

Joint Use of Community-Centered Schools in Pennsylvania

The Problem

Childhood obesity has tripled in the United States over the past 40 years. The epidemic is related to the fact that most communities do not include a built environment that supports healthy physical activity. Through federally mandated school wellness policies, schools are starting to adopt policies that help address this epidemic, but many schools have cut physical education class hours, and many schools don't have access to fields for outdoor activities. As a result, many school children are still not engaging in an adequate amount of physical activity during school hours. In addition, many children and their families do not have adequate recreational facilities to exercise and play during after school hours.

Historically, schools have had a variety of recreational facilities, such as, gymnasiums, playgrounds, fields, courts, and tracks. However, most of these schools close their property to the public after school hours because of concerns about costs, vandalism, security, maintenance, and liability in the event of injury. While these facilities go unused after regular school hours, communities are potentially building facilities that duplicate those that already exist on school property. In these times of fiscal constraint, this duplication is simply not the best use of time or resources.

A Potential Solution

A joint use agreement is a formal agreement between two separate government entities, often a school district and a city or county, setting forth the terms and conditions for the shared use of public property. Typically, each party under a joint use agreement helps fund the development, operation, and maintenance of the facilities that will be shared. In so doing, no single party is fully liable for the costs and responsibilities associated with the recreational facilities. Furthermore, after regular school hours, schools can continue to provide their students and the local community with the facilities needed to maintain active and healthy lifestyles, while incurring little to no additional costs.

As interest grows in addressing childhood obesity, demand for more community recreational facilities is likely to increase as well. As a first step, parents and community members can request access to these public facilities by urging their school and local government officials to pursue a joint use agreement. When school facilities or school grounds are made available to the community, the community's built environment and public health are likely to improve.

It is important to note that this arrangement works equally well for many uses in addition to recreation. Auditoriums, classrooms and other meeting spaces can be shared between school districts, municipalities, nonprofit organizations and others providing needed facilities without duplication.

What is joint use?

Joint use is a way to increase opportunities for children and adults to be mentally and physically active. It refers to two or more entities — usually a school and a city or private organization — sharing indoor and outdoor spaces like classrooms, gymnasiums, athletic fields and playgrounds. The concept is simple: share resources to keep costs down and communities healthy.

Why is joint use needed?

The research is clear: the more active children are, the healthier they will be now and when they are grown. Yet certain places make physical activity harder instead of easier. Too often, kids find the gate to their school's blacktop or basketball court locked after school hours, locking them out of opportunities to be active. Closing off recreational facilities after school leaves many children and families struggling to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. They may live in an area without a nearby park or be unable to afford exercise equipment or a gym membership.

Joint use agreements can fix these problems. Joint use makes physical activity easier by providing kids and adults alike with safe, conveniently located and inviting places to exercise and play. Besides making sense from a health perspective, joint use agreements make sense financially because they build upon assets a community already has. In addition to making places for physical activity more accessible, joint use offer the potential to share other facilities as well (classrooms for evening college classes, auditoriums for local performances and stadiums for benefit concerts). Sharing existing space is cheaper and more efficient than duplicating the same facilities in other parts of the community.

Clearly in these economic times, any sharing of facilities is valuable to all the parties involved. For the school districts who can receive rental fees or the local nonprofit YMCA that can generate some additional income for providing their facilities, it is a positive situation.

Is joint use happening in Pennsylvania?

Joint use is happening in cities across the nation. In fact, the concept of joint use is not new. Schools have shared their land and facilities for community use for over 200 years. Most states, including Pennsylvania, have policies to encourage schools to make facilities open to the public.

School districts have recognized the value of making their facilities available to outside groups for, not just recreation, but social and educational uses as well. Pennsylvania allows for joint use in the Pennsylvania Department of Education statutes.

It authorizes a board of school directors to permit the use of school property for social, recreation and other uses. They may also lease school property for educational purposes to an organization or group for charitable purposes. They may charge a fee and request reimbursement for the cost of use. In addition, it allows towns or boroughs who maintain recreational space to lease the property to any school board or school athletic organization.

The Hanover Public School District (York County) has developed several joint use agreements. From rental of their sports fields to community teams and the auditorium to community groups, they are able to generate additional income for the district's very limited budget. They also have agreed to lease the auditorium and a few classrooms on Sunday for use by a local church. The superintendent also noted the value in their joint use agreements that go beyond the financial aspects. By offering space free of charge for senior citizen tax preparation and other similar activities, the community has appreciation for the facility even if the individuals being served no longer have students within the school system. This is valuable in public relations when tax increases become necessary.

Joint use agreements between schools and other entities are also beneficial to school districts that don't have all the amenities needed within their own facilities. Central Dauphin High School (Dauphin County) uses a swimming pool at Harrisburg Area Community College for their competitive swim team. Hazelton Castle Elementary School (Luzerne County) was renovated and is located in a neighborhood where students could walk to school but did not have a playground available for recess because the school was originally built as a high school. By entering into a joint use agreement, they are able to use a nearby city owned park for recess.

Maintenance – How can we keep the space in good condition?

Joint use agreements can detail each partner's goals to help ensure that school properties are respected and maintained. When school resources are being shared, it's important to have joint use agreements that specify who needs to make repairs and who will address wear and tear to the property. Some school officials have noticed a decrease in vandalism since implementing a joint use agreement. They have noted that when the community shares school resources, they take pride and ownership in the space, which can help deter vandalism.

Liability – What if someone gets hurt?

Experts say most schools' existing liability insurance is sufficient to cover any liability issues associated with joint use. Joint use agreements can identify liability concerns and make sure they are covered. Pennsylvania law does allow for additional bonding if necessary.

A Plan for the Future

An increase in joint use agreements is likely to occur out of both necessity and convenience. As nonprofits, local municipalities and school districts seek creative funding options, the joint use model is an obvious tool. It allows school districts to generate additional funding for their limited budgets, provides facilities to the communities that are otherwise not available and encourages school districts to use existing community facilities instead of taking on the financial burden to provide all amenities. If school districts can arrange to use community facilities that are nearby (swimming pools, practice fields or parks), a historic or older school can remain in a neighborhood where students can walk and bike to school. As joint use practices grow and the value of community-center schools is recognized, it is hoped that school districts will seek to keep existing and new facilities in communities instead of building larger consolidated schools on the outskirts of a town where student must be bused.

Preservation Pennsylvania is a strong advocate for community-centered schools and believes that high quality schools are located within walking distance of neighborhoods and public transportation options. School facilities that are in use beyond regular school hours become community centers and these schools become essential components of healthy communities. Joint use is a way to keep our community-centered schools healthy and vibrant. Existing schools that are well-maintained and in use beyond the regular school hours can be retained and rehabilitated as needed and continue to serve not just the students but the community as well.

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