

The Aspen Institute's **PROJECT PLAY**

REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORTS IN AMERICA

The Aspen Institute's Project Play Summit 2013 *with Support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

Highlights and Observations

OVERVIEW

The Aspen Institute's Project Play is a thought leadership exercise that aims to provide stakeholders – from parents to policymakers to mayors – with a framework and the tools to build healthy communities through sport activity that meets the needs of all children. The two-year initiative was launched at an April 2013 meeting in Aspen, Colo., that convened 80 high-level leaders for a series of educational and brainstorming sessions. The event included voices from across health, business, academia, sports, media and philanthropy, representing more than 100 million direct constituents and more than 30 million youth athletes.

From barriers to access to promising programs and inspiration for disruptive innovation, the Aspen



Institute's Project Play Summit addressed a range of topics with a group that included, among others: Scott Blackmun, CEO of the United States Olympic Committee; David Drummond, SVP and Chief Legal Officer at Google; Ginny Ehrlich, CEO of the Clinton Health Matters Initiative; Shellie Pfohl, Executive Director of the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition; Sharon Roerty, Senior Program Officer with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Craig Robinson, Men's Basketball Coach at Oregon State University; John Walsh, Executive Editor of ESPN; Jim

Whitehead, CEO of the American College of Sports Medicine; Olympians Gary Hall Jr., Michelle Kwan, Nancy Hogshead-Makar, Wendy Hilliard and Tom McMillen; and Paralympians Sarah Reinertsen and Jon Lujan.

Attendees embraced the project as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine youth sports in America. Given new data showing that the U.S. has the world's worst childhood obesity crisis, can we create sport models that get more kids off the couch? And do so without running them into the ground -- given concerns about burnout, concussions and overuse injuries among the early-emerging child athletes who have become the focus of the sports system? The perspectives, ideas and research shared at the Summit and subsequent, topic-focused roundtables and panels will help inform the development framework proposed in the Project's final report, to be underwritten by Summit sponsor Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and delivered in late 2014.



[Summit Agenda](#) | [Summit Participants](#) | [Childhood Obesity Rates in US Compared to Other Countries](#)

SUMMIT GOALS



Create an aspirational vision for sports, health in 2030

- Conceptualize the benefits if leaders act affirmatively
- Conceptualize the costs of inaction
- Identify policies, practices, and partnerships that could be beneficial



Begin connecting the silos

- Introduce a venue for leaders from across the disjointed sports landscape to share ideas and find common language, as holistic solutions are pursued
- Bring health leaders into the sports conversation, as the barriers to participation in sports (access, safety, age-appropriate play) are addressed

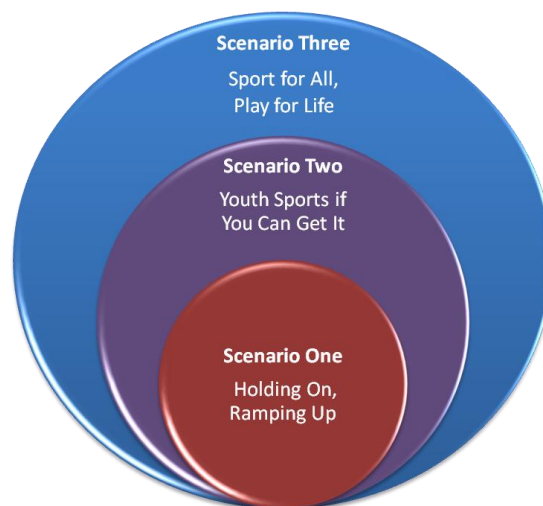


Lay the groundwork for final report

- Identify a framework that stakeholders from across the disjointed sports system could plug into to maximize participation and best serve the interests of children, communities and public health
- Introduce and test themes that could underpin the framework

HIGHLIGHTS & OUTCOMES

With the help of the University of Florida's Sports Policy and Research Collaborative (SPARC), Project Play looked into the future of youth sports and health in America in 2030. Possible scenarios were identified, based on a variety of environmental factors and outcomes. (Read "[Three Scenarios for 2030](#)")



Future scenarios based on interviews, research & data, as captured by Summit graphic artist:



Seeking Systems Change through Disruptive Innovation



Sports & Society Director Tom Farrey elicits Google's keys to systems change from Google Senior Executive David Drummond

A vision of a broad development framework began to coalesce throughout three days of heightened thought and idea-sharing, inspired by outside models of systems change including leading tech innovator Google. David Drummond, Google SVP and Chief Legal Officer, detailed Google's culture of innovation and proposed a parallel open-source model for youth sports: a conceptual platform with simple rules that allows stakeholders -- sport governing bodies,

schools, local entrepreneurs -- to plug into and

build less expensive programs that better serve the needs of children and families. He suggested a socially responsible model that is market-driven, with government in a supportive role. He encouraged leaders to be "audacious" in their vision, as well as optimistic about the chances of success.

"(Youth sports) reminds me of lots of other industry structures, business systems and ecosystems we see at Google," he said. "It looks like one that ought to be disrupted. Because it seems like there's a huge unmet need out there."

David Drummond, Google SVP and Chief Legal Officer, and former college football player

[Watch clip from Tom Farrey's conversation with David Drummond on systems change](#)

[Read Tom's blog entry](#)

Brainstorms produced a diversity of ideas. Among those most widely embraced as essential to success:

- “Physical Literacy” – developing/measuring the ability of children to move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of activities in multiple environments that benefit the whole person
- Age-appropriate play – moving from a culture of careless competition to thoughtful development
- Early positive experiences – special emphasis on fun and fundamentals before age 10
- Universal access – programs that can accommodate all kids; parks within half-mile of homes
- Coach education – push (and pull) training down the pipeline to volunteers to reduce attrition rates
- Private industry engagement – kids are tomorrow’s workforce, so explore/support smart reforms



Promising Programs

The Summit highlighted breakthrough programs, from local to international, that embody the values of “Sport for All, Play for Life” and have found success at shifting the paradigm. Among the most ambitious:

[USA Hockey’s American Development Model](#) : Adopted in 2009 by the sport’s national governing body, ADM is an educational and policy tool that promotes age-appropriate play from the toddler years to adulthood. Endorsed and funded by the National Hockey League, ADM was created after USA Hockey realized that 46 percent of children were dropping out of the sport by age nine. [Watch presentation](#)

[The Wendy Hilliard Foundation](#): Gabby Douglas was the top gymnast at the 2012 London Olympics, and the first African American female ever to win gold. But how many other kids could be great at or just enjoy a sport – and are never introduced to it? Wendy Hilliard, a former Olympic rhythmic gymnast, reduces the cost barriers associated with gymnastics through her innovative Harlem-based program. [Watch panel on locally-based initiatives moderated by Robin Schepper and featuring Hilliard](#)

[Canadian Sport for Life](#) : CS4L is a movement to improve the quality of sport and physical activity in Canada through the linking of sport, education, recreation, health and government institutions. Aspen Project Play Summit presenter Stephen Norris was a founder of CS4L, which aims to integrate the goals of elite and grassroots sport development to improve the nation’s health. [Watch presentation](#)

[Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club](#) The mission of AVSC is to provide all youth in the Greater Roaring Fork Valley the opportunity to develop as athletes and as people through sports. Making sport-for-all the top priority has proved to be a powerful lever in raising the charitable funds to offer scholarships to hundreds of immigrant kids, many Hispanic, growing up in outlying areas.

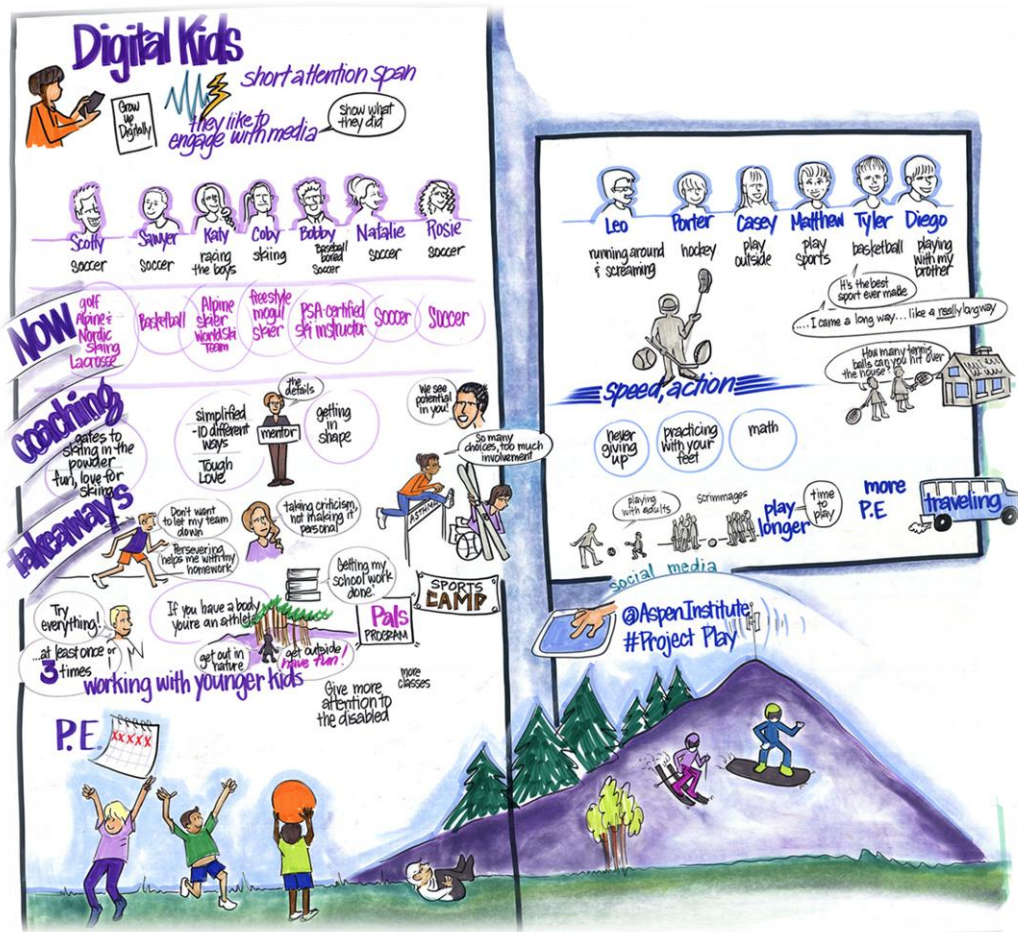
What Kids Want!

Grounding the dialogue with input from local children and teens proved rewarding and provoking as they produced reminders of what kids like/don’t like and why they play/why they don’t play.



Kids are part of the solution, so with the help of co-sponsor The Whistle, we asked what they think:

<i>Best Coaches</i>	<i>Bad Coaches</i>	<i>Concerns & Issues</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Teach skills in fun manner– Love sports & teach kids to love sports– Approach kids differently according to their needs– Always “see a lot of potential”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Can make kids disinterested in sports the rest of their lives– Use degrading language– Torment/use exercise as punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Tryouts that run forever– Focus is often on the kids who are good, leaving out many– Need more camps / training for kids with disabilities– Need more PE in schools!



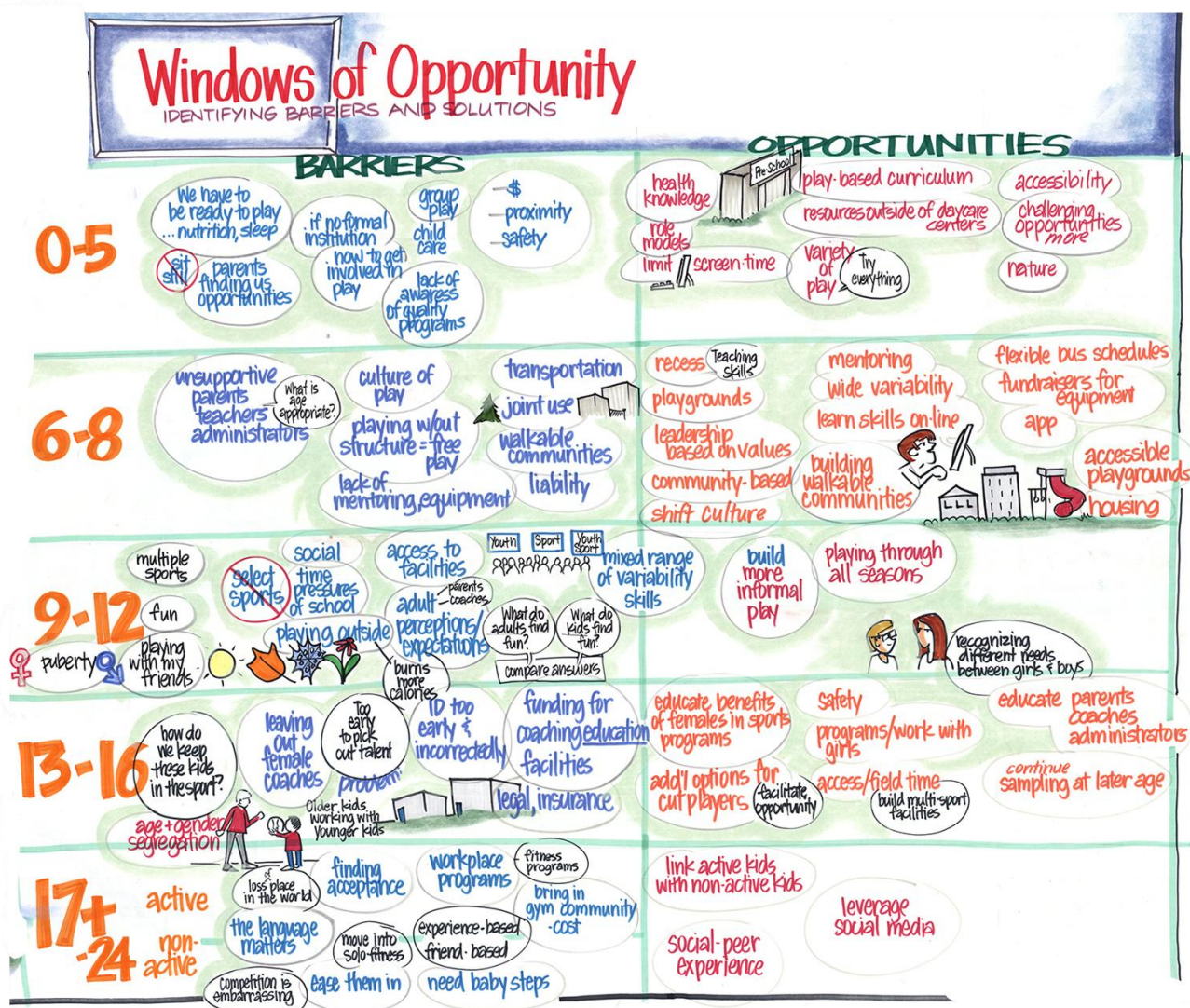
"Kids today need more personal attention than ever...We have to find people who like to teach, who like to mentor. Those are your coaches."

Craig Robinson, Oregon State University men's basketball coach

[Watch clip from Craig's conversation with ESPN's John Walsh](#)

Windows of Opportunity

Working groups were then asked what needs to happen at each stage of children's development to maximize, or lay the foundation for, participation in sports activity. Prioritizing informal play and sport sampling were identified as opportunities to reduce high dropout rates as they enter adolescence:



The panel was co-moderated by Nathan Plowman from Nike's Access to Sport division, which partnered with American College of Sports Medicine and other groups to publish Designed to Move, a global plan to address the epidemic of physical inactivity. In a pre-summit survey, attendees were asked to rate the state of U.S. youth sports based on the seven identified "design filters" to engage children. The average scores, on a scale of 1-10, were all below 5, highlighting ample room for improvement: Universal Access (3.8), Fun (3.9), Dosage & Duration (4.3), Age-Appropriate Play (4.5) Teach/Coach/Mentor (4.7), Incentives & Motivation (4.9), Feedback to Kids (4.9). Overall score for youth sports in America: 4.2.

Youth Sports Hack-a-Thon, Unplugged

The final session of the Summit asked attendees to channel the tech influence and Aspen Ideas Festival and brainstorm game-changing products, partnerships or research. Some of the ideas that emerged:

This Is Your Brain on Exercise

Marketing campaign that uses cutting-edge imaging technology to demonstrate the documented benefits of physical activity to cognitive function, in an effort to rebuild support for regular P.E.

The Athleat App

A smartphone tool for athletes and active people of all ages to make the best food choices possible, in whatever location and circumstance they are in. By planning around practices, training and competition, the app can help nourish their bodies and optimize their choices for well-being.

Kid Leadership Kit

Checklist sent to youth sport providers that would identify ways to help children take more control of their experience and develop leadership skills. Suggestions include offering board positions on youth leagues, proactively seeking player input, allowing kids to select all-stars where appropriate, and encouraging/mentoring teens who show interest in becoming coaches.



Post-Event Reflections and Commitments

Feedback in a post-event survey of attendees was highly favorable, as were expressions of support:

- 100% of respondents described the Aspen Institute's Project Play initiative as important to the future of youth sports (83% described it as "very important")
- 98% found the Summit valuable in terms of identifying potential partners in their work
- 80% offered to highlight Project Play content to their constituents; among others, National Federation of State High Schools committed to engaging all coaches through its channels
- ESPN, Nike, the USOC and other sport organizations committed to advancing dialogue, content

Next Steps

Looking ahead to the Aspen Institute's Project Play framework for youth sports that will be published in late 2014, an expansion of both perspectives and commitments will be critical to feeding the outcome. Roundtables (one-day gatherings of 25-30 thought leaders) and "Aspen Timeouts" (panels held at major conferences of stakeholder organizations) will be held on key topics that beg for a deep dive, including:

- California, city TBD: What's the role of technology in getting and keeping kids active in sports?
- Baltimore: What's the business model for sport for all in the era of travel teams?
- Santa Clara, Calif.: How could concussion and liability concerns reshape youth sports?
- City TBD: How to expand the quality and quantity of community coaches?
- Chicago (tentative): What's the model for school-based sports in the 21st century?



Using our brand to help people understand and believe in the power of sport is something where we can really make a difference.

Scott Blackmun, CEO, United States Olympic Committee

[Watch Scott's comments to Tom Farrey on panel with Michelle Kwan, Gary Hall Jr.](#)

APPENDICES

[Project Play Video Highlights](#)

[Project Play Photos](#)

[Designed to Move](#)

[The Case for Physical Literacy, blog entry by Robin Schepper, Sports & Society Advisory Board Member](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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