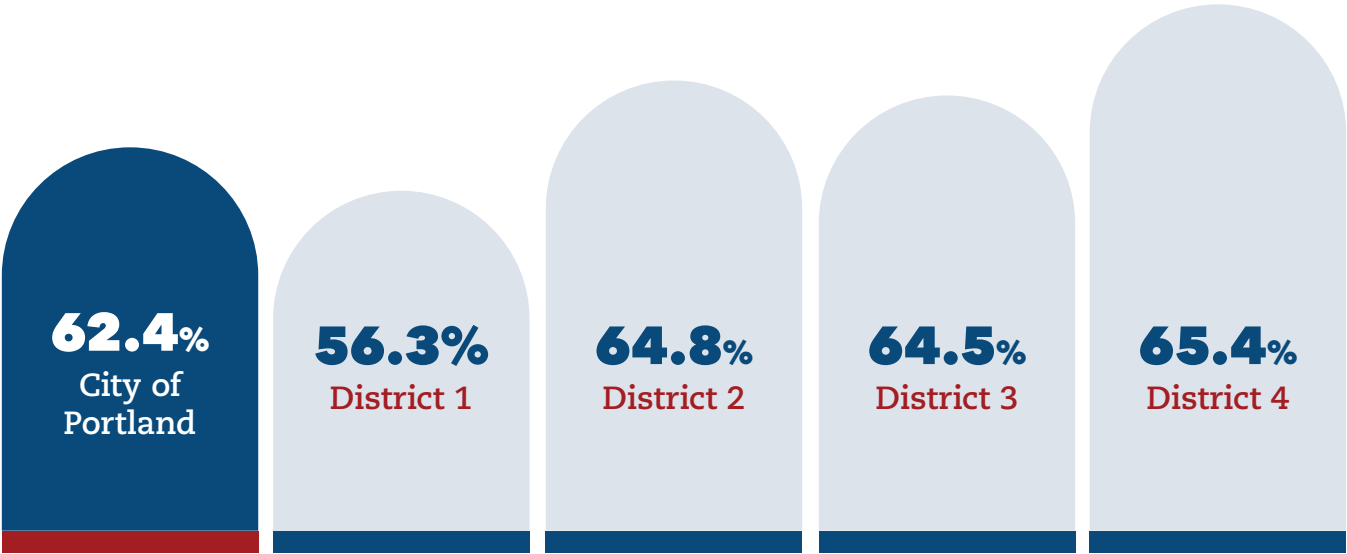
63% of Kids in Portland Participated in at Least 1 Sport in the Last 12 Months



68-83%	■
65-67.9%	■
63-64.9%	■
61.6-62.9%	■
60-61.5%	■
58.6-59.9%	■
57-58.5%	■
55-56.9%	■
52-54.9%	■
0-51.9%	■

Source: Kinetica Localized Dataset - 2025

Organized Sports Participation is Lower in District 1 vs. Other City of Portland Districts



Source: Kinetica Localized Dataset - 2025

Sports/Activities Youth in District 1 Want to Try

Kinetica’s research shows District 1, home to Portland’s largest percentage of youth and lowest household incomes, has nine sports and recreational activities that draw the highest youth interest to play compared to the city’s other three districts.

Sport	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4
Swimming	9.7%	8.8%	9.1%	8.3%
Martial arts	8.2%	7.2%	8.2%	6.7%
Skateboarding	6.7%	6.4%	6.7%	6.1%
Dance	6.6%	6.4%	6.2%	6.2%
Gymnastics	6.6%	6.3%	6.1%	5.9%
Walking (recreational)	5.7%	5.2%	5.6%	5.3%
Softball	5.2%	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%
Boxing	4.9%	4.5%	4.6%	4.6%
Rock climbing	3.6%	3.3%	3.5%	3.0%

Source: Kinetica Localized Dataset - 2025

Portland's American Fitness Index Results

The American College of Sports Medicine annually ranks America's 100 largest cities on a composite of health behaviors, health outcomes, community infrastructure and local policies that support a physically active lifestyle. In 2026, Portland was rated the 29th healthiest city in the U.S., its lowest ranking on record after five top 10 rankings in six years from 2017 to 2022.

ACTIVITY TYPE	PORTLAND	100-CITY AVERAGE
 Bike Score	52.0	82.7
 Walk Score	47.5	67.3
 Parks per 10,000 residents	4.0	5.0
 % within 10-minute walk to park	72.3	91.0
 Outdoor athletic fields per 10,000 residents	2.9	2.2
 Basketball hoops per 10,000 residents	3.6	3.3
 Playgrounds per 10,000 residents	2.5	2.1
 Rec centers per 20,000 residents	0.9	0.5
 Swimming pools per 100,000 residents	2.3	1.7
 Tennis/pickleball courts per 20,000 residents	4.4	3.0
 Park expenditure per resident	\$166	\$286

Note: Higher numbers reflect better health results than lower numbers in the categories of “Bike score” and “Walk score.”

Source: American Fitness Index, 2026.



What Youth Like Most About Organized Sports



Playing with friends

51%



Having fun

49%



Learning and improving skills

33%



Exercising

32%



Winning

23%

Why Kids Play

KEY TAKEAWAY

Children play sports largely for social reasons, contrary to how adults often organize the activities. This trend is also reflected nationwide.

What Youth Like Least About Organized Sports

Not enough time for schoolwork

21%
LATINO/A

14%
BLACK

15%
ASIAN

16%
WHITE

I'm not good enough

24%
LATINO/A

20%
BLACK

19%
ASIAN

16%
WHITE

I'm worried about getting hurt

18%
LATINO/A

15%
BLACK

25%
ASIAN

11%
WHITE

None of the listed reasons are true

46%
LATINO/A

32%
BLACK

44%
ASIAN

50%
WHITE

Note: "None of the listed reasons are true" was the top answer option selected by youth in the survey, which did not include further inquiry into why respondents chose this option so frequently.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Youth Differences in Sports by Household Income

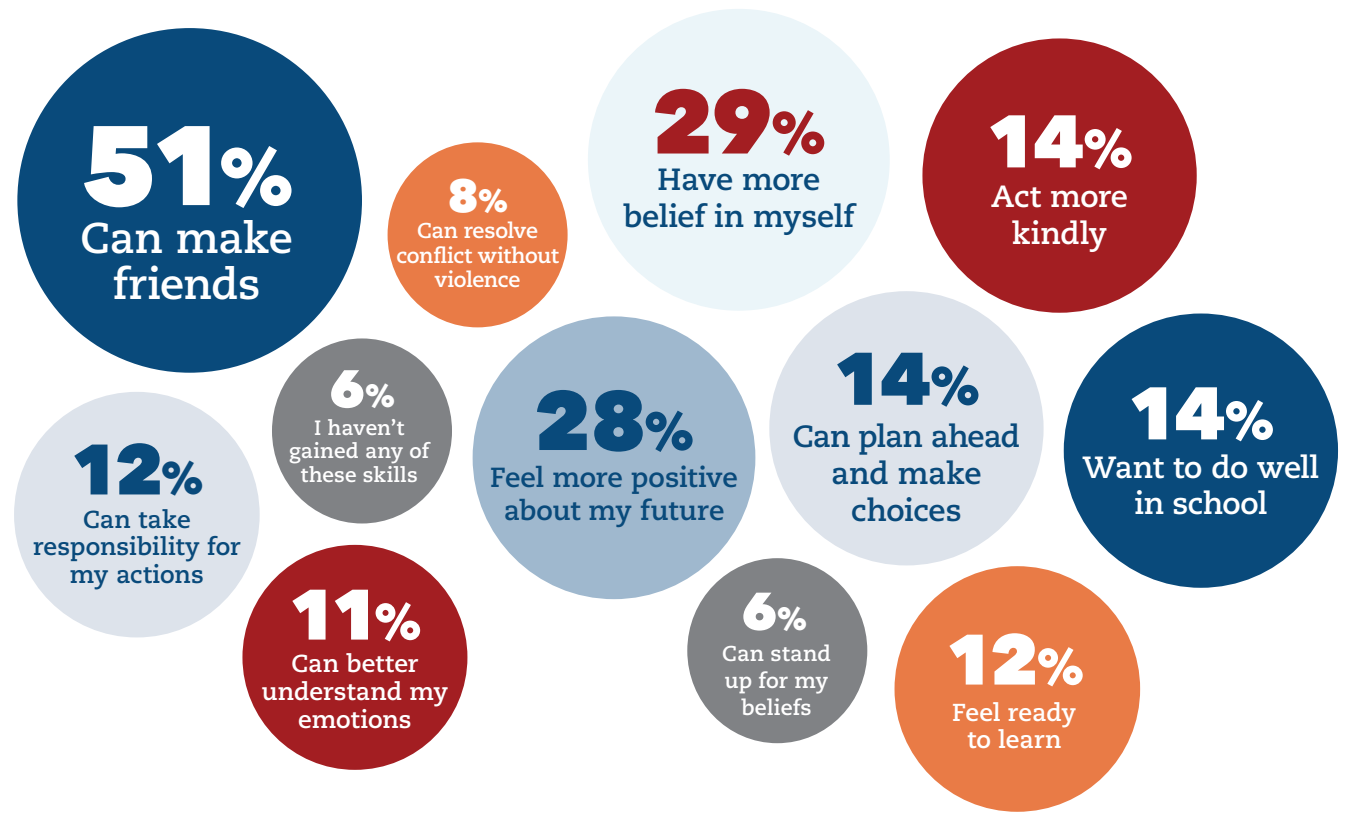
Children from lower-income homes participate in sports less than children from higher-income homes, in part because they face these challenges at higher rates.

	LOW INCOME	MEDIUM INCOME	HIGH INCOME
I enjoy sports to get away from problems	19%	9%	8%
Sports are too expensive	19%	17%	9%
Teams are too serious	12%	9%	7%
It's too hard to get to sports activities	14%	7%	3%
I don't feel safe or welcome on a team	8%	5%	2%
I can't play due to family responsibilities/job	13%	11%	4%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Value of Sports to Children

Because I participate in sports, I ...



Note: Responses are only from youth who indicated they played on an organized sports team in the previous 12 months.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Project Play interviewed community members, held focus groups with youth, parents, coaches and administrators, and reviewed media articles and other information. This section highlights the State of Play Portland qualitative findings and additional data associated with important themes. Included in this section are stories of youth sharing their sports experiences.

1 | Lack of coordination within the youth sports ecosystem impacts access for children.

Portland possesses no shortage of capable actors through many well-intentioned sports organizations, coaches, educational institutions, municipal governments and corporate foundations. However, many sports providers and relevant sectors work in silos within the Portland community, which has limited resources devoted to youth sports. This includes fragmentation of corporate and philanthropic funders in the youth sports space.

For some children in Portland, especially Black and Latino/a youth, the barrier to sports is a complex web of logistics. The fragmented system means some children disappear from sports as they age up or get priced out. A more coordinated system could create pipelines, partnerships with resources, and transportation alignment, among other benefits.

While mission-aligned partnerships do exist in Portland, the fragmented ecosystem lacks a central mechanism to consolidate resources and foster large-scale collaboration. Also lacking is a comprehensive understanding of who funds youth sports and play and for what purposes.

“There’s no one that’s connecting the dots and bringing all these different partners together,” said Scott Bush, chief marketing officer of [Athletic.net](#) and former president of Portland Track. “That lack of a coordinated ecosystem hurts a lot.”

Sport Oregon, the state’s sports commission that drives sports tourism and policy in Oregon, may be Portland’s closest convening entity since its founding in 1991. [Sport Oregon’s board of directors](#) includes executives from major local organizations who collectively shape Oregon’s sports future. In 2014, the organization launched the Sport Oregon Foundation to expand sports access for underserved youth. Despite employing only one full-time staff member, the foundation prioritizes the Portland metro area due to its high population density.

The foundation’s flagship initiative, [She Flies](#), supports girls and women in sports through grants, storytelling and community events. The foundation has distributed more than \$250,000 to advance female opportunities in sports. Its newer initiative, [Play Oregon](#), targets specific barriers to physical activity. Activities include:

- **Go to Camp, Give a Camp:** In partnership with [Elite Sports Academy](#), this program utilizes a one-for-one model. Every paid registration for an “elite” multisport camp covers the costs for a child from a low-income household or marginalized identity to attend for free.

- **Free Summer Basketball Clinics:**

Partnering with the Portland Trail Blazers, the foundation provides free clinics for underserved youth across the Portland and Salem metropolitan areas.

- **Golf in Schools:** Sport Oregon and **First Tee Oregon** integrate golf into physical education classes. This collaboration provides specialized equipment, teacher training and ongoing support, with a dollar-for-dollar match of \$20,000.

Sport Oregon CEO Jim Etzel noted that the current youth sports model forces families to spend excessive time and financial resources to compete. "We're working at the state level to try to build a coalition of legislators around sports to help people understand why it's important to create those opportunities to play within your community," he said.

Other entities financially support youth sports too. Nike directly supports local community organizations and parks departments to increase youth sports participation and train coaches. The Nike Community Impact Fund offers additional funding through open applications, managed by the Oregon Community Foundation, awarding \$550,000 annually to local nonprofits and schools in the region to support positive experiences in sport and physical activity for youth in their communities. The Multnomah Athletic Foundation also has provided more than \$960,000 in community grants supporting sports participation and more than \$2.4 million in scholarships to Portland-area athletes.

Establishing a more collaborative framework within Portland raises several critical questions. Leaders must define specific goals and reach a shared understanding of what constitutes "sports" and "play." This definition must clarify the roles of physical education and noncompetitive recreation. Importantly, any collaborative effort must successfully integrate community voices to maintain relevance and inclusion.



One perception shared locally about backbone organizations is that they risk duplicating work and diverting scarce resources. Instead of funding administrative overhaul for a new entity, some people suggest that the primary goal should be funneling resources directly to youth. (See page 50 for recommendations to help address these concerns.) We also heard sentiments that while many youth sports providers share common goals, they often remain too busy to meet, or they resist collaboration because they compete for the same limited funding and field permits.

Bush believes Portland is ready for regular, high-level interaction between teams, companies, philanthropy and others to pool resources supporting youth sports. While he argues that local governments should participate, he doubts they have the capacity to lead a comprehensive youth sports initiative — a perspective shared by others in the community.

"There's a lot of competition that fragments everyone in youth sports, but there's no one that's a uniter that's bringing people together," Bush said. "Who's creating that place where people can talk and realize, 'We're all kind of in this together?'"

2

Household income serves as a primary predictor of sports participation in an “up or out” model.

National and local research shows surveyed children from lower-income homes participate in sports far less than children in higher-income homes. Although costs to play are not the only barrier to participation, they reflect a substantial hurdle.

The modern youth sports landscape forces children into selecting one distinct pathway: the inclusive participation pathway or the exclusive performance pathway. Navigating these options can be overwhelming for parents. Nationally, more than half of youth sports parents feel **significant pressure to have their children specialize in a single sport**. This pressure stems less from professional aspirations and more from the simple desire to make a high school team. In Portland, playing sports often requires time, money and transportation that some families — especially those facing racialized and economic constraints — are structurally denied.

Fearing their children will miss out on future opportunities, many parents opt for travel teams at early ages. This choice carries a heavy financial burden. Several Portland mothers of AAU basketball players reported monthly payments nearly equal to their housing rent. One parent estimated spending \$6,000 annually on basketball training and camps for two children, while others described feeling “scammed” by weekend tournament fees that cost a family of five \$80 just to watch their child play.

Despite these costs, parents continue to pay, often fueled by unrealistic expectations. “If this gives them a free ride in college, I will be happy,”

said one mother. “I want them to be in the NBA and they can pay me back.”

While 22% of sports parents nationally **believe their child can play Division I sports and 11% envision a pro career**, NCAA statistics show that fewer than 1% of high school athletes reach the pros. A high school basketball player faces 1-in-10,399 odds of making the NBA.

Despite the sports ambitions of some families, children in Portland largely play sports to have fun and be with friends. Recreational and local teams remain the primary venue for play. Six in 10 youth athletes participate in recreation and local leagues, compared to four in 10 on school or travel teams, according to Aspen’s youth survey.



Where Surveyed Youth Play Sports

	SCHOOL TEAM	REC/LOCAL TEAM	TRAVEL TEAM
All youth	43%	62%	39%
Low income	60%	47%	30%
Medium income	43%	61%	33%
High income	41%	65%	44%
Elementary school-age	29%	76%	39%
Middle school-age	33%	67%	43%
High school-age	70%	48%	31%
Latino/a	51%	62%	26%
Black	60%	37%	31%
White	41%	68%	40%
Asian	40%	61%	37%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

School sports are the most popular setting for children from low-income households, largely because they remove transportation and cost barriers. Beyond schools, options for affordable, high-quality sports programming have grown increasingly scarce in recent decades.

In the early 1970s, Portland Parks & Recreation (PP&R) fully staffed 60 parks for summer activities so that every child lived near a supervised play area. By the 1980s and '90s, the department shifted from universal neighborhood presence toward centralized, fee-based programming. Following the 2008 Great Recession, PP&R further divested from many sports to focus mainly on basketball and volleyball, adopting a facility rental model for other providers.

Today, PP&R's signature program, Goldenball, provides low-cost basketball to more than 2,600 youth in grades 3-6. While Goldenball has survived for 88 years as of 2026, it faces modern pressures. The program eliminated offerings for grades 8-12 post-pandemic and currently turns away interested teams due to limited gym access, capping participation at 220 teams.

Youth sports in Portland have evolved into an “up or out” model. Children either ascend to higher competitive levels — requiring more time and money — or exit sports entirely due to cost or ability. While travel sports can offer social benefits and appropriate athletic challenges, the intense pressure can sap the joy from the game. This disconnect is critical: children consistently rank fun and friendship as their primary motivations to play.

Kenia Brambila Soltero, 10

Kenia, a fifth-grader at Alder Elementary School, has big dreams in fútbol. One day she wants to play for the hometown Portland Thorns in the National Women's Soccer League.

"I feel proud of myself and every time that I play, I notice that I'm learning and getting better," Kenya says via a Spanish translator.

Seeking improvement, Kenya's father moved her to a new team after her previous coach showed total disinterest. "He didn't like how the coach trained the team," Kenya explains. "It was basically no training at all. The coach would leave for his car, be on his phone, leave the kids out there doing whatever they wanted to do, so there was no direction."

Kenia currently plays for Mi Ranchito, a predominantly Latino team. Because high costs hinder the registration of enough girls for Latina-only teams, she has only played on coed teams thus far. Kenya's mother, Rosa, pays for both her son and daughter to play, but the daily winter costs of indoor fútbol in Troutdale create a financial burden for Rosa. Kenya's team frequently utilizes Lents Park and Cherry Park to avoid field fees.

Nationally, sports participation among Latina girls rose from 40% in 2019 to 48% in 2024, outpacing non-Latina peers. Research published by the McKinsey Institute for Economic Mobility, "Unlocking the Growing Power of Latino Fans," attributes this success to organizations like the ELLA Sports Foundation, Girls on the Run, Sports 4 Life and the Women's Sports Foundation that have launched programs targeting historically underrepresented groups.

Enabling Kenya and her teammates to play requires significant community effort. Parents raise money for referees and field space while coordinating transportation for parents unable to attend due to work. They provide every child with water and snacks and share extra equipment, like shoes or shin guards, with those in need. Supplies serve as a powerful incentive for Kenya; she feels motivated when people buy her gear and tell her not to give up.

Her elementary school is 55% Latino/a and 71% economically disadvantaged, representing a community requiring more support. As she gets older, Kenya hopes to join high-profile teams and wear vibrant, colorful uniforms. She continues to chase her dream in a system often stacked against her.



3

Structural challenges shape the participation rates for many Black and Latino/a youth.

Portland engages with sports and outdoor activities like few communities analyzed by the Aspen Institute. Hiking, trail running, cycling, water sports and winter sports are all possible. Many organized team sports are popular. Parks are highly valued by the community, and supported by taxpayers as a necessary resource to help build healthy children and adults given the physical, social and emotional benefits that come from being active.

Despite the region's overall success, the trickle-down effect of Portland's play culture is uneven. Structural challenges related to cost, safety and culturally affirming programming shape the organized sports participation rates in the communities where many Black and Latino/a children live. The disparity is often not a matter of interest by children, but of access to nearby facilities and programs that meet the needs of these youth and the budgets of families and caregivers.

Outdoor Recreation Activities Tried at Least Once in the Past Year

Black and Latino/a youth are far less likely to engage in outdoor recreation. They are less likely to have ever been intentionally introduced to outdoor rec activities due to structural challenges.

	BLACK	LATINO/A	ASIAN	WHITE
Swimming	21%	24%	47%	58%
Biking	16%	31%	53%	56%
Hiking	11%	22%	39%	45%
Skateboarding	10%	13%	18%	18%
Roller skating	10%	12%	18%	24%
Archery	5%	8%	20%	19%
Rock climbing	4%	7%	18%	21%
Rowing	4%	5%	11%	9%
Paddleboarding	3%	5%	16%	25%
Kayaking	2%	8%	13%	18%
Alpine skiing	2%	2%	11%	11%
Snowboarding	2%	4%	9%	6%
Cross country skiing	2%	2%	4%	6%
Mountain biking	2%	5%	10%	13%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.



FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Eric Knox, founder of HOLLA and a former Benson High School girls' basketball coach, summarizes the challenge for organized sports participation this way: "There are three reasons some kids play sports at lower rates — the first is money, the second is money, the third is money."

The youth sports ecosystem has increasingly shifted toward an elite "pay-to-play" model. While highly talented Black and Latino/a athletes from low-income communities are often recruited by affluent AAU or travel teams, these opportunities tend to be transactional and do not build community-wide capacity. The cost of training, travel, tournament fees and even basic equipment creates a barrier that low-income families cannot scale. Some parents noted that this financial gap can prevent children of color from starting sports at a young age, creating a skills gap by high school that further discourages participation.

SAFETY

According to Aspen's youth survey, Black and Latino/a youth are three times more likely than White youth to disagree that they have a safe place to play near their homes. While only 9% of Black youth say they don't feel safe or welcome on their sports team, that is far higher than Asian (4%), White (3%) and Latino/a (1%) youth. Also, Black and Latino/a youth are about two to three times more likely than Asian and White youth to say playing on a team prevents them from fulfilling family responsibilities, such as holding a job.

To understand why certain populations are excluded from sports at higher levels, non-sports systemic disparities are also factors. Examples include:

JUDICIAL SYSTEMS

Imani Muhammad, founder of Youth Organized and United to Help (Y.O.U.TH), highlights the "school-to-prison pipeline" as a direct competitor to the sports ecosystem. In Multnomah County, **Black youth are eight times more likely to have a criminal referral** and twice as likely to be detained as White youth. Latino/a youth are more likely than White youth to experience a negative outcome at each decision point of the judicial process.





EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

High school sports require specific GPA eligibility. However, **Black and Latino/a students in Portland face significantly lower reading and math proficiency rates** compared to their peers, according to the Oregon Department of Education. Muhammad notes that many youth play on AAU teams with no academic requirements throughout middle school, only to be barred from high school play once they fail to meet academic eligibility requirements. This sudden exclusion at age 14 or 15 can sever a young person's last tie to a supportive community structure through the school setting. By the teenage years, opportunities to play sports outside of school have significantly decreased.

IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

In October 2025, **16 youth soccer teams withdrew from competition** following reports of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity at Portland's Delta Park. "People will have different views about immigration and enforcement actions — and that's understandable," Simon Date, executive director of the Oregon Youth Soccer Association, wrote to parents. "But wherever you stand on the politics,

we stand unapologetically with kids not being scared to be at our events. Every child deserves to play soccer without fear, and that will always be our North Star."

Some soccer teams reduced practices. Community members now wonder if they need more indoor, secured places for play. One funder delayed building outdoor basketball courts because they won't currently be used in that community. By late 2025, some traditional funders of sports and play had dramatically shifted their priorities to protecting and feeding immigrants. They viewed the immigration actions as an emergency moment without clarity on how long they might last. Addressing the basic needs of families is vital and a service some sports providers offer that can also attract children and families to sports.

In March 2026, community advocate Som Subedi, an immigrant from Bhutan who is now a U.S. citizen, created a soccer tournament dubbed the World Cup for immigrant and refugee girls in Portland. The idea was to help girls receive a sense of joy and unity amid fear and uncertainty, **The Associated Press reported**. Local police officers and a local immigrant rights group were present to help children feel safe at the tournament.

Play matters a lot in Portland. But it's complicated.

Daniel Ponce, 18, and Aiva Anderson, 16

The beauty of McDaniel High School's stomp and shake cheerleading team is that it engages many students who previously avoided organized sports. This high-energy style, originating from Southern historically Black colleges and universities, features synchronized foot stomps, hand claps, full-body shakes and rhythmic chants.

Daniel, a senior and the only boy on the varsity squad, never played sports before joining. "I never felt included or welcomed in other sports," he says.

Aiva, a sophomore who is Black, quit gymnastics after coaches neglected her compared to White peers. "I would be asking [coaches] the same questions as all the other White girls who were getting help, and I wasn't getting as in-depth answers," she recalls. "I was kind of left on my own, and a lot of other Black girls had that experience too."

Led by McDaniel coach Sharlivia Slaughter, the team rejects cliquey stereotypes and body-type judgments many students find common in traditional cheer, swimming or gymnastics. There are White, Mexican, Asian and Black students of all shapes and sizes.

"Coach always tells us that we're as strong as our weakest link and we have to help each other," Aiva says. "We're all on the same level, so there's not really comparing with each other, which I think helps with inclusion."

The Aspen Institute's survey ranks cheer/stomp and shake among the top five organized sports for Black youth in Portland. Despite this popularity, the team faces skepticism regarding its status as a "real"

sport. In state competitions, McDaniel loses points for omitting traditional stunts and tumbling. While other local schools adapt to traditional routines, Slaughter advocates for the Oregon School Activities Association to recognize stomp and shake officially.

Daniel and Aiva refuse to water down their team's culture to fit traditional standards. "Getting second place is not nothing because people know how good we are," Daniel says.

Aiva notes the racial double standard in these athletic debates. "Especially because there's always underlying racism to it, you know? I think if stomp and shake was a White thing, there wouldn't be that much argument about whether or not it's a sport, or whether or not we should be included."

As it is, Aiva says, many Black girls don't feel welcomed by teammates or coaches on sports teams, as she experienced in gymnastics. She plans to attend college in the South and continue cheering.

"Joining stomp and shake," Aiva says, "was the first time I've been treated equally in sports."



4

Girls in Portland play sports more than the national average, but there is room to grow.

Girls participate in organized sports at higher rates in Portland than in the U.S., according to the Aspen Institute’s review of separate research collected by the CDC and state and national high school athletic associations. Still, sports access for girls can be improved given that boys’ participation rates generally remain higher than girls’ rates, especially girls of color. Results from Aspen’s youth survey, which skewed toward higher-income households, show that girls of color participate in organized sports 13 percentage points less than White girls.

Among all races, Aspen’s survey shows higher participation by girls in track and field, cross country and tennis than boys — though Kinetica data earlier in the report showed track and field parity. Aspen respondents also reported equal participation in soccer, contrasting Kinetica’s recorded gender gap. However, Portland girls continue to play flag football and basketball at significantly lower rates than boys.

The growth of women’s sports is noticeably visible in Portland, which aims to be the global epicenter of the movement to professionalize and prioritize women’s sports. Media outlets identify Portland as **one of the top 10 women’s sports markets in the country**. RAJ Sports is the only ownership group in the U.S. to hold franchises in both the WNBA and the NWSL, and the Portland Fire returned to the basketball court in 2026. At the 2026 Women’s Global Sports Summit on Nike’s Philip H. Knight Campus, **Nike and RAJ Sports announced a partnership to expand women’s sports in Portland**. The initiative includes sports

clinics, camps and free Nike gear to Portland youth, focusing especially on girls. This is such a rabid women’s sports community that The Sports Bra — a Portland restaurant dedicated exclusively to broadcasting women’s sports — is now franchising nationally following local success.

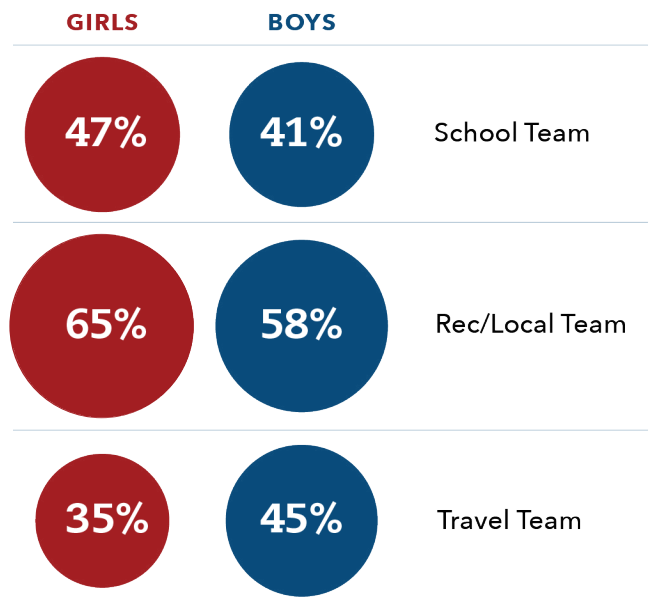
The fact that Portland embraces women’s sports does not guarantee the investments and opportunities will create systemic change. **Research on major sporting events** shows that elite sports visibility rarely inspires inactive youth to take up sports on its own. For grassroots growth to occur over the long term, short-term support must evolve into sustained investment and coordination within a community.

As opportunities in college and professional sports continue to grow, so does the pressure placed on girls at increasingly young ages. Nationally, girls who drop out of sports report experiencing significantly higher rates of negative parental behavior compared to boys who quit. Female former players are roughly twice as likely as male former players to report that their parents compared them to other players, pressured them to play and argued with coaches or referees during games, **according to a 2026 Aspen Institute study of children’s sports experiences**.

Notably, the State of Play Portland youth survey showed that Portland girls play sports on local and school teams more than boys, while boys play on travel teams more. Also, surveyed girls participate in many outdoor recreational activities at higher percentages than boys.

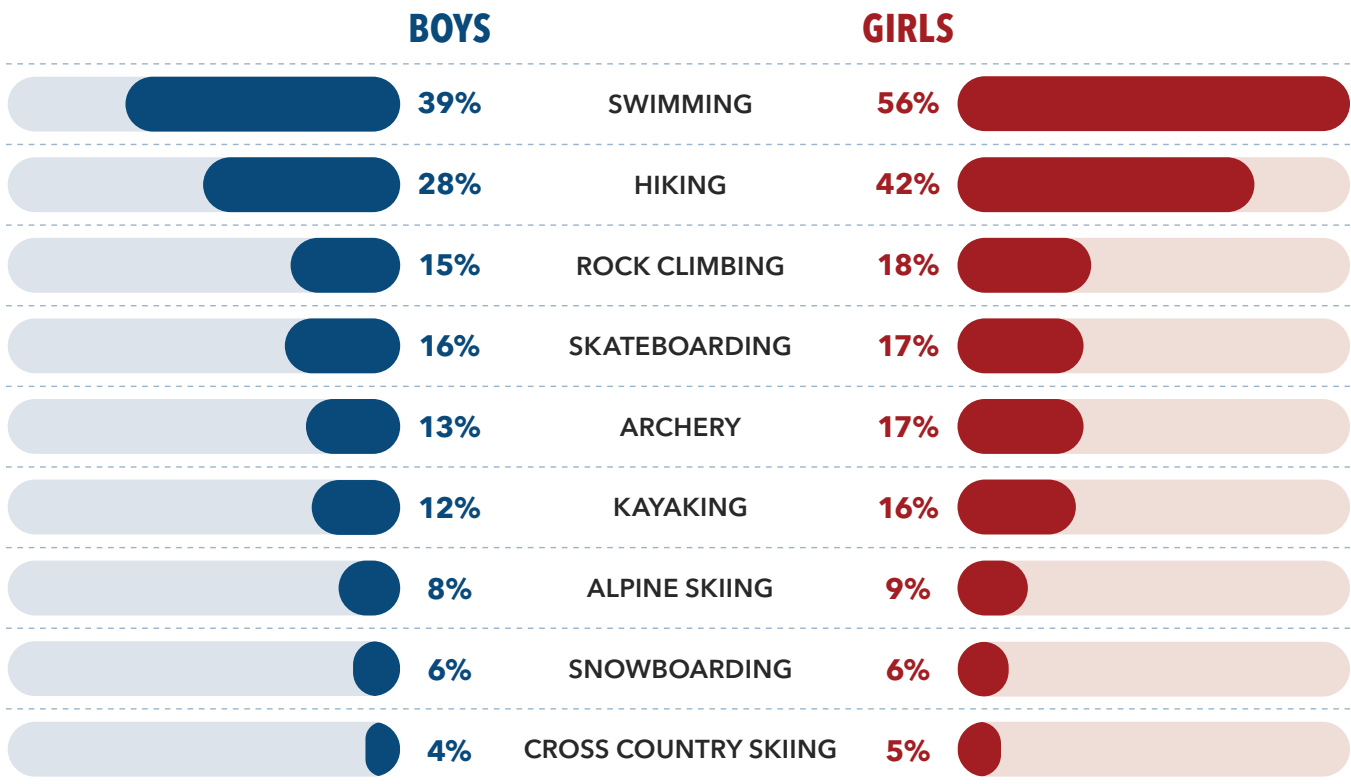


Where Surveyed Youth Play Sports



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Outdoor Recreation Activities Tried at Least Once in the Past Year



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Our survey revealed that girls are more than twice as likely as boys to play sports for social connection (16% vs. 7%), while boys place a higher value on winning (27% vs. 19%).

Also, girls are more likely to cite self-doubt regarding their skill level, injury concerns and academic time constraints as barriers to sports participation.

National research suggests that more free play — or pickup games — is especially needed for female athletes, who have higher rates of overuse injuries and sports specialization than males. Females participate in fewer free play hours per week and play their main sport for more months of the year than males. The percentage of athletes that

exceed the recommended 2-to-1 ratio of organized sport to free play hours is significantly higher in females (90%) than males (79%).

Resources exist to empower coaches who are coaching girls. The Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota, in partnership with Nike, created Coaching Her, a tool created for coaches to support **positive experiences for girls in sport**. Nike has also co-created additional expert-backed inclusive **coaching tools and resources**, including How to Coach Kids and Coaching Girls, Body Confident Sport, Sports Bra Playbook and Hijab Playbook.



Hillary Nguyen, 15

High school beginnings often daunt students, but for Hillary Nguyen, the tennis court offered a fresh start. Hillary gravitated toward the Parkrose High School team long before she picked up a racket. During a middle school club fair, she met the team captains and learned about “open court,” a casual summer program designed to introduce beginners to the game. There, she met Kurt Casad, whom she calls Coach Kurt, and began practicing fundamental skills in a low-stakes environment.

Initial performance anxiety hampered her start. “At first, the big thing holding me back was that I hate competitions and games,” Hillary admits. However, the welcoming environment and diverse peer group fostered a deep sense of belonging that overcame her hesitation. “If not for my friends already on the team, I wouldn’t have the courage to join.”

When Hillary lacked her own gear, Coach Kurt eased her transition by giving her a racket. “It was my first time playing, so I was really nervous about the racket and stuff and he was like, ‘You should just keep it — try it out, see if you like it. I feel like you could be a really good addition to the team.’”

High equipment costs often bar entry to sports for many families. Organizations like [Smashing Barriers](#) — a student-led Portland group — further support this cause by providing free lessons and redistributing equipment to underserved youth.

Hillary describes the team mentality, shaped by Coach Kurt, as refreshingly pressure-free. His consistent encouragement

keeps Hillary from feeling defeated by mistakes or technical challenges.

“You’re not playing for a competition, or to win,” she says. “You’re playing for fun, and as long as you do your best, he’s happy for you.”

Hillary prioritizes peer connection, lifelong skill-building and genuine enjoyment over traditional competitive metrics. She attributes her positive experience to a trained, motivational mentor and urges adults to expand one-on-one coaching opportunities for youth.

Aspen’s Portland youth survey found girls value a caring coach more than boys. Having a supportive mentor “has impacted us a lot,” Hillary says. “He taught us that as long as you put effort into it, and have a good attitude, you’re gonna be fine. I apply that to real life, not just tennis.”



5

Park maintenance, field space and permitting access are challenges for sports programming.

Portland Parks and Recreation (PP&R) faces an “infrastructure crisis,” [according to an October 2025 city audit](#). The report highlights a systemic failure: the city continues to construct new parks — many of which are in underserved areas — while ignoring a massive maintenance backlog at existing sites. For decades, East Portland had significantly fewer parks per capita than West Portland, so PP&R focused capital investments that prioritized neighborhoods with high concentrations of people of color and low-income households.

The city audit claims assets like playgrounds, paths and restrooms risk failure regardless of funding levels achieved over the next decade. As of September 2024, PP&R reported that 85% of its assets were in poor or very bad condition. Restoring these to reasonable standards would cost between \$550 million and \$800 million. In addition, the department lacks secure, long-term funding for many current programs and services.

The audit noted that PP&R failed to implement systematic cost-saving or revenue-generating strategies, leaving decision-makers without the information necessary to sustain fiscal health. “With long-term uncertainty, Portlanders may approach every budget cycle worried that their favorite local park, community center or program is under threat,” the auditor wrote.

In November 2025, [voters approved a ballot measure to increase property taxes for park maintenance](#). Although 56% of voters supported the 75% levy increase to prevent slashing the operations budget by as much as half, only \$2

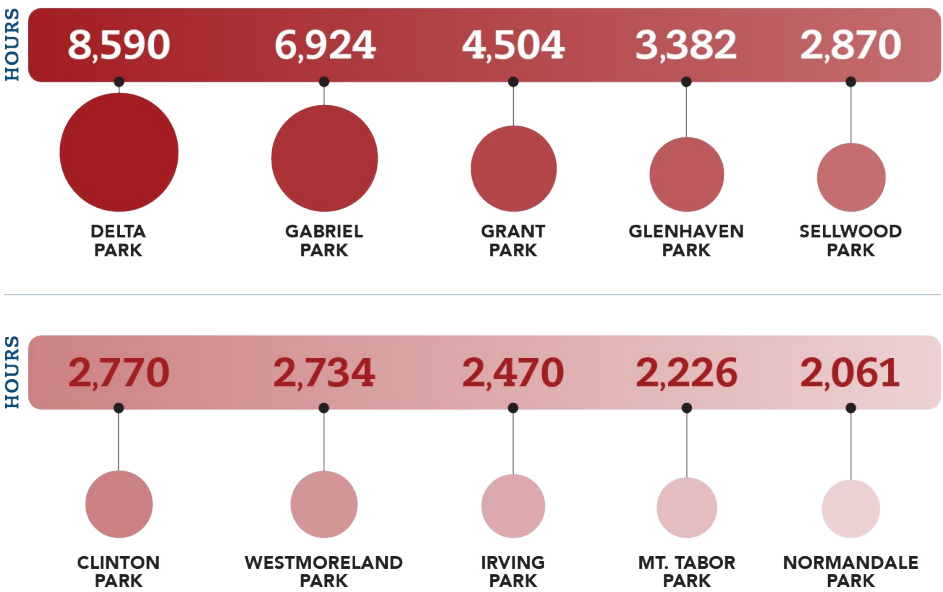
million from this new revenue was earmarked for the maintenance backlog. PP&R manages 156 parks, 12 community centers and 11 pools; the department expects to finalize a fiscal sustainability plan by June 2028.

Audit findings also suggest that ad hoc decisions can impact PP&R’s stability. For instance, the former mayor supported and funded a skate park and pickleball project intended to help address camping concerns. The project moved forward without formal approval from the parks director and introduced long-term maintenance responsibilities that were not included in the budget. A parks manager noted that dedicated funding is not currently available for capital projects, in part because previous city councils had waived policies that would have set aside infrastructure revenue for those purposes.

Youth sports providers identify exclusionary field permitting as their primary challenge — a reality PP&R acknowledges and has tried addressing. Historical permitting policies favor established organizations, marginalizing new and diverse groups.



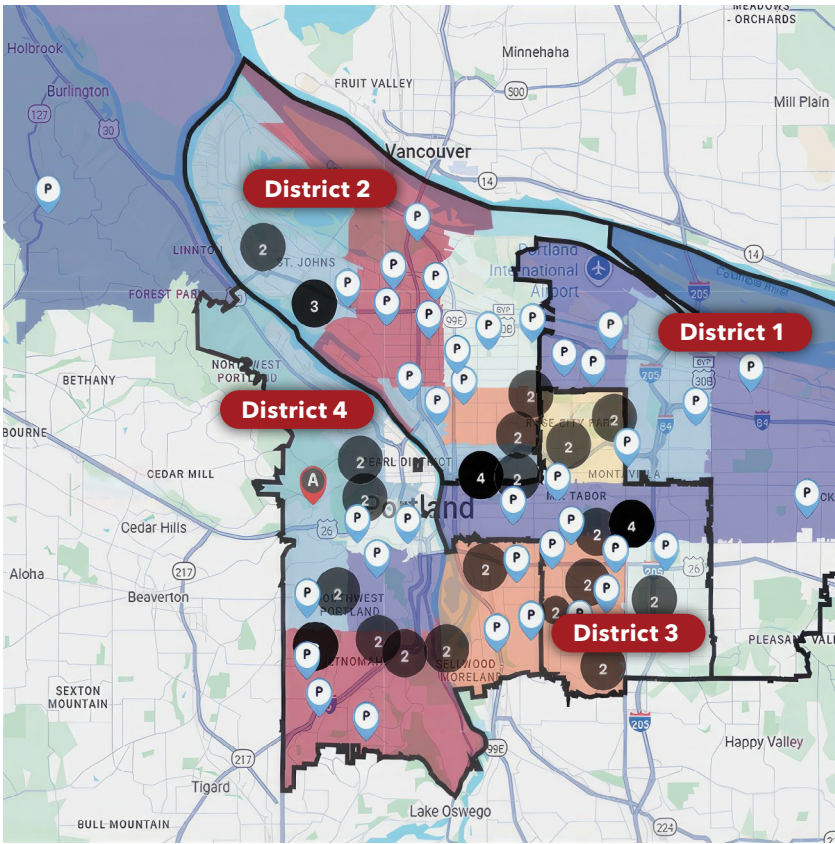
Top 10 Most-Used Portland Parks by Youth, 2024



Note: Portland Parks & Recreation permitted 88 parks, schools and other spaces for youth usage in 2024. This chart reflects only spaces with more than 2,000 permit hours.

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of 2024 permit hours provided by Portland Parks & Recreation.

District 1 Has Lower Portland Parks & Recreation Youth Permit Hours



Permit Hours

10.2K - 12.9K	
7.24K - 10.2K	
2.52K - 7.24K	
1.62K - 2.52K	
763 - 1.62K	
0 - 763	

Note: Black and white circles both indicate park locations. District 1 is home to the highest number of children and lowest household incomes. Portland Parks & Recreation said the topography makes it challenging to build new sports fields in that area. The data on this map for District 1 only allocates youth permit hours assigned by Portland Parks & Recreation. It does not include separate field usage utilized by Parkrose, David Douglas and Centennial school districts.

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of 2024 permit hours provided by Portland Parks & Recreation and mapped by Kinetica.

Permitting Dynamics and Shared-Use Agreements

As of early 2026, PP&R policy prioritized space for its own programs first, followed by Portland Public Schools (PPS). PPS accounted for 32% of youth permit hours in 2024, the highest usage of any organization, an Aspen Institute analysis of PP&R data found. Some community members complain that fields go underused earlier in the day while community and travel sports games get pushed late into the evening. General public use of school fields is on school days from 6 to 9 p.m. While schools are generally open for community use at 6 p.m. on weekdays, weekend access depends on custodial availability.

PPS manages its facilities through Facilitron, an online platform launched in 2024, prioritizing school-sponsored activities and city programs before general community groups. High school fields are mostly used by PPS high school activities, and elementary and middle schools are mostly used by PP&R, which then sub-permit to the general public. Fees vary by user tier and facility type. Youth nonprofits pay approximately \$25 to \$40 per hour for synthetic turf fields without lights, significantly less than the \$110 commercial rate. Grass fields cost youth nonprofits \$8 to \$15 per hour compared to \$65 for commercial entities. Technology and custodial fees may also apply.

The three-year shared-use agreement for facility use between PP&R and PPS expired in May 2025. They are looking to establish a pay-per-hour model for facility and field usage moving forward. PP&R also manages agreements with leagues and tournaments, aiming for accessibility goals that support low-cost programs. Remaining slots go to historical users — groups holding permits for at least two consecutive years.

Delta Park, located in District 2, is Portland's largest public municipal sports complex, featuring nine



soccer fields (five grass, four turf), seven softball fields and six sand volleyball courts. It is the city's most in-demand outdoor youth sports venue.

Synthetic and lighted fields generate 60% to 70% of PP&R athletic permit revenue, totaling \$700,000 to \$900,000 annually. Hourly rates for turf are \$73.50 for youth nonprofits, \$99 for adults and \$142.50 for commercial entities. High-revenue organizations navigate this system more effectively; three of the top four soccer clubs using Delta Park the most in 2024 (United PDX, Portland City United, Columbia Premier SC) reported annual revenues exceeding \$2.6 million. Smaller clubs using other fields reported revenues between \$303,000 and \$736,000.



Top Youth Permit Hours at Delta Park by Organization

2024 HOURS	% OF ALL PP&R HOURS AT DELTA PARK
1,256 93% Saints Soccer Academy	689 100% Oregon Youth Soccer Association
896 90% United PDX	535 79% Portland City United
892 100% Portland Metro Softball Association	513 100% Columbia Premier SC
819 3% Portland Public Schools	437 7% Portland Youth Soccer Association

Note: % of All PP&R hours at Delta Park only reflects an organization's usage of Portland Parks & Recreation facilities. Some organizations also utilize time at non-PP&R facilities.

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of Portland Parks & Recreation 2024 youth permit hours

6

Portland strives to engage youth with disabilities in play, but families wish their children felt less isolated in sports.

Experiences for students with disabilities vary widely in Portland, which generally embraces adaptive sports opportunities. Move United ranks Oregon among the top 10 states for adaptive sports, bolstered by many options in Portland. Organizations like Adaptive Sports Northwest (ASNW), Special Olympics Oregon, Bustin' Barriers and Oregon Adaptive Sports offer sports for children and adults with physical and intellectual disabilities. Portland Parks and Recreation partners with ASNW to offer wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, power soccer, pickleball and bocce. The parks department features six inclusive playgrounds and eight parks with accessible features.

Parents of children with disabilities with whom the Aspen Institute spoke praised how comprehensive the adaptive sports environment is in Portland. Some families explicitly choose to move or remain in Portland because of the quality of local medical care, supportive Oregon state funding that creates a reliable health safety net, and supportive adaptive sports opportunities.

But parents and children also reported being initially unaware of adaptive sports opportunities. One mother described information as “haphazard” and siloed across pockets of the community. Access relies heavily on word-of-mouth, medical provider recommendations or targeted hospital newsletters. Once a family successfully plugs into the disability community, resources flow more freely, but the initial phase feels insurmountable to many families.

Parents use sports to help children accept their physical realities, build long-term physical

durability and discover a sense of identity among peers with similar lived experiences. “Even though the typical sports organization says, ‘We’re welcoming, we want people with disabilities,’ they do not make it easy,” said the mother of a child with a disability. “They don’t do extra things to make the kids with disabilities get recognized for their hard work.”

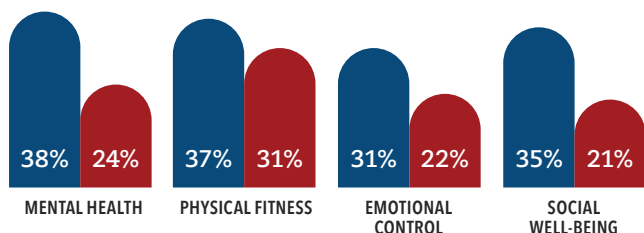
While individual physical education teachers can be well-meaning, parents and children said school districts are typically reactive rather than proactive. They wish there was greater intentionality about the needs of children with disabilities built into PE and other organized sports activities at schools.

National research by the Aspen Institute shows children with disabilities participate in sports nearly one month less annually than their peers. Lack of play can be impactful — parents of children with disabilities are more likely to believe their child’s health worsened when not regularly playing sports.

Portland benefits from local organizations like ASNW, which loans and rents equipment so athletes can try sports like wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, goalball, power soccer, swimming, track and field, sit volleyball, pickleball, archery and cycling. Lacking a dedicated gym, ASNW relies on regional partnerships for facilities. ASNW Executive Director Jen Armbruster, a Paralympic gold medalist, notes that families often don’t know these programs exist and schools often fail to realize how easily sports can be modified for inclusion in PE.

Child's Health Worsens When Not Regularly Playing Sports

Decrease "Greatly" or "Somewhat"



Source: 2025 Youth Sports Parent Survey, Aspen Institute Project Play initiative, Utah State University Families in Sport Lab, Louisiana Tech University Minds in Motion Lab

Jamaal Goodlow, a Unified basketball coach at Parkrose High School, advocates for comprehensive programs from elementary through high school. Unified sports pair students with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. Goodlow criticizes disability sports access in Portland, grading it a C-minus or D.

As it is for all students, securing gym space is a major challenge in schools for students with disabilities. Goodlow gets frustrated that athletic directors often refuse to view Unified as a true varsity sport, prioritizing gym time for other teams. Despite this, Goodlow's adaptive physical education students all joined the 2025 Unified team, which drew crowds larger than some junior varsity games.

"Playing on the (Unified) team gives the athletes so much pride and makes them feel like they are part of a high school program," Goodlow said. "I think it starts with giving them a fun experience in PE that treats them as athletes, and that starts to break down stigmas."

Inclusive PE Modifications

SHAPE America, the voice for more than 200,000 health and physical educational professionals across the U.S., offers the following tips to help PE educators teach students with disabilities. For more detailed information and links to videos,

visit SHAPE America at: blog.shapeamerica.org/2025/02/10-super-simple-equipment-modifications-to-support-your-students-in-pe/

- **Focus on abilities:** Build on what the student can do rather than limitations.
- **Keep it simple:** Use straightforward adaptations to provide effective support.
- **Avoid overmodifying:** Provide just enough support to achieve success while promoting independence.
- **Observe & adjust:** Flexible changes should reflect individual student needs.
- **Involve students:** Let students explore and take ownership of their movement experiences; their input can lead to the most effective and engaging modifications.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

- **Move United Adaptive Sports Curricula for Public Schools:** A free, interactive workbook for pre-K through 6th grade. moveunitedsport.org/app/uploads/2023/07/Adaptive-Sports-Curricula-for-Schools.pdf
- **Adaptive Sports Northwest Athlete Funding Resources:** Information on grants and scholarships for athletes with disabilities. adaptivesportsnw.org/members/resources/
- **Portland Parks & Recreation Adaptive Recreation Program:** Community-based services designed for people with disabilities. portland.gov/parks/recreation/adaptive
- **Access Recreation:** Guidelines for accessible hiking trails and outdoor facilities. accessrecreation.org
- **Harper's Playground:** Sets the standard in Portland for universally accessible, nature-infused playgrounds. harpersplayground.org/playgrounds/harpers-playground/
- **Northwest Wheelchair Tennis Association:** Recreational and competitive play for youth and adults. adaptiveathletics.net/organization/northwest-wheelchair-tennis-association/

Adrian Zeddek, 14

Adrian once felt invisible on the playground, the only child in a wheelchair. Left behind and battling depression, he struggled to accept his reality until his family moved from the East Coast to Portland.

“Kids would previously leave him behind and they didn’t understand him, so he was really wanting to have wheelchair friends,” says Bethany Lilly, Adrian’s mother. “He’s had depression since he was injured as a child and thought he would become all the way better. He didn’t really accept that this is his reality and he needed to find a way to grow into his current ability and body to feel great about himself. It’s pretty tremendous to get him in sports in Portland.”

Now in his second wheelchair racing season, Adrian has found competition, community and the confidence to see himself as an athlete. He humorously claims he is “addicted” to racing to become fast enough to catch the ice cream truck. “I have to be able to catch him somehow,” he says.

In reality, Adrian now dreams of becoming a Paralympian — a significant shift in his mental health. Adrian suffered a spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury at age 4 from a car accident. While living in West Virginia, Adrian’s elementary sports opportunities were nonexistent. He sat on the bleachers during gym while others played because the school offered no adaptive alternatives.

“It’s kind of depressing to just sit around all day and have nothing to do,” Adrian recalls.

Moving to Portland provided better medical care and adaptive sports. Bethany credits Adaptive Sports Northwest for fostering Adrian’s hope. While Benson High School has been a positive experience for Adrian, bureaucratic barriers persist. Despite the school possessing adaptive chairs and employing a PE teacher who also uses a wheelchair, Bethany says the district refused to accept liability for the equipment. Benson’s vice principal personally paid to rent chairs so Adrian could participate safely.

Adrian has discovered a new purpose through sports, inspired by meeting Paralympians and trying hand cycling and adaptive scuba diving. He wishes Portland would create community days for people without disabilities to try adaptive sports and respect the necessary skills.

“You get a lot of attention and pity on what you can’t do,” Adrian says, “so it’s nice to be like, look what I can do.”



7

Physical education is valuable for children, but experiences vary and gaps exist, reflecting uneven resource allocation and curriculum limitations.

Eight in 10 youth surveyed by the Aspen Institute enjoyed their most recent PE class, suggesting school districts successfully provide engaging experiences despite significant challenges. Most survey responses came from Portland Public Schools (PPS) students.

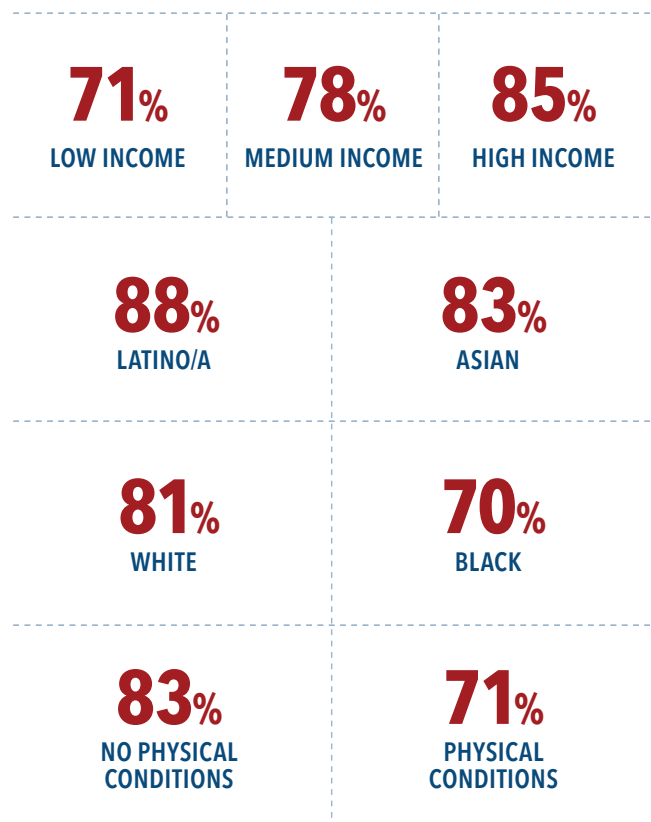
However, disparities exist. Black youth, students from low-income households and children with physical conditions that might impact their ability to play sports reported the highest levels of dislike for PE. These gaps often reflect uneven resource allocation, curriculum limitations and a lack of inclusive environments. Among students who dislike PE, 55% cited a lack of interest in the activities provided.

Oregon law mandates 150 weekly PE minutes for elementary and middle schoolers, with half the time dedicated to moderate-to-vigorous activity. High schoolers must earn one PE credit to graduate. In reality, many districts, including PPS, struggle to meet these standards. Oregon elementary students average 114 minutes of PE per week. PPS elementary students receive 90 minutes with a licensed specialist, while the remaining 60 minutes integrate structured movement through a social-emotional learning curriculum.

In 2024-25, PPS documented challenges in meeting these standards at Cesar Chavez K-8, da Vinci Arts Middle School, George Middle School, Ockley Green Middle School, Metropolitan Learning Center and Winterhaven K-8. The district said all of the schools now meet the standards and are scheduled to receive future facility upgrades.



Youth Who Enjoyed PE Class



Note: "No Physical Conditions" and "Physical Conditions" refers to youth self-identifying if they have any physical conditions that might affect their ability to play sports.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

Many aging Portland-area schools lack adequate gym space, forcing large groups into single gyms or cafeterias doubling as gyms. Several elementary and middle schools now have fitness centers to address increased space needs.

Financial deficits also threaten PE programming. PPS faces a \$56 million budget shortfall for the 2026-27 school year, and its proposed cuts in April 2026 included reducing 254 full-time equivalent positions, 136 of which are for licensed positions, which include teachers. It is not known how PE instruction may be affected.

PPS lost about 13% of student enrollment between the 2018-19 and 2025-26 school years. The significant decline started during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued due to lower birth rates, families moving out of the school district and a shift toward private or homeschooling options. It is an ongoing concern and PPS projects a deficit of more than \$65 million for the 2027-28 school year.

Why Some Youth Don't Like PE

Responses are only from youth who dislike PE.

Not interested in the things we do during PE	55%
Not good enough at the things we do in PE	18%
Friends aren't in my PE class	15%
Things we do in PE are too serious	15%
I don't want to get hurt in PE	13%
The places we have PE are bad quality	8%

Source: : Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.



8

Access to sports is often determined by access to transportation.

Only about half of youth from low-income households in Portland rely on family members for transportation to practices or games, according to the Aspen Institute youth survey. In contrast, youth from higher-income households are far more likely to depend on their parents for rides (62% of middle-income and 77% of high-income youth).

Low-income youth disproportionately use public transit, school buses or walking to reach sports. Racial disparities are equally stark: only 46% of Black youth use family transportation to reach sports. Black youth use public transit

for sports three times more often than White youth, while Latino/a youth use it twice as often. Notably, 7% of physically inactive children cite a total lack of transportation as their primary reason for not participating.

The Portland Bureau of Transportation uses an [Equity Matrix](#) to guide project decisions by measuring race, ethnicity and income across census tracts. While Portland offers affordable options — including the Youth Pass, which provides free TriMet rides (buses, MAX light rail, streetcar) for students — only 8% of Aspen's surveyed youth use public transit for sports.

How Youth Usually Travel to Practices/Games

	LOW INCOME	MEDIUM INCOME	HIGH INCOME
Driven by family member	49%	62%	77%
Driven by someone else/carpooling	23%	29%	40%
Walking	22%	13%	12%
Play at school	19%	10%	7%
School bus	18%	12%	6%
Public transportation	16%	13%	4%
Taxi/Uber/Lyft	6%	3%	<1%

Note: Youth could select up to two responses.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.

This low usage forces parents into Portland's notorious traffic. **ConsumerAffairs ranks Portland's congestion as the seventh worst in the nation.** With a daily average congestion of six hours and 36 minutes (**the fourth highest in the U.S.**) and an average commute of 25 minutes, the “parent-as-Uber” model becomes unsustainable for many families.

Nationally, the average sports parent spends 28 minutes driving their child to and from sports every day there is a practice or game, with parents in homes earning \$100,000 or more spending seven more minutes driving than parents from homes under \$50,000, **according to Aspen Institute research.**

“I’m nothing but an Uber all day long,” said one Portland mother who struggles to drive her children to various activities.

Safety concerns also complicate local access; this mother avoids her neighborhood park in East Portland due to a recent shooting, driving 30 minutes each way to reach safer alternatives. The location where a child lives in Portland dictates their ability to play. Field shortages exacerbate this concern; if local fields are unavailable or unsafe, families must bear the burden of traveling across the city. Some youth with whom we spoke like having the option to take public transportation and feel comfortable using it.

Biking is another transportation option for some children, although only 8% of surveyed youth bike to sports activities. Disparities exist based on socioeconomic, racial and gender differences. High-income youth (56%) are twice as likely as low-income youth (26%) to have biked at least once in the past year, according to Aspen's survey. White (56%) and Asian (53%) children biked at least once, a significantly higher rate than Latino/a (31%) and Black (16%) youth. Girls (51%) utilize bikes more than boys (42%).

The Bike Bus — a group of children cycling together to school guided by parent “drivers” — has become a Portland phenomenon. Led by Sam Balto, a physical education teacher and CEO of Bike Bus World, the movement promotes independent mobility and physical activity. Portland currently hosts 30 regular Bike Buses, more than any other North American city.

In 2025, **Bike Bus PDX received an \$895,000 grant** from the Portland Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund to expand into low-income Title I schools. This funding will create a toolkit, hire new cluster coordinators and study the Bike Bus's impact on long-term transportation behavior.

Using the Bike Bus to reach parks and gyms could normalize cycling for sports travel. Sellwood Community House uses twice-weekly bike buses to transport children to parks for summer programming, including sports activities.

To succeed in under-resourced communities, partners must address bike access, storage and road safety, said Balto, who noted that walking school buses are a good option for families without bikes. “To create a movement, you’ve got to create wins and build momentum to get more people participating and speaking up on those issues.”



9

Children embrace unique and inclusive sports while opportunities grow for sports gaining popularity.



The Aspen Institute has analyzed few U.S. communities with sports and physical activity offerings as diverse as the Portland area. Roughly 25% of surveyed children have tried activities like tennis, bowling, badminton, hiking, pickleball, kickball, table tennis, Gaga ball or jump rope at least once in the past year.

At least half of surveyed girls have tried soccer, biking, volleyball and swimming at least once, but the opportunities to play go well beyond these traditional activities. For example, 17% of surveyed girls have tried skateboarding — a slightly higher percentage than that of boys. In other communities, Aspen rarely sees girls on skateboards more than boys.

Portland girls benefit from Skate Like a Girl (SLAG), a nonprofit that uses skateboarding as a tool to promote confidence, leadership and social justice. Founded in Olympia, Washington, in 2000, it has expanded to major chapters in Portland, Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Their mission is to create an inclusive community where people who have been historically marginalized in skate culture — specifically women and gender-expansive individuals — can feel safe and empowered. Unlike many traditional sports programs that focus solely on technical skill, skate coaches use these themes to teach life lessons about resilience, mutual respect and community advocacy.

Portland's sports options are so diverse that 31% of surveyed girls have tried roller skating at least once. More girls play on organized groups or teams for roller skating than for flag football, golf, lacrosse, wrestling and bowling. Parents in one roller derby program, the Rose City Rollers, told us that the sport also provides a welcoming space for queer and gender-expansive youth.



In our student survey, 3% of respondents identified as nonbinary or gender nonconforming and 1% selected not listed. Local school policies permitting transgender students to compete in alignment with their gender identity have drawn both intense public scrutiny and legal challenges.

While local and national policy debates sometimes focus on gender inclusion in girls' sports, broader participation data reveals a distinct challenge for boys: a lack of variety of sports played. Aspen's survey suggests Portland boys try fewer unique sports options than girls, with boys often congregating to the more traditional sports. There are only two sports (basketball and soccer) that at least half of surveyed boys tried in the past year. One boys' sport with growing momentum is volleyball, a sport traditionally provided mostly to girls.

In the survey, 29% of Portland boys indicated having tried volleyball in the past year.

That is higher than more traditional boys' sports like tackle football, flag football, baseball, track and field, cross country/running, lacrosse and ice hockey. Volleyball participants in the survey are very diverse: 48% Asian, 43% White, 37% Latino/a and 30% Black.

National data shows a 51% increase in high school boys' volleyball participation over a recent six-year period, the fastest-growing sport for boys. Partnerships between the First Point Volleyball Foundation and the American Volleyball Coaches Association helped sanction the sport in new states, including in Oregon high schools in 2025 after a trial period. "Boys' volleyball is vital for underrepresented students, our LGBTQ+ students and athletes who haven't found their home," said Patrick Gibson, a grassroots leader for the sport in Portland. "The research shows we are getting new students into sports through boys' volleyball."

After the sport was sanctioned in 2025, 71 of Oregon's 297 high schools registered for the 2026 season, including David Douglas, Reynolds, Gresham and Barlow high schools within Multnomah County. However, many of the state's largest 6A school districts — including Portland Public Schools (PPS) and Beaverton School District — declined to offer varsity teams in 2026, sparking public efforts to change their position.

PPS maintains boys' volleyball as a club sport, but club teams cannot compete for OSAA state championships. After much public pressure and student advocacy, PPS agreed to organize a separate volleyball season for 14-16 schools in the Portland metro area facing budget concerns. While this will not allow these schools to compete against other teams participating in the official OSAA season, the solution keeps these students' engagement high until PPS and other districts can potentially budget accordingly for volleyball.

In a December 2025 memo, PPS officials cited a \$50 million budget shortfall and a \$400,000 reduction in the athletic budget as the primary reasons for the decision. The Portland Interscholastic League (PIL) requires \$9.5

million to operate but receives only \$8 million from the general fund. Recent cuts eliminated 100 coaching positions, a second-grade swim program, an athletic supervisor position and a program to help underserved students find college sports opportunities.

PPS anticipates future requests for girls' flag football, boys' and girls' lacrosse, and boys' and girls' water polo, "which will further strain our limited resources," PPS officials wrote in the memo. Officials argued that adding boys' volleyball would widen the participation gap between males and females, potentially violating Title IX. While club teams offered to self-fund, PIL policy forbids individual sanctioned teams from fundraising to prevent district-wide inequity.

The Oregon High School Boys Volleyball Association noted that other local districts with budget constraints (Hillsboro and West Linn-Wilsonville) allowed self-funded teams to register for the OSAA season. "This is precisely what we are asking PPS to allow," wrote the volleyball association, which hopes to work with PPS in future years for boys' volleyball to thrive at Portland high schools.

OSAA Volleyball Survey Results

The Oregon High School Boys' Volleyball Association surveyed 650 high school boys' volleyball players in 2025. These are some of the results across Oregon, where participation grew from zero to nearly 1,000 players in four years.

- 60% do not play on a private club team.
- 43% play volleyball as their only high school sport, engaging hundreds of new students.
- Multisport volleyball athletes also play soccer (32%), basketball (31%), football (25%) and track (23%). Boys' volleyball in Oregon is a spring sport, only overlapping with track and field among these sports.
- 40% of players are ethnic minorities.

Jack Coracci, 17

Jack, a senior at Cleveland High School, refused to stay silent when Portland Public Schools declined to offer boys' volleyball as a sanctioned sport. Volleyball has provided Jack with too much — work ethic, leadership skills, positive mental health and vital friendships. He discovered the sport after leaving soccer and track and field at a younger age when the competitive skill gap grew too wide for him to continue.

So in November 2025, Jack and fellow club players attended a school board meeting to advocate for their community.

"It's hard to explain how important this sport and community is to so many people (across the school district)," Jack passionately concluded, drawing applause from some board members. "But it's really not just about us right now. There are so many kids that will try volleyball and fall in love, just like I did, so to strip that opportunity away from them is disheartening. It's hard to think about. All we want to do is play, so let us play."

Jack later explained that he wanted to compete with "my guys" one last time for a shot at a state championship — a goal currently impossible for a club team. He understands the struggle boys face finding organized teams due to frequent roster cuts. Primarily, Jack wanted adults to hear him. The players felt disrespected after learning of the district's decision through rumors rather than direct, official conversation.

"It felt good to kind of express my feelings to a large group of people, and have it be official," he says. "You know, have them

actually listening to me and maybe taking in what I have to say."

Project Play's top strategy to increase participation is "Ask Kids What They Want." Jack highlights a simple, vital concept adults often ignore: high-quality youth sports systems must center youth voices at every stage.

Jack began playing as a freshman after a friend invited him to join Cleveland's club team. He immediately embraced how personal effort — rather than physical height like in basketball — determines volleyball success. Volleyball also taught him significant lessons about leadership and empathy.

"I was put into a leadership position for my team where I had never been this leader of a group of guys my age," he says. "It was enlightening. It helped me kind of understand the way other guys think about their lives and that helped me a lot."



10

Many coaches feel burned out and lack ongoing development.

In 2025, veteran coaches from the Gresham-Barlow School District met with the Aspen Institute to discuss what coaching is like today. These lifers coach out of a love for their community, yet they face a landscape that has changed fundamentally. Coaches report dwindling community connection and lower participation in sports, especially in contact sports like football and wrestling.

Most significantly, these self-described “old-school” coaches struggle to relate to children tethered to technology. They observe that immediate digital reward cycles make the long-term grind of sports unappealing to youth. One coach noted, “A lot of these kids, if it’s not immediate, ‘I’m not doing it, bro.’” Another highlighted the toxic pressure of the internet: “I think they are terrified of doing something where somebody could see them in a nonperfect moment.”

Some good news about local coaching: 90% of surveyed youth feel their coach cares for them

as a person. (Note: The majority of survey responses came from Portland Public Schools.) Still, representation in coaching remains a gap. Latino/a youth are twice as likely as White youth to lack a coach who looks like them.

In Aspen’s conversations with Gresham-Barlow coaches, they expressed a strong desire for training beyond existing resources so they feel motivated to continue coaching. They want to keep coaching, but not if they can’t better connect with children while facing other challenges — low coaching stipends, lenient transfer rules that drain talent from low-income schools, poor parent behavior and conflicting child schedules between club and high school sports.

One coach summarized the need for holistic training this way: “You’ve got a youth football coach out there trying to get after it like the old days and the kids are like, ‘I’m going home and never coming back.’ That’s happening a lot right now.”



I Have a Coach Who Looks Like Me

Youth who "Strongly Disagree" or "Disagree"

26%
GIRLS

20%
BOYS

39%
LATINO/A

29%
ASIAN

19%
BLACK

18%
WHITE

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Portland Youth Survey.



Beyond the Scoreboard

Oregon possesses a mentorship framework for coaches. The Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA) adopted [Beyond the Scoreboard](#), an initiative by former athletic directors Tom Bendt and Pete Lukich. They started their work a decade ago to invest in coaches, who they felt were often overlooked by athletic directors focused mainly on logistics.

Recognizing that the existing national training course was often dry, they developed a more engaging Oregon-specific course for coaches. Beyond the Scoreboard's two-hour course through 3D Institute is mandatory for all first-year coaches. Funded by the OSAA Foundation, Beyond the Scoreboard annually targets a new set of schools of varying sizes and locations across the state for this additional support.

- **Mandatory training:** All first-year coaches must complete a two-hour 3D Institute course.
- **Summits:** Coaches engage in three-hour, in-person discussions regarding topics such as psychology, mental health and capturing athletes' hearts and self-worth.
- **Culture building:** Athletic directors (ADs) act as "state ambassadors," developing core values and intentional leadership rather than simply being managers of their departments.

Bendt and Lukich note that schools face challenges to continue the long-term follow-up after the initial pilot year, but some continue to do excellent work. As of 2025, two Portland-area high schools had participated (Ida B. Wells and Centennial). More local high schools could pursue pilot opportunities. In addition, Bendt and Lukich encourage schools to take these steps:

- **Identify champions:** ADs cannot do it themselves and must find coaches to lead cultural shifts.
- **Form executive boards:** Create coach-led groups to align schoolwide standards and meet regularly.
- **Engage decision-makers:** Persuade superintendents and school boards to fund professional development despite budget deficits.

Community Organization Profiles

Many organizations in Portland are successfully navigating systemic hurdles with innovative models based on the needs of children and families. Here are some examples.

ERASE THE GAP

In recent years, Portland Community Football Club, with support from groups like Active Children Portland and other local youth nonprofits, have discussed building a local youth sports coalition focused on equity. Their efforts bring together community leaders and public servants to challenge the “pay-to-play” status quo.

In 2025, PCFC hosted the second annual “Erase the Gap” event, which featured speakers such as State Representative Travis Nelson, People of Color Outdoors Executive Director Pamela Slaughter and representatives from the Portland Thorns, Friends of Baseball, Active Children Portland and North Portland Soccer Club. The event focused on access, belonging and systemic opportunities by promoting sports as a valuable tool to improve community health.

Active Children Portland has provided free afterschool programming for the past 15 years, largely in Title I and east Portland schools. Active Children Portland serves K-8th graders with a mix of academic and athletic offerings, like soccer and basketball, using paid coach-mentors at schools sites and collaboration with other youth-serving organizations.

Coalition building is difficult to start and sustain. PCFC Interim Executive Director Jerika Ferguson hopes that a dedicated entity will carry the administrative burden of organizing these coalitions rather than placing the labor on smaller nonprofits, like PCFC. However, Ferguson notes that these nonprofits should be asked and welcomed to join a coalition at the beginning.

EXTRA INNINGS

Extra Innings, a free summer baseball league serving under-resourced children, launched in 2024 in the historically Black Albina neighborhood. It is part of community-led efforts to invest in Albina in ways that honor Albina’s history and support Black residents’ ongoing presence.

The goal for Extra Innings: increase the number of Black children ages 13-14 playing baseball and softball. Aspen’s survey of Portland-area youth found that Black children are half as likely as White and Latino/a youth to have ever tried baseball.

Extra Innings participation grew from 70 to almost 500 children in the first three years. About 70% to 80% of the participants are youth of color — Black, Latino/a, Pacific Islander and Native American. Many had never tried organized baseball and needed to first learn how to play catch.

Led by Dave Gunderson and Gerald Bolden, the league’s success is rooted in its barrier-free philosophy. They use rolling registration, meaning a child can join the league at any time without the hurdle of complex paperwork or proof-of-income requirements. By operating during the summer months, from June through August, they avoid Portland’s rainy season, which often forces other leagues to cancel games.

This simple shift in scheduling helps children get the repetitions they need to fall in love with the game. Extra Innings demonstrates that by removing administrative friction and providing free equipment, traditional barrier sports like baseball can become inclusive again.

LEARN MORE

Active Children Portland: acportland.org

Extra Innings: extrainningspdx.org

Portland Community Football Club: pcfc.co

Portland Tennis & Education: ptande.org

Y.O.U.TH: youthpdx.org

PORTLAND COMMUNITY FOOTBALL CLUB (PCFC)

Community-rooted models like PCFC reflect how many families have always organized sports: collectively, flexibly and with mutual care for children. This stands in stark contrast to the premier club model, which represents a market-driven approach.

PCFC serves a population where up to 90% of players are not White and 70% receive free or reduced-price lunch. PCFC makes participation entirely free. Instead of tryouts, PCFC uses a skill-based evaluation during practices. Kids start playing in their age group, and based on skill demonstrated over time, get sorted into competitive or developmental teams. Players can move between these levels. PCFC advocates on behalf of skilled players to try out for larger clubs, if they so choose, but there's an open-door environment and players often return to hang out or play with their siblings. The club funds its operations through grants, donations and sponsorships and treats soccer as a mechanism for family stability. Its most impactful innovation is the integration of wraparound services. PCFC operates a monthly food pantry, uniquely open between 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. to accommodate working parents, so that families don't have to choose between a child's practice and a nutritious meal. "Food is actually more important than play right now," PCFC Interim Executive Director Jerika Ferguson said.

PORTLAND TENNIS & EDUCATION

Founded by Dr. Ernest Hartzog to diversify the exclusive sport of tennis, Portland Tennis & Education (PT&E) has served 18,000 youth over three decades. Tennis is very popular in Portland — 35% of youth surveyed by the Aspen Institute have played the sport at least once, with girls playing slightly more than boys. But local children who are Black (13%) and Latino/a (21%) have tried tennis at much lower rates than those who are White and Asian (44% each).

PT&E is not just a tennis clinic; it is an intensive after-school and summer intervention. Participants receive over 1,000 hours of out-of-school support annually, including one-on-one tutoring and lessons in financial literacy and job interviews. The average child stays for more than five years, according to Campbell Glenn Garonzik, PT&E executive director. In 2026, the U.S.

Tennis Association Foundation recognized PT&E as the National Junior Tennis & Learning Chapter of the Year (out of 272 chapters nationwide).

The financial model of PT&E is particularly noteworthy. PT&E operates out of the city-owned St. Johns Racquet Center, and revenue from public court rentals and adult classes directly subsidizes the tuition-free youth program. This creates a sustainable social enterprise model where affluent recreational players directly fund opportunities for underserved youth. The results speak for themselves: PT&E maintains a 100% on-time high school graduation rate for its long-term participants (the 2025 graduation rate in Portland Public Schools was 83%).

Y.O.U.TH

Y.O.U.TH motivates, inspires and empowers youth, family and educators to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, using sports as one tool to do so. Imani Muhammad, the organization's founder, recognized that for many Black youth, sports must be part of a larger safety net. Basketball serves as an entry point, but the program's core is literacy, academic support and responsive programming.

Children from Y.O.U.TH with whom we spoke described Muhammad as more patient and understanding than many coaches. "Instead of yelling at kids or being rude, 'Oh, you can't do this, you need to go faster, you need to work out more, you're not in shape,' be more comforting like [Muhammad]," said one child. "Like, sit down and talk to them and don't yell at them."

Because many participants attend predominantly White schools, the basketball court represents one of the few spaces where they can fully embrace their cultural and personal identities. Mothers of participants report that they intentionally choose Y.O.U.TH over other programs to protect their children from the scrutiny and racism they face in mainstream sports environments.

"Their peers don't even have a clue about [the racism experienced] and don't understand, but it's like our kids have this extra layer they deal with," said a mom. "When we go places, we have to be cautious and we have to tell our kids, 'You've got to represent because they're looking at you. They're looking at everything you do.' And that's a lot."

Recommendations

The Aspen Institute developed five ideas for Portland to address the structural economic and racial inequities highlighted in this report. These are systemic issues that can be addressed through collaboration, permitting, coach development and repositioning the value of recess and physical education.

1 Collaborate to Create Structural Change

There is no one-size-fits-all way to collaborate and and expand sports and physical activity access for children. Collaboration requires flexibility. Different communities possess unique needs and capacities and connecting silos is not easy.

Find common goals and language. Listen to the community. Start small and celebrate wins as they come. Here are ways Portland community members could work together.

EXPLORE BUILDING A COALITION

Community-based collaborative approaches leverage the talents, resources and perspectives of diverse organizations and individuals to address large-scale, complex social challenges. One type of collaboration is the coalition. Research suggests that backbone organizations can help organizations work together more effectively and achieve collective goals by providing dedicated infrastructure and specialized leadership to maintain long-term alignment across sectors.



But coalitions are not easy. Local leaders could research if a coalition in Portland would add net value without pulling away limited funding from the community. The Coalitions for Sport Equity (CSEq) is a group of regionally based coalitions focused on systemic change toward sports, physical activity and play equity for youth. CSEq partnered with Temple University to explore the characteristics of coalitions that are important for the sustainability of creating systems change in youth sports, physical activity and play. Some key findings:

- **Productivity grounded in equity:** Contrary to common assumptions, equity and productivity are mutually reinforcing. Trust-based, inclusive processes are associated with enhanced perceptions of productivity.
- **Managing collaboration is complex:** Collaboration extends beyond logistics and coordination to deep relationship management. Backbones invest significant time in building trust, communication and cohesion among members.
- **Progress through practice:** Coalitions emphasize equity through shared leadership and community representation, but leaders acknowledge ongoing gaps between intention and practice. Action remains critical.
- **Importance of funding:** Funding is foundational to coalition effectiveness. Backbones need stable, long-term funding to build momentum and pursue systems change, while funding opportunities strongly incentivize member participation.

- **Linking measurement to funding:** Shared measurement is widely viewed as essential for demonstrating impact and securing funding, yet it remains underdeveloped in most coalitions. Capacity constraints and competing evaluation systems slow progress toward common metrics.
- **Balancing services with advocacy:** Coalitions face ongoing tension between delivering immediate services to members and pursuing longer-term advocacy and policy change. Time and capacity constraints often push advocacy efforts to the margins.

Read the full research:

coalitionsforsportequity.org/research#/findings

RESOURCES FOR COALITIONS

The **MOVE Fund**, a coalition of funders, practitioners and thought leaders, came together to establish a five-year initiative that supports efforts across the U.S. to advance collective action and systems change at the regional and local levels focused on youth sports, play and movement. Led by the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport and the Play Equity Fund, the five-year initiative has multiple funders, including Nike.

The MOVE Fund supports coalitions and collectives that advocate for public and private investment in sport and play, build the capacity of sport-based youth development organizations and create a local sports system in their regions that is equitable, positive and inclusive. Among the 2026 MOVE Fund grantees is the **Salem Youth Sports Alliance** in Salem, Oregon. The alliance helps connect local children with sports opportunities that fit their interests and families' price and commitment level.



EXAMPLES OF CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Issue-focused coalitions (Washington):

The King County Play Equity Coalition, funded largely by Seattle's professional sports franchises, utilizes specialized "action teams."

These committees focus on shared learning and specific hurdles such as facilities, outdoor education, swim equity and soccer access. Its advocacy team sets the legislative agenda and coordinates directly with state lawmakers.

Relationship-building conferences (New Jersey):

The inaugural 2025 New Jersey Youth Sports Conference, organized by the New Jersey Devils Youth Foundation, united the state's six professional teams with parks departments and nonprofit operators. The event successfully identified shared challenges in youth sports and next steps toward state-level alignment.

Local government advisory groups (Virginia):

Since the 1970s, the Fairfax County Athletic Council has advised the Board of Supervisors and school district on sports matters. This 23-member council — comprising grassroots sports representatives and government authorities — balances competing interests regarding issues such as field permits and facility costs. Learn more about local youth sports governance models: projectplay.org/news/2024/4/30/three-models-for-local-youth-sports-governance

Centralized state commissions (Illinois): In 2025, Illinois established the nation's first statewide commission dedicated to youth sports equity with support from Laureus Sport for Good USA. This commission evaluates community feedback to make sustainable recommendations for integrating positive youth development into sports. Similarly, California invested \$4 million in 2026 to establish a statewide youth sports commission under the California Health and Human Services Agency.

State law for mental health training (Ohio):

Since 2023, Ohio state law requires school-based coaches to complete a mental health training course approved by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Coaches learn how to recognize signs of athletes' anxiety and depression, understand risk factors for suicide, and provide proper referrals for professional help. The effort started as a voluntary initiative by Coach Beyond, a collaborative effort between Ohio State University's LiFEsports program and the Ohio High School Athletic Association. Training has also expanded to community youth sports teams.

SHARED CRITERIA FOR GRANTMAKING

Shared language is essential for unifying resources within communities. One example is the **Children's Bill of Rights in Sports**, developed by the Aspen Institute and a group of policy experts. It serves as a guiding framework. This document outlines eight principles rooted in human rights so that all youth have the opportunity to develop as people through sports.

Major organizations, including the U.S. Conference of Mayors, National League of Cities and National Recreation and Park Association, have adopted these principles. Cities such as Boston, Houston, Kansas City and Tacoma, Washington, have endorsed the Bill of Rights. Funders increasingly use these principles to evaluate grant applications, looking for evidence of safeguarding policies and inclusive coaching strategies. Local providers such as i9 Sports use the Bill of Rights as a filter, checking every new rule against these eight principles before implementation.

Portland's sports providers and municipalities could adopt this framework or find other common language to guide future collective actions that signal quality to the public. The PLAYS Coalition, Coalitions for Sport Equity and MOVE Fund also offer valuable structures.

2 Leverage the Power of the Permit to Level the Playing Field

Parks and recreation departments are the largest providers of public sports facilities, giving them the opportunity to use “the power of the permit” to disrupt historical inequities. Rather than automatically renewing existing leagues indefinitely, some agencies across the U.S. prioritize safety, low-cost recreation and local nonprofits that bridge equity gaps. It is a goal shared by Portland Parks & Recreation (PP&R) if it had more capacity to do so, a common challenge in the U.S.

While 73% of park and recreation agencies nationally believe establishing fair permitting practices is critical, only 30% apply values-aligned permitting fee structures that prioritize serving local residents and low-income youth ahead of non-residents and well-resourced travel leagues, according to a survey by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). More than half of the agencies charge the same rate to all third-party leagues and fewer than half require third-party leagues using facilities to train coaches.

PP&R permit terms for its facilities currently include these safety and operational requirements:

- **Background checks:** The city encourages volunteer screening and requires a “Youth Safety Plan.” City-run leagues such as Goldenball mandate explicit background checks.
- **Concussion safety:** Organizations must attest to compliance with Oregon law, including annual education for coaches, players and parents.
- **Abuse prevention:** Permits require liability insurance (\$1 million to \$2 million) that specifically includes covering sexual abuse and molestation.

PP&R wants to eliminate historical usage as a priority factor but says this requires better data and enough staff capacity. The department faces a 10% budget cut in 2026-27, roughly \$60



million less than the previous year, including maintenance cuts, reduced hours for community centers and potential layoffs.

In recent years, PP&R switched to a new web-based application system from handwritten PDF forms, allowing staff to capture demand data and identify discrepancies. This data could help create access for underrepresented groups, such as girls and children of color, rather than allowing established groups to dominate premier fields.

To manage Delta Park’s high demand, PP&R implemented a lottery system for softball fields and may consider one for soccer. Potential ideas include capping the percentage of hours a single soccer club can book at Delta Park. Enforcing new rules will be challenging due to staffing cuts. About seven years ago, PP&R reduced permit costs for high-need areas, but a lack of vetting led to fake addresses from ineligible organizations. Prime fields were used by organizations that should not have been eligible.

If PP&R builds the capacity to analyze permit data and enforce inclusive policies, what are now administrative tasks can become tools for social change. The National Recreation and Park Association's **Youth Sports Framework** recommends to:

- **Prioritize access:** Give permitting preference to programs that serve youth with barriers (such as low income, a disability or a lack of transportation).
- **Require data:** Mandate that leagues collecting permits submit demographic data (like zip code) on their participants. This allows the parks department to see if the leagues using public land actually reflect the community's demographics.
- **Enforce standards:** Use the permit to enforce safety and quality standards, such as requiring abuse prevention training or specific coach certifications.
- **Include flexible fee structures:** Structure fees to go beyond market rate by offering sliding scales or waivers for organizations serving low-income youth.
- **Understand the barriers:** Conduct assessments to find out why certain kids aren't playing. Is it due to cost? Location? Lack of culturally relevant sports? Then adjust permitting to encourage organizations that solve those specific problems.

PP&R does not have a single consolidated written policy that codifies all of these concepts within the athletic permitting system. Officials say elements of these goals are implemented through programs, fee structures and permit conditions.

PP&R faces challenges addressing most of these areas, especially prioritizing access and understanding the barriers. The permitting process is often cumbersome, costly and reliant on personal relationships. While these



relationships occasionally help underrepresented youth, lasting change requires bold leadership. Building staff capacity or using technology to analyze online application data could be a significant step toward meeting NRPA standards.

INCLUSIVE PERMIT MODELS IN OTHER U.S. CITIES

- **King County, Washington:** A facility fee assistance program waives user fees for organizations serving communities at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- **Washington, D.C.:** Proposed legislation would grant higher permitting priority to inclusive, no-cut youth sports leagues that provide fee waivers for low-income families.

- **Durham, North Carolina:** Low-resource organizations can apply for full or partial permit waivers if their programs align with the parks department's mission and benefit the community.
- **San Francisco:** The city's parks department monitors "equity zones" — neighborhoods with historical environmental and health burdens — and prioritizes programming in these areas to prevent organized sports from clustering only in wealthy neighborhoods.

3 Cultivate a Coach Development System

The next frontier to educate youth and high school coaches requires continuous cycles of development so coaches feel supported, engage with peers and receive investment in their growth. Coaches need and want more than "check-the-box" training. Well-trained coaches improve experiences for children, parents and communities, yet current standards nationally and locally remain inconsistent. Some Portland sports providers offer coaches no training at all.

The Million Coaches Challenge (MCC), a national cohort of partners training coaches in evidence-based youth development practices, offers a shared vision for a generation of coaches. Portland leaders can adopt this framework to:

- **Elevate coaching:** Position coaching as vital community support.
- **Prioritize well-being:** Train coaches to support emotional and social growth.
- **Increase representation:** Recruit diverse coaches who understand their athletes' lived experiences.
- **Improve retention:** Make coaching enjoyable and sustainable so coaches want to stay longer, resulting in a more consistent sports experience.

MCC's playbook offers tips and can be found at millioncoaches.org/calls-to-action/.



1. **Build buy-in for training among organizational leaders.** Convince organizations that coaches make or break the athletes' experience, but many coaches feel unprepared.
2. **Reframe training as a benefit.** Position education as a perk that builds confidence and connection with children, reinforcing that coaches are not in this alone.
3. **Prioritize sustainability of training programs.** Budget for development and invest in learning management systems that stay relevant since coach training programs should be built to last.
4. **Create recommendations for continued coach education.** Offer flexible pathways from seasoned volunteers to career professionals; training should be offered in a variety of formats to meet different coaching populations and needs.

Technology should also play a role in training coaches, especially to help volunteer parent coaches with little time or expertise. “Sports governing bodies like U.S. Soccer, USA Lacrosse, USA Basketball and organizations like the NBA have already developed detailed player development frameworks,” wrote **Travis Roache**, a lacrosse coach who studies how artificial intelligence can help coaches. “Unfortunately, these resources often sit idle as static PDFs or blogs instead of interactive, personalized guides. AI can now transform them into adaptive coaching companions that walk parents step by step through practice planning, skill assessment and athlete development.”

We all want a youth sports system that puts children’s physical, emotional, mental and social well-being first while teaching age-appropriate sports skills. That means continued coach development must be a priority.

4 Position Recess and PE as Tools for Physical Literacy and Academic Benefits

Portland children are less physically active than the national average. One of the few settings in Portland best positioned to change that is schools through robust recess and PE programs. However, amid school budget cuts and educators’ drive for highest test scores, it is important that local leaders understand the value of children moving their bodies during the school day and invest in these activities.

Research shows that physically active children are less likely to be obese, more likely to score higher on academic tests and attend college, report lower levels of depression, exhibit higher self-esteem, reduce their risk of future disease, and experience fewer long-term health costs. We also know that communities thrive when they promote policies and develop infrastructure that encourage sports and recreation.



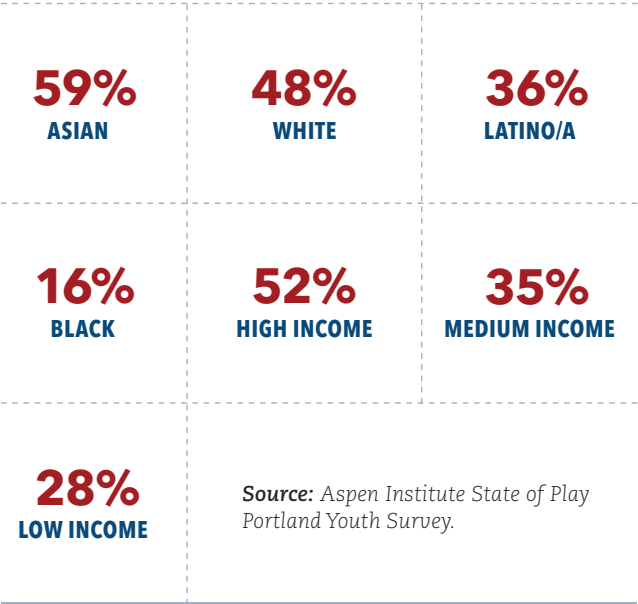
Childhood obesity rates in Portland have gradually increased over the past decade, mirroring broader national shifts. In 2024, 30% of Portland students in eighth and 11th grades were classified as overweight or obese, up from 25% in 2015, according to the Oregon Student Health Survey. Latino/a, American Indian and Alaska Native students experience obesity rates almost two times higher than their White peers. Children in East Portland and East Multnomah County school districts face obesity rates nearly double those of students in the West Hills, according to research from the Healthy Columbia Willamette Collaborative.

RECESS

For the first time in 13 years, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) **released new guidance in 2026 about protecting recess** for children of all ages. This comes after years of shrinking recesses and worsening children’s health. Since the mid-2000s, up to 40% of school districts nationally have reduced or eliminated recess, **The Associated Press reported**. Researchers have long asserted that children need pauses between learning so their brains can hold the information, and recess also gives students of all ages a chance to navigate relationships and build confidence.

“A quality recess will reestablish mental equilibrium and focus, a need of every student, kindergarten through 12th grade, every day,” the AAP wrote in its updated policy statement. “As such, recess should be a protected block in the daily schedule and be considered a student’s personal time. Recess should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons. Pediatricians and their AAP chapters should press for state laws protecting equal access to daily recess and educate parents to advocate for the benefits of recess for all children and adolescents.”

Surveyed Portland Youth
with 5 PE Classes Per Week



Portland Public Schools (PPS) requires a minimum of 35 minutes of daily recess, and its wellness policy prohibits withholding recess as a form of discipline. Not all districts embrace recess. Efforts in 2025 to pass a state law requiring at least 30 minutes of daily recess in Oregon were unsuccessful. Playworks, elementary students and Oregon State Associate Professor William Massey testified in favor of the bill. Massey cited **research showing that recess supports emotional regulation and classroom behavior** without compromising academic outcomes.

The Coalition of Oregon School Administrators and the Oregon School Boards Association urged caution, pointing out that Oregon already requires 150 minutes of weekly PE, expressing concern that a new recess mandate could conflict with instructional-hour accounting, collective bargaining agreements and staffing rules. The committee adjourned without a vote. In retrospect, some supporters of the bill believe they lacked the robust, multisector support necessary to reconcile implementation details.

In contrast, Washington state passed a rigorous recess law by leveraging the King County Play Equity Coalition. This coalition utilized an advocacy action team to drive policy change. The coalition presented local legislators with survey data from 580 parents across 16 counties, showing that 75% of parents felt their children lacked sufficient recess time. Portland leaders could replicate this data-driven advocacy effort to achieve similar policy wins statewide.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Investment in physical education is also crucial. Since 2016, PPS has, on average, increased centralized funding for PE, according to school district officials. PPS is the only local school district to have an administrator dedicated specifically to health and PE. By having this position, PPS has brought in nearly \$8 million in grant funding — mostly for health education but some in support of PE. This allows the district to offer PE and health classes that few Oregon school districts have the capacity to provide.

But challenges exist even within PPS. PE class sizes have increased, making it harder for teachers to engage with students. Professional development sessions for PE teachers are often the first to be canceled or denied altogether. PE teachers want to be seen as actual professionals and worry that the hyperfocus on English language arts and math, to the exclusion of all else, is harming PE.

Students from high-income households are almost twice as likely as low-income students to have PE classes five days per week, according to Aspen's youth survey, which largely came from children in PPS. Disparities in the number of PE classes also exist for Black and Latino/a students. Positive physical education experiences can help children feel welcome in schools and reduce chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason. Oregon's

rate of chronic absenteeism in public schools (33%) is one of the highest in the U.S., according to Department of Education data. Portland Public Schools (33%), David Douglas (35%), Centennial (40%), Gresham-Barlow (40%) and Reynolds (45%) school districts were all at or above the 2024-25 state average for student chronic absenteeism.

Nationally, students at schools with a weak culture of wellness are three times more likely to be frequently or chronically absent than those at schools with a strong culture of wellness, [according to research from GenYouth](#). Belonging, friends and socializing, adult connections and physical activity were the positive student experiences at school that most strongly correlate with attendance, GenYouth reported. Nationally surveyed students said they like socializing with friends during PE class, having enjoyable physical activity opportunities at school, having a caring PE teacher and playing on a school sports team.



Another youth survey report by GenYouth

examined the youth inactivity crisis and the role schools can play in reversing it. One of the key insights is that fun is fundamental to participation in PE. Students want activities that are enjoyable and social. They also seek a judgment-free, supportive environment that meets them where they are in terms of skill level and body confidence.

The way we teach traditional sports in PE needs to change. It is leaving too many children behind who may want physical activity but through different methods and settings. National research by the Aspen Institute, echoed in conversations with some Portland youth, found that traditional sports options are not meeting students' demand. The menu needs to be updated with more casual and fitness-focused activities, such as strength training, biking, skateboarding, dance, yoga and climbing. To continue evolving, PE teachers need more professional development to better support their students and introduce new ways of teaching.

The connection between physical activity and mental health and belonging is clear. The more Portland invests in comprehensive physical activity plans that integrate PE and recess and are linked to academic achievement goals, the healthier children will be.

5 Grow Sports Options Aligned With Youth Interest and Desired Places to Play

Portland youth reported that they largely play sports for social reasons. They want to play with their friends and have fun far more than they want to win or pursue college scholarships. Youth sports providers can improve outcomes by working to understand the needs of children, especially those who are left out or opt out of sports.

Adults should ask them why they play sports and what should change. Children mostly want a space where they can try their best, whether it is traditional sports or nontraditional activities. Here are ways to do this based on feedback gathered from focus groups with children and parents.

INVEST IN FLAG FOOTBALL

Flag football is a rising sport nationally that Portland could build infrastructure around as the sport keeps growing. NFL Flag is offered in the Portland Activities & Athletics League, but there is a major opportunity to further expand the sport. In Aspen's survey, more Portland boys have tried flag football (21%) than tackle football (15%). Black youth in Portland try flag more frequently than tackle — the opposite of many other communities across the U.S.

School Sports Playbook Ideas

The Aspen Institute's "Reimagining School Sports Playbook" has inspired schools across the country to create a more accessible high school sports model. "I utilized the playbook to get ideas for reigniting sports after the pandemic," said Heidi Sipe, past president of Oregon School Activities Association. "It forced us to advocate for new ideas and think about reasons why kids aren't participating that we weren't acknowledging, especially economic issues."

The playbook helped OSAA refine classification criteria for low-income districts. Rather than applying uniform reductions, OSAA adjusted school populations based on the gap between local and state average poverty rates, better addressing the specific challenges of high-poverty areas. Sipe also used the playbook to help OSAA establish cooperative sponsorship policies, helping underfunded communities field individual sports teams and expand student participation.

Read the playbook: as.pn/playbook.

Only 9% of local girls have tried flag football, but exposure is growing. Girls' flag football is currently an Oregon School Activities Association "emerging activity." Barlow High School won the 2025 state championship. National participation among youth ages 6 to 17 grew 14% from 2019 to 2024, while tackle football, soccer and basketball participation declined.

This growth follows heavy investment from the NFL, which provides free equipment and curriculum to many schools. The NFL plans to launch professional flag leagues and debut the sport at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Soon, children will see their idols playing flag and they will envision playing themselves. Will the supply meet this new demand?

EXPAND INTRAMURAL AND CLUB SPORTS AT SCHOOLS

Schools should prioritize intramural and classmate-vs-classmate formats alongside varsity athletics. Interscholastic sports often face a supply crisis: when 80 students try out for a 15-person roster, 65 are left without options. Schools can bridge this gap by using their facilities for no-cut intramural clubs that foster a sense of belonging.

The Portland Interscholastic League (PIL) currently offers a youth program for grades 6-8 using high school clusters. While some sports involve cuts (basketball, volleyball), others such as track and field, cross country, football and wrestling remain open to all. Expanding these options could offset the participation decline typically seen in middle school as travel sports team participation peaks. Schools are a valuable setting to offer sports, and more options would help children who get cut or just want to play with fellow classmates.

IMPLEMENT ROLLING REGISTRATION AMONG NONSCHOLASTIC SPORTS PROVIDERS

Families are often excluded by rigid timing rather than a lack of interest. In Portland, 15% of surveyed youth who have not tried their most-wanted sport say they simply don't know how to sign up. Among those respondents, youth indicated registration is most challenging for archery, flag football, badminton, parkour and volleyball.

Providers can increase participation by making registration flexible throughout the year. The Portland Community Football Club (PCFC) utilizes rolling registration to reach low-income and underserved youth. This open-door policy supports children who need community regardless of the season. While PCFC competes against travel teams and must adhere to certain Oregon Youth Soccer Association timelines, its flexible model identifies overlooked talent and accommodates children who prefer practice over sanctioned games.

Rolling registration does present logistical hurdles. PCFC coaches find attendance difficult to predict, and high demand forced the club to move to paper registration to manage digital literacy issues and document collection (headshots, birth certificates and international clearances). Despite these challenges, Jerika Ferguson, PCFC interim executive director, advocates for the model. "Kids just need to start having fun again," she said. "Let's reduce the amount of organized play. Even within club sports, I think we can make things more chill."

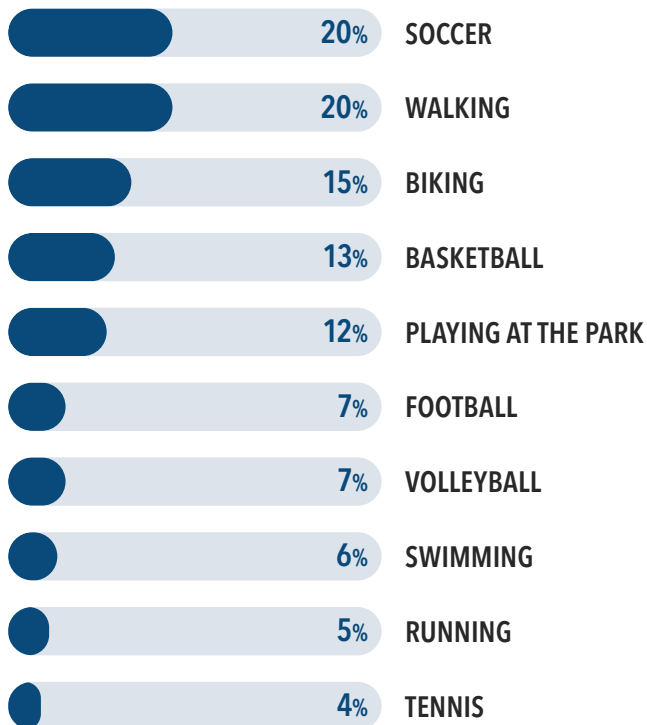
Mapping Stories of Recreation in Beaverton

The Aspen Institute partnered with The Action Mapping Project (AMP) to understand recreation patterns of youth in Beaverton, opportunities to fill gaps in the recreation landscape for youth and the barriers that young people encounter when being active. By working with students in the Beaverton School District, AMP transformed their stories into these core indicators about their recreational experiences:

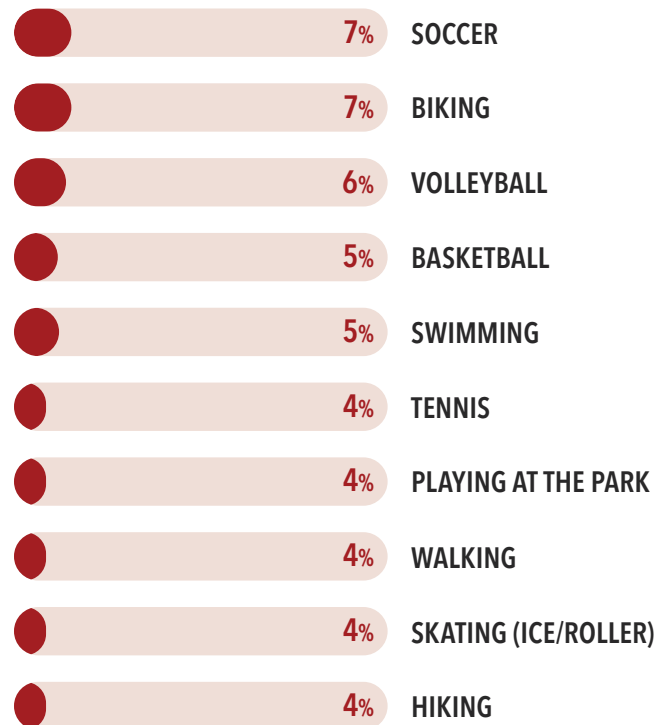
- A sense of play and belonging so youth feel safe while doing the things they love.
- The way youth actively use transportation other than cars, such as walking and biking.
- Potential investments in transportation infrastructure based on youth habits.
- The recreational activities youth have tried and want to try.

Below are some preliminary findings from stories shared by 4,471 middle school and high school students at 15 schools in the Beaverton School District. The full report is available at actionmappingproject.com/region/beaverton.

Top Outdoor/Recreational Activities Tried by Beaverton Youth



Top Outdoor/Recreational Activities Beaverton Youth Want to Try



Source: The Action Mapping Project.

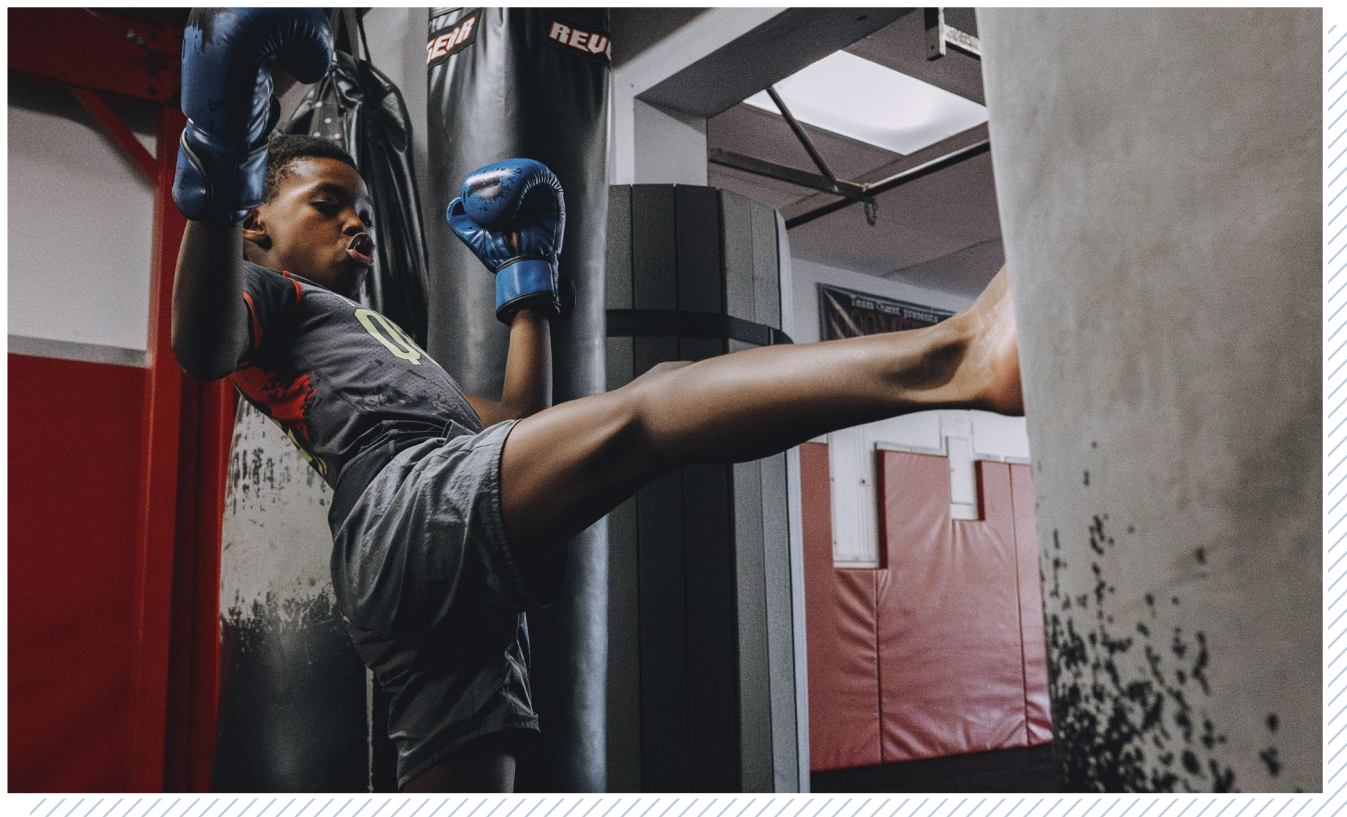
Where the Gaps Exist for Youth Recreation in Beaverton

AMP’s Aspire GAP Index highlights activities that larger numbers of children aspire to try but have not yet had the opportunity to experience. Activities with a positive gap (such as volleyball) have unmet demand, while activities with a negative gap (such as soccer) are approaching saturation.

UNMET DEMAND		LESS DEMAND	
Skating (ice and roller)	2.49	Walking	-7.15
Volleyball	2.37	Soccer	-4.69
Tennis	2.10	Playing at the park	-2.66
Hiking	2.06	Basketball	-2.62
Rock climbing	1.67	Biking	-2.14

Note: The average GAP Index score is 0. More opportunities are expected from investing in activities with a score of at least 1. Fewer opportunities are expected from investing in activities with a score below minus 1.

Source: The Action Mapping Project



CREDITS

The “State of Play Portland” report was written by Jon Solomon, research director of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, with support from Ruby Avila, program associate, and Kaig Lightner, local project consultant. The project was managed by Jennifer Brown Lerner, Sports & Society Program deputy director. Editing was provided by Tom Farrey, Sports & Society Program executive director. Google Gemini provided artificial intelligence copyediting support for this report. Humans reviewed and edited all content. Matthew Kelley and Natalie Jolly produced research from Beaverton. The Hatcher Group designed the report. Nike generously funded the report.

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PHOTOS

Photos in this report were provided by: AC Portland, Adaptive Sports Northwest, Bike Bus, Boys & Girls Club, Elite Sports Academy, Getty Images, Girls on the Run, Girls Rugby, Multnomah Athletic Club, Nike Inc., Oregon Youth Soccer Association, Oregon High School Volleyball Association, Oregon School Activities Association, Playworks, Portland Community Football Club, Portland Parks and Recreation, Portland Tennis & Education Center, Rose City Rollers, Self Enhancement Inc., Skyhawks, Team Quest, Y.O.U.T.H, and Youth on Course.

ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization whose purpose is to ignite human potential to build understanding and create new possibilities for a better world. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve society’s greatest challenges.

AspenInstitute.org

ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops insights, ideas and opportunities to help leaders build healthy communities through sports.

projectplay.org

ABOUT SOCIAL & COMMUNITY IMPACT AT NIKE, INC.

Nike is creating the future of youth sport — by inviting all kids in and making play more accessible, fun and inclusive. The company is teaming up with community organizations, athletes, experts and employees around the world to engage more kids in sport. And because seeing is believing, Nike is increasing opportunities and representation for girls, in particular, so they can fully see themselves in sport. Nike does this by making it easier for kids to participate, shifting perceptions about what sport looks like (so more youth are invited in and off the sidelines), and increasing the number of trained coaches who represent the communities they serve — all with the goal to change the game for kids today and for future generations of youth.

about.nike.com/en/mission/focus-areas/future-of-youth-sport



