

Shared Use of School Property in Massachusetts

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Background

Being physically active is important for both individual and public health. For people to be physically active, they must have access to safe, affordable, and convenient recreational facilities. These types of recreational spaces and facilities are out of reach for many community members, either due to cost or availability. School property can provide a valuable resource for community recreational space and facilitate physical activity through recreation and sport activities before, during, and after school hours. Advocates are working to find ways to increase community use of school property.

The United States Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends that children engage in at least sixty minutes of physical activity daily,¹ yet less than half of children achieve these recommendations.² Availability of recreational infrastructure, crime, and safety influence children's physical activity levels,^{3,4,5} and minority and poor populations have less access to indoor and outdoor spaces for physical activity and more issues with crime-related safety than their white and wealthier counterparts.⁶ Additionally, children living in low-income neighborhoods in Boston have less access to recreational infrastructure than children living in middle- and high-income suburban areas in Massachusetts.⁷ As such, providing access to safe spaces for physical activity, especially in low-income neighborhoods, is an important step to increase opportunities for children and adults to engage in

physical activity. One potential avenue for increasing access to safe spaces for physical activity may be community use (also called shared or joint use) policies that allow use of school recreational spaces and facilities outside of school hours.

School districts can allow community access through school board policies, procedures, and practices that open school property for general community use. In addition, school districts often have school board policies and procedures that outline a process for formal use, usually covered by some form of written agreement.⁸

Benefits of Community Use

Strategies to increase physical activity through the utilization of school facilities, community wide policies and other components, and family engagement, appear to be effective in promoting physical activity.⁹ Schools that have agreements with communities are more likely to have after-school physical activity programming available to children,¹⁰ and higher levels of community use are positively correlated with the number of minutes of physical activity provided in afterschool programs.¹¹ These results indicate that partnerships between schools/school districts and community groups may be helpful in increasing children's activity levels.

Community use interventions also show positive results for increasing engagement in physical activity.^{12,13} Studies show that providing access to school grounds outside of school hours results in an increased number of children engaging in physical activity in low-income intervention neighborhoods compared to low-income control neighborhoods. In Los Angeles County, community use sites that provided programming had sixteen-fold higher engagement in physical activity compared to sites that provided no programming. These studies indicate that community use agreements that allow access to school grounds outside of school hours have the potential to positively impact physical activity levels.

Massachusetts Partnerships surrounding Shared Use

Several national and governmental organizations recommend increasing community use as a strategy to increase opportunities for physical activity.^{14,15,16} In Massachusetts, the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation of Harvard Law School, the American Heart Association, and the Massachusetts Alliance of YMCAs partnered to research current community use practices and to provide training and technical assistance to Massachusetts communities interested in engaging in shared use. As part of this work, the group sought to understand how community use practices, facilitators, and barriers differ among districts with high levels of shared use (high-use) vs. districts with low levels of shared use (low-use). The group conducted online surveys about community use practices with school districts administrators, followed by telephone interviews with administrators in high-use and low-use districts. This report shares key findings and recommendations.

School Administrator Survey

Who took the survey

The survey was sent to administrators working closely with community use in 239 eligible school districts, of which 100 responded. Of those respondents, 52 were business or facilities managers, one was the superintendent, and 47 had “other” job titles. Administrators that responded represented districts that had an average of 6.4 schools and 3,408 students enrolled.

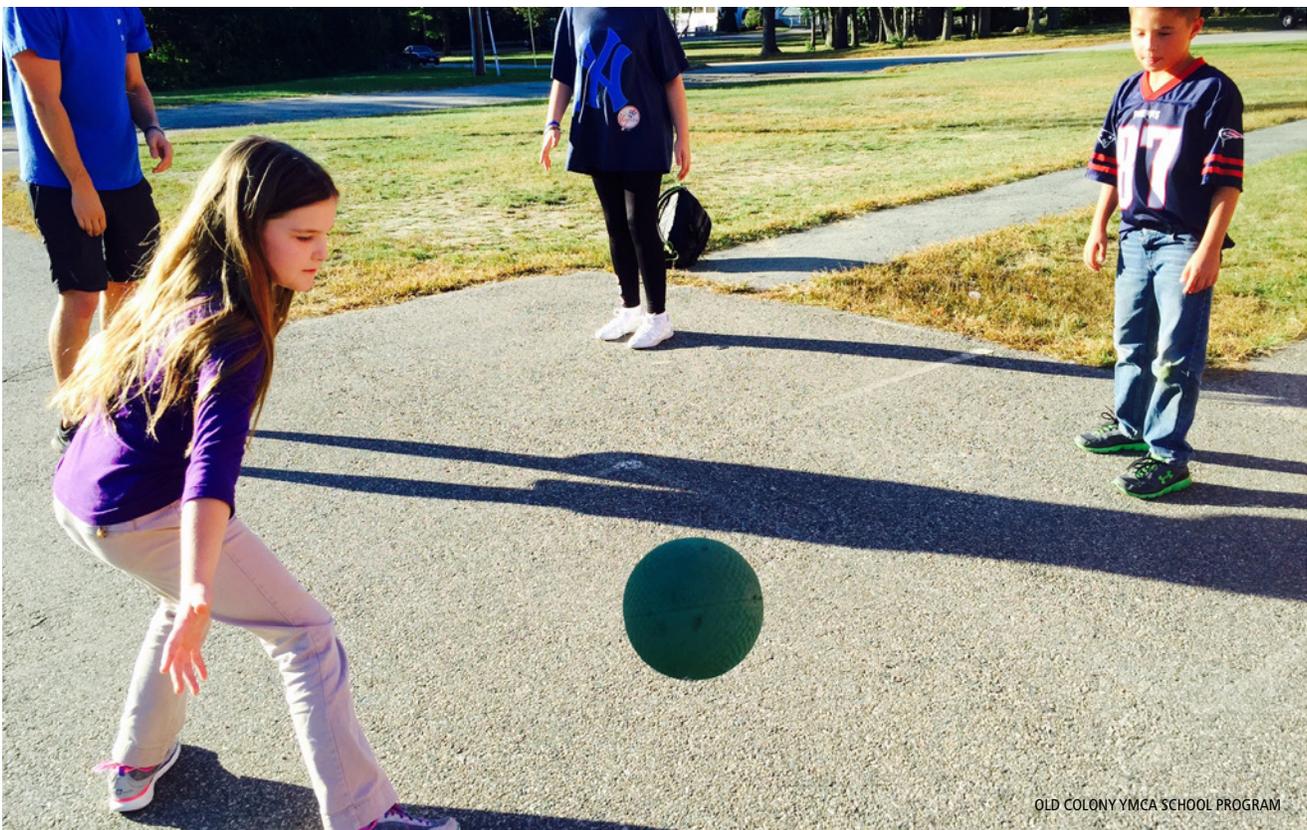
Most districts engage in shared use on a daily basis

Forty percent of districts reported that they engage in community use 31 or more times per month, whereas 14 percent of districts reported that they engage in shared use 10 or fewer times per month. Most districts report engaging in community use utilizing both formal agreements and informal agreements.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Frequency of community use varies across Massachusetts school districts, though most districts are comfortable engaging in both formal and informal agreements.

High-use districts are defined as school districts reporting community use 31 or more times per month.

Low-use districts are defined as school districts reporting community use 10 or fewer times per month.



OLD COLONY YMCA SCHOOL PROGRAM

Most shared use is for recreational purposes

Almost three-quarters of districts report that over half of their community use is for recreational purposes. Additionally, 51 percent of districts report that 75–100 percent of community use is specific to children and, and 64 percent of districts report that 75–100 percent of community use is recurring use (vs. one-time.) Almost three-quarters of districts allow informal community use of playgrounds after school, on weekends, during school holidays, and during summer break, and approximately half of districts allow informal use of tracks/fields during the same time periods.

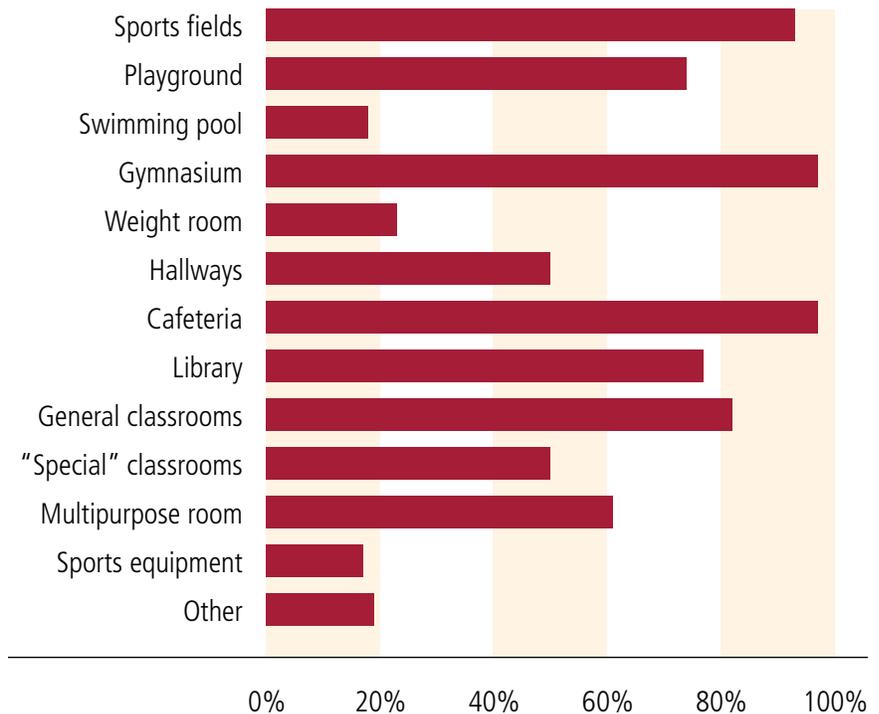
KEY TAKEAWAY: Most community use in Massachusetts increases opportunities for children to engage in physical activity.

Availability of facilities does not vary between high-use and low-use districts

Almost all districts have sports fields, gymnasiums, and cafeterias that are available for community use; whereas only 17 percent of districts allow community use of sports equipment. More high-use districts report new or renovated school facilities compared to low-use districts, and over half of districts reporting new or renovated facilities cited an increase in demand for community use.

KEY TAKEAWAY: The types of facilities available for community use does not vary among high-use vs. low-use districts, though availability of new or renovated facilities does impact demand for community use.

Figure 1: Types of school facilities available for community use.



High use districts report providing a wider variety of services

Most districts have agreements for indoor and outdoor recreation; however, high use districts report providing a wider range of services than low use districts. Most districts have community use agreements with Parks and Recreation Departments or youth organizations, and high-use and low-use districts reported engaging in community use with a similar variety of partners.

KEY TAKEAWAY: High-use districts provide a wider variety of services through community use, though both low-use and high-use districts provide recreation through community use agreements.

Figure 2: Types of community use agreements.

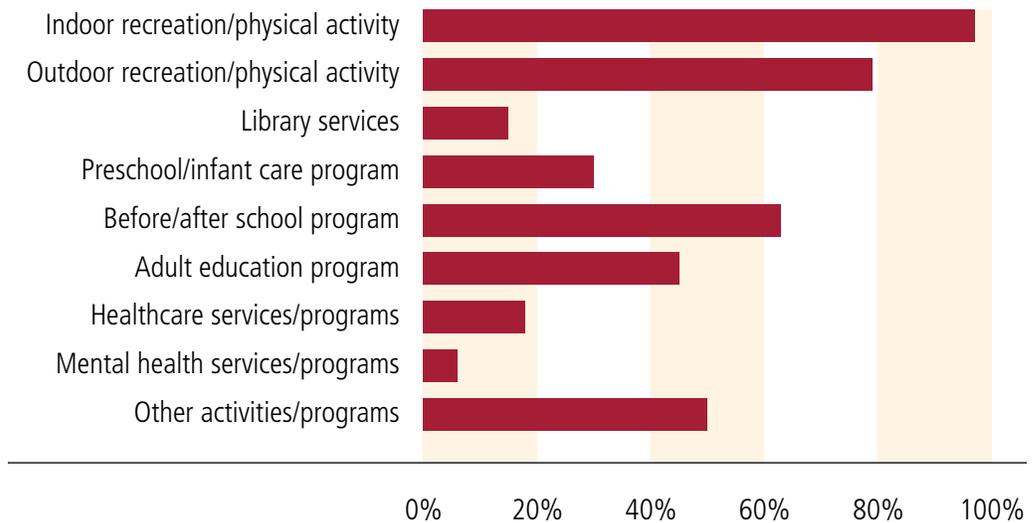
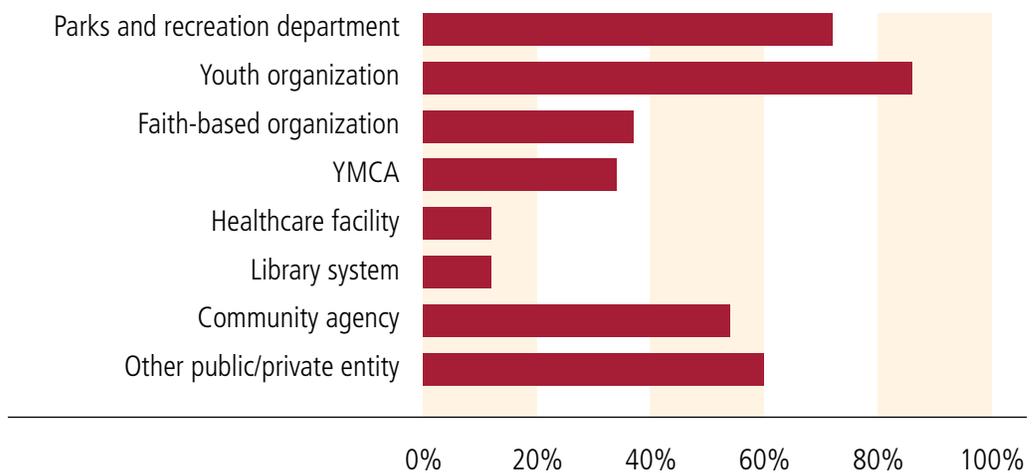
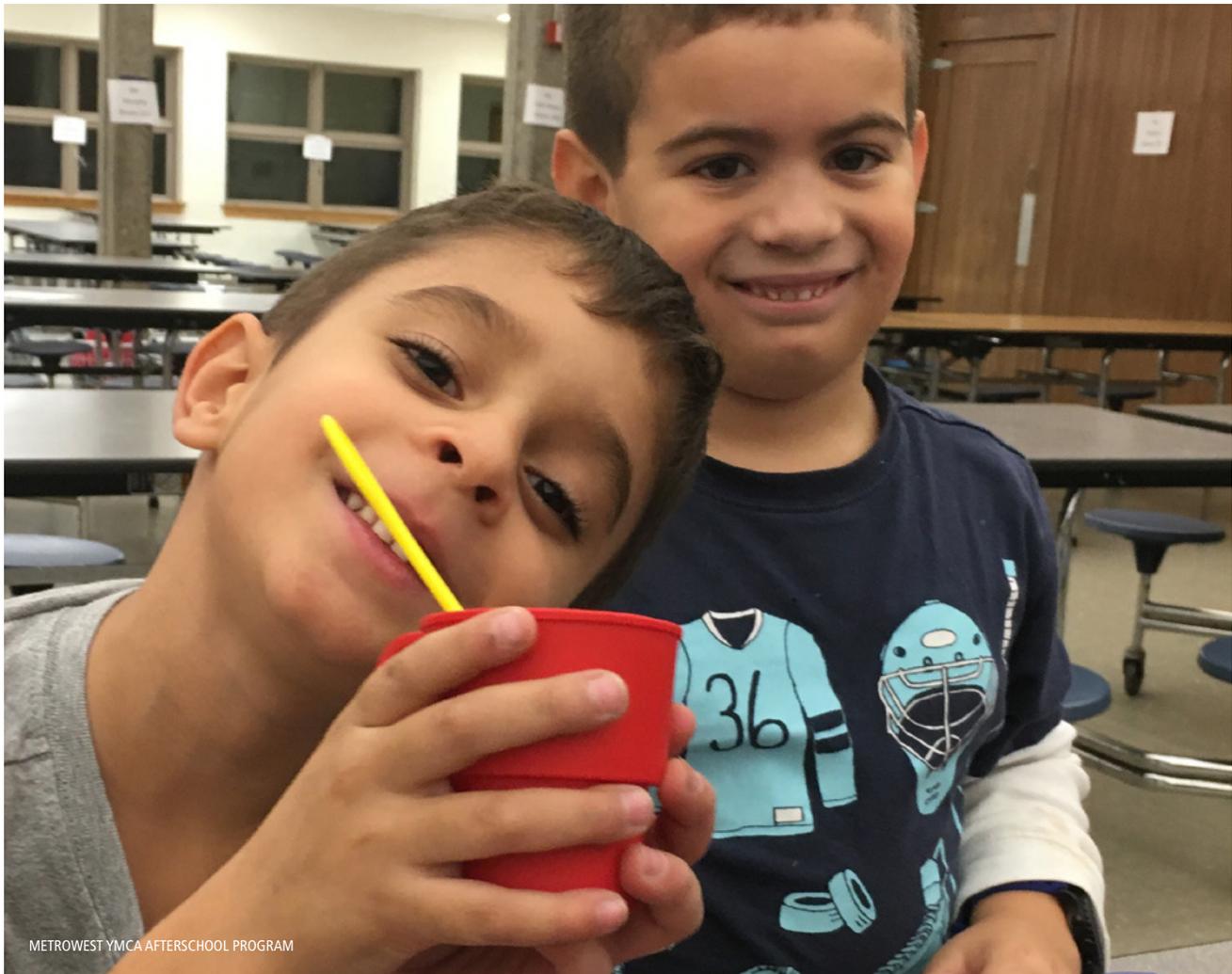


Figure 3: Types of community use partners.





METROWEST YMCA AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM

In-depth Interviews

Who participated in the interviews

Administrators from school districts with high and low levels of community use were invited to participate in telephone interviews. Seven administrators in high-use districts and seven administrators in low-use districts chose to participate in the interviews. Administrators represented districts with large and small enrollment, and districts in both urban and rural areas.

High-use districts provide a wider variety of services and engage with a wider variety of partners

Consistent with survey results, administrators from high-use districts described providing a wider variety of services compared to low-use districts. In particular, high-use districts provided adult/community education programs, extended day programs and day care, and summer programs through community use partnerships. In contrast to what was found in the survey, high-use administrators

described engaging in community use with a wider variety of partners compared to low-use districts. High-use administrators mentioned engaging in community use with private and for-profit groups, neighborhood associations, and arts and theatre groups; whereas low-use administrators did not mention these types of partners.

KEY TAKEAWAY: High-use districts have wider community engagement, both in the types of community partners and types of services.

Facilitators of community use

The most commonly cited facilitators of community use in high-use districts are community identification of access, history of community use, and convenience of school facility location. Administrators often mentioned schools as “hubs” of their communities.

One business manager explained, “The neighborhood school model that we have encouraged... encourages people to think of it as our neighborhood school.”

The most commonly cited facilitator of community use in low-use districts was also community identification of access; however, administrators in these districts defined identification of access differently, describing that identification means “people know about it [community use]” (facilities manager). Other facilitators in low-use districts included lack of other recreational spaces in the community, and support for recreation in the community.

KEY TAKEAWAY: High-use districts view schools as central to their communities’ functioning, thus facilitating high levels of community use.

Barriers to community use

The most commonly cited barriers to community use in both high- and low-use districts are cost and maintenance and upkeep. Administrators described community use as “a huge expense” and “a big job.” They cited both upfront costs for utilities and staffing for community use, as well as maintenance costs as major barriers to use. In addition to maintenance costs, administrators discussed the difficulty scheduling regular maintenance to fields and facilities, or limiting the amount of community use at certain facilities in order to decrease the work necessary to maintain that facility.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Cost, maintenance, and upkeep are major concerns in both high- and low-use districts. Addressing this concern, especially in low-use districts, may help to increase community use.



Recommendations

Encourage recreation-oriented community use programming

Community use programming significantly increases the number of children and adults engaging in physical activity. High-use districts in Massachusetts provide a wider variety of services and engage in community use with a wider variety of partners; therefore, low-use districts should focus on creating partnerships with local community groups and agencies to develop recreation programming.

Provide technical assistance to deal with commonly cited concerns

Cost, maintenance, and upkeep are major concerns about community use among Massachusetts school districts. The use of formal community use agreements to address scheduling of support staff and school facilities, and to spell out, in detail, that the district meets the provisions of the Massachusetts Recreational Use Statute, can help deal with (though not alleviate), some of these concerns.

The Massachusetts Recreational Use Statute¹⁷

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 21, § 17C. Public use of land for recreational, conservation, scientific educational and other purposes; landowner's liability limited; exception

This statute states that any person or organization that allows the public to use their land for recreational purposes "without imposing a charge or fee ... shall not be liable for personal injuries or property damage sustained by such members of the public," except in some extreme circumstances. Land-owners who charge a fee for use of the property by the public cannot rely on the statute as a defense for claims related to injury or property damage.

Create state fund to support community use

Cost is the biggest barrier to community use in Massachusetts. Funding streams that have been successful in the past include inclusion of community use funds in local and state budgets, and grants through public and private organizations. Gathering this information into one location where schools can easily access it is a first step to addressing the concern. Additionally, creation of a state fund for community use would help alleviate the financial burden on school districts.

Support state policy change that would limit liability for schools allowing community use for recreation

The Massachusetts Recreational Use Statute states that any person or organization who "lawfully permits the public use" of their land or facility for "recreational, conservation, scientific, educational, environmental, ecological, research, religious, or charitable purposes without imposing a charge or fee ... shall not be liable for personal injuries or property damage sustained by such members of the public." Currently, Massachusetts statute language is unclear on liability protection for Massachusetts schools. While there is some liability protection case law has been unclear/inconclusive on how much protection is granted to the schools. Support for state policy change that protects both schools and community organizations when allowing free use of their facilities, would address the major barrier of liability in Massachusetts.



Next Steps & Conclusion

In conclusion, Massachusetts school districts are engaging in community use at varying levels, and many districts need support to increase community use in their communities. Though training and technical assistance will help address barriers in the short-term, policy change at the state level would go a long way to increasing community use throughout the state. Schools are central to Massachusetts communities, and leveraging state policy change with local community partnerships will result in more physical activity opportunities for Massachusetts communities through community use.

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