



“Fields of Dreams: Innovate and They Will Come?”

Roundtable Summary

Any true commitment to broad-based sports participation begins with infrastructure. Fields. Gyms. Rinks. Rec centers. Bike paths. Build, maintain and secure them, or pay the price later. Federal support for such projects took a serious hit in 1980 with cuts to matching grants for states and cities through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and it’s never recovered. Today, we see park and rec departments under significant duress – and the rise of private, often specialized athletic facilities whose programming is too expensive for many families.

In Chicago, the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program convened 41 leaders for a Project Play conversation on how to grow the supply of safe play spaces that meet the needs of all children in all communities. Held at Navy Pier on the final day of the Illinois Youth Sports Summit, and on the eve of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Assembly, the dialogue identified breakthrough ideas in funding, collaboration and innovation that can serve urban, suburban and rural communities – each of which face their own distinct challenges. Leaders also considered ways that the hosting of an Olympic Games could best leave a legacy of community facilities.

The Sept. 24, 2014 meeting began with an introduction by Tom Farrey, Sports & Society executive director, and an exercise in which each participant recounted their “favorite place to play” while growing up. Many participants identified simple and informal contexts, a reminder that state-of-the-art facilities and pristine fields are not the only places where sport can occur. A recurring theme involved the modification of sport to be played with what was available, a key insight into what and how places can be made accessible for safe and active play.

J.O. Spengler, chair of the University of Florida’s Sport Policy & Research Collaborative, also presented [aggregated research](#) about play spaces that helped inform the day’s conversation.

OUTCOMES

At the roundtable, several opportunities were embraced as holding great promise in this space:

- Small-sided play on smaller courts as a means of engaging more children at a lower cost
- Customizable templates to foster Shared Use Agreements between schools and towns
- Public-private partnerships that open up private sports facilities to underserved kids
- Technology as a connector to locations that offer quality sports programming
- Standardized contributions by industry, sport events to build community infrastructure

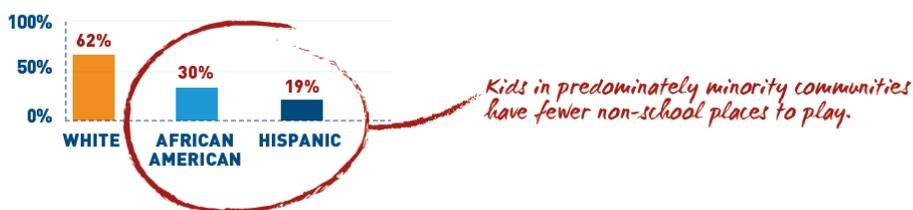
BREAKOUT SESSION FINDINGS AND SELECT OBSERVATIONS

Attendees discussed and identified the biggest barriers to access and the most promising strategies to improve access. Following is a brief summary of the key themes in each area, as developed by each of the four breakout groups (urban, suburban, rural, and Olympic legacy):

Urban

Dense urban areas present a very unique set of challenges in the provision of places for children to play. One major barrier to participation in sport activities is that the places to play do not exist. In general, urban areas exist as they are – there is little option to build new recreational facilities, particularly in regards to outdoor spaces. This affects access in two ways. First, people’s proximity to parks and facilities is predetermined. Second, because urban environments are more populous, there is higher demand for limited resources. This can lead to policies and practices that are detrimental to the poorest neighborhoods. In addition, crime and violence in the inner city is itself a barrier to access. Even if facilities exist, being on the streets may not be safe, and therefore using spaces may not be a real option for young people in urban areas. It should be noted that this is a safety issue first, and a transportation issue second.

NEIGHBORHOODS WITH A RECREATIONAL FACILITY
PERCENT OF CENSUS TRACTS WITH A RECREATIONAL FACILITY BY RACE/ETHNICITY



Participants in this breakout group agreed that a major barrier to access among urban poor is cost. Overcrowding can result in fees and/or designated hours of use, which creates barriers for low-income populations. When cities choose to privatize public facilities and/or rent them to outside clubs, it reduces the number of opportunities for children to play for free. When cities have limited funding and must make allocation and maintenance decisions, the most disadvantaged neighborhoods are often ignored. This exacerbates a system in which those with the most need have the least access. A lack of investment in these neighborhoods allows violence and illegal activity more opportunity to thrive, which in turn makes the streets and public spaces less safe. The less safe a neighborhood is, the less likely children will be permitted and/or be encouraged to be outside for any reason.

The barriers to access in the urban context are often rooted in long-standing policies and practices that are not easily or quickly reversed. However, the participants at this table identified a number of promising strategies and “quick fixes” that could increase sport participation among youth in urban communities. First and foremost, given that space is

limited, urban communities may want to rethink where sport can be played, and consider untraditional facilities such as parking lots or garages, abandoned lots, or rooftops as potential play spaces. In addition, sports themselves can be modified to be played in smaller spaces. A related challenge is that being outside can be unsafe, and therefore finding indoor facilities that can be used to play sports will reduce certain barriers to access. Again, many outdoor sports can be modified for indoor play. For example, indoor soccer has smaller teams and slightly different rules than traditional outdoor soccer. Wiffle ball is a version of baseball that can be played indoor with minimal equipment. Many racquet-based games do not need a court, but can be played against a wall or other hard surface. Consistent with principles of child-centered sport, kids can be introduced to a space and allowed to make up their own games and rules using the available equipment and amenities. These are just a few examples of simple and innovative ways to modify sport games for the built environment.

Urban cities can also mandate that redevelopment/construction projects include the creation or renovation of safe, free, accessible play spaces. This could include parks or splash pads, fields or courts, community recreation centers, neighborhood pools, etc. It could also include creating, extending, or connecting bike paths and trails where possible. Active transport received a lot of attention, in particular because the walking and biking movements have focused predominantly on adults, and there is opportunity to expand the movement to include children. Depending on the specific urban context this may mean different things, and may not always be feasible, but one idea that really stood out was “make the journey fun.” Including hopscotch and games on paved paths, as well as introducing play structures throughout a trail will create more opportunities for kids to be active and playful during the walk, and will make the experience more enjoyable for them.

Participants also discussed the need to educate both policymakers and parents on the importance of sport experiences in overall youth development. Sport and recreation often get sidelined as “fun” in a way that suggests these activities are not important, and do not need to be addressed in policy. However, in the past decade, raising rates of childhood obesity and other ailments related to a sedentary lifestyle have provided opportunities for sport and recreation providers to partner with health and wellness agencies to achieve common goals. Sport and recreation generally promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles, so they can be a natural partner for organizations with health-based initiatives. In the urban context, this is a particularly salient opportunity because the populations with the most troubling rates of health problems related to inactivity are also the children with the least amount of access to safe places to play. The growing list of examples suggests that these partnerships are a huge opportunity to increase access to sport and recreation.

Harnessing technology and mobile apps to target specific markets was another exciting opportunity discussed. Developing and promoting apps that allow kids to connect with each other and find out where they can join games or what is going on at certain facilities. These apps would also allow parents to monitor their children, or know if certain areas are supervised and/or open during the times their children want to play. This would improve access by letting both parents and kids know where there are safe opportunities to play at any time.

Barriers

- Equity of access
- Lack of neighborhood safety
- Inadequate policies/funding
- Sport seen as just “fun,” not important
- Cultural norms of inactivity

Opportunities

- Leverage school sites
- Educate policy makers
- Create health-focused partnerships
- Develop technology (mobile apps)
- Promote active transportation

Suburban

Barriers to access in suburban communities are far different, and often more political, than those facing either urban or rural areas. The word “suburban” brings up images of communities that are designed to be family-friendly, to provide safe places for kids to play, to include opportunities for lifelong recreation, and to be easy to navigate. Thus, suburban communities would seem to be replete with schools, parks, and trails. However, this is not always the case. Poor planning has led to pockets of poverty, disparity and inequality in facility and park location, and prioritization of roads and driving. Even when these amenities are available, a restricted use is another major barrier that prevents access. With many formal sport settings, such as fields, courts, and gyms, use is restricted to the owning institution and the organizations to which they grant permission. Even with informal amenities such as parks and trails, when significant socioeconomic differences exist, communities can create resident permit systems to reduce use and prohibit access. In these situations, there are safe places, but use is restricted. Unfortunately both examples of restriction are related to ability to pay, and are more detrimental to children of low-income families.

Perception of safety is another major barrier to access in suburban communities. Many parents are concerned that it is not safe for their children to be outside. Sometimes the concern is that there are too many cars, so playing in the streets or traveling to a park or field is unsafe. Other times, parents are more worried about what might happen when there is no adult supervision, such as injuries, a stranger approaching their child, or deviant behavior. While the specific concerns may vary by community, there was overwhelming consensus among those at the table that parental perceptions of safety risks – often misperceptions – prevent many kids from using the amenities that are available.

While discussing ways to improve access in suburban communities, there was an emphasis on the need for more shared use agreements between parks, schools, and private entities. Providing politicians and policy makers with a template for agreements that can be tailored to meet local needs will increase the likelihood that such arrangements are created and maintained. While there is a need for state-specific models, organizations can find basic templates of what should be considered and included from resources such as [ChangeLab Solutions](#) and [KaBOOM!](#) For example, stipulations for maintenance and staffing should be addressed in any joint use agreement. Sharing facilities may also help reduce overall costs of sport programs, potentially making them more accessible for children of low-income families.

In addition to joint use agreements, partnerships between public and private entities were identified as a potential solution to increase sport options and maximize opportunities to play. Developers could be incentivized to build facilities near schools in exchange for tax abatements and agreements to provide low-cost programming immediately after school, in the 3-5 PM hours. If sport organizations partner with schools or park districts, and supply the resources and training necessary to teach and offer various sports, there will be more affordable options for kids. For example, in attempt to grow the sport of rugby among youth, the Illinois Youth Rugby Association partnered with the Chicago Public System and the Chicago Park District. [USA Rugby](#) provided over 200 starter rugby kits to schools and recreation centers. Each kit included the fundamentals of the sport and simple, easy-to-use training material for coaches. Any kid who was interested could come and learn the sport. The schools and parks get the resources needed to offer a new sport, increasing options and opportunities for kids, and the sport hopes to get an increase in sustained participation.

Another promising idea that emerged was that cities and mayors could establish targets for active communities based on sport participation. This could stimulate multiple city-wide policy initiatives and programs that would promote sport, play, and active lifestyles. One component of such a strategy could be improved access to spaces, particularly for free play. Instead of simply using facilities more at the organizational level, time could be set aside for kids to come use the space in whatever way they want, offering unstructured, but supervised, play. This way, children who are not enrolled in sport programs (by choice or circumstance) still have opportunities to be active. Another way in which targets for active communities could address issues of access would be improving safety of streets and sidewalks for kids to walk, bike, or skate to and from school, parks, and other community facilities. This could be as simple as adding a few stop signs or a pedestrian crosswalk at busier intersections, or it could mean building trails that connect various hubs within the community. Specific solutions might vary, but making active transport safer for children will allow more children to get to and from the places where they can play.

Barriers

- Lack of political will
- Underuse of supporting data
- Socioeconomic segregation
- Absence of policy road maps
- Parent perceptions of safety

Opportunities

- Provide information, data, education
- Develop partnerships
- Focus on addressing disparities
- Foster interconnectivity of systems
- Repurpose underutilized assets

Rural

Though rural communities may seem to have plenty of space, the group assigned to this area was quick to argue that such an assumption is misguided. The group pointed out that a conceptual definition of “rural” was lacking, explaining that rural communities are typically those in which land served as a primary source of economic activity (e.g. agriculture, mining, logging). This fact encompassed one of the primary challenges facing rural communities – they are often resistant to any type of development that would use land for other purposes, such as recreation. Related to this challenge is that of isolation and lack of transportation to connect

homes and communities. Often children live far from other each other, reducing the likelihood of informal sport, and recreation opportunities are offered at the county (not the local) level, requiring transportation to get to programs. Lack of reliable transportation to bring children together in safe spaces is a major access problem.

Another related challenge is that while there may be space, there is often a lack of supervision and/or programming for youth sports. Many rural communities lack typical sport providers such as park and recreation departments or YMCAs, being forced to rely on schools for sport programming. Taken in conjunction with what is known as the “Friday night lights syndrome” that exists in many small towns and emphasizes football above all else, this severely limits the options available to children in rural communities. Even when services and programs do exist, however, there are constraints such as limited knowledge or skill to teach particular sports, lack of equipment, and insufficient numbers. In addition, the expense of complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has prompted many rural communities to avoid updates and renovations that would make facilities safer and accessible to individuals with disabilities. Finally, a lower tax base and limited resources means that there are less defined spaces and facilities, and that those that exist are often less accessible and poorly maintained.

Given the unique set of challenges facing rural communities, the most promising opportunities can be considered in terms of two strategies: 1) leveraging what exists and 2) redesigning sport programs. There are limited resources in rural communities; however, existing agencies and organizations have access to facilities and networks that can be utilized to help offer sport and play opportunities for children. In addition to schools, examples include 4-H, Future Farmers of America, Girl/Boy Scouts, and faith-based organizations. Each of these has a membership base, established relationships with community members, and access to staff and volunteers. The key is to help them incorporate sport and play into their existing programming. As mentioned, open space often exists, but it is the use of that space that can be challenging, either because of explicit restriction and/or lack of supervision. Therefore, leveraging existing agencies to offer sport and play opportunities during their programs is a promising solution.

The group suggested the rethinking of rules in certain sports, to modify programs and fit the demographics of the community. Small populations mean that fielding full teams based on age and gender can be extremely difficult. Therefore, have co-ed teams and have smaller teams. Many team sports can be played with fewer participants than the professional models. Supporting mixed gender teams also reduces participation deficits. Even in individual sports, genders do not need to be segregated, which would increase opportunities to practice and develop skills. Another way to address insufficient participation is to create multi-sport programs, so that children play three sports instead of one. This helps increase options and meet the demands of different interests, while safeguarding against lack of enrollment. A multi-sport program would also promote sampling and the principles of physical literacy by default.

Using technology to connect kids via virtual sport activities is another opportunity. Lack of transportation and access to safe places that would bring enough kids together to play a sport can pose serious challenges to keeping kids active. The social aspect of sport participation is

part of what makes sport fun – and the interactive nature of video games can serve as a model for designing sport programs that allow kids to practice and play alone or in pairs, then share it with their friends at a later time. One participant talked about trail runs, and how they can be packaged as adventures, in which kids log their runs and then recount them the next day at school. Another suggested building on the emergence of free, online training tools in which world-class coaches and athletes demonstrate skills and drills in short video clips; kids could register for an online program that rewards them for progress. This type of a program could include a social or sharing component in which kids participate by themselves and then share their experiences when together, or even with kids in other communities.

Barriers

- Transportation
- Social infrastructure
- Economic challenges
- Limited programming
- Physical literacy (comprehension/value)

Opportunities

- Space
- Leverage existing organizations
- Community engagement
- Technological innovations
- Programming untraditional and/or modified sports

Olympic Legacy

In light of the fact that the U.S. Olympic Committee is strongly considering bidding for a U.S. city to host the 2024 summer Olympic Games, this topic was added to the day's agenda. Legacy, loosely defined, generally refers to positive economic, social, and/or environmental outcomes that will last beyond the conclusion of the event. The International Olympic Committee requires all bid cities for Olympic Games to establish and define a concept of legacy specific to that location. For the most part, bid cities have focused predominantly on legacy as it relates to facilities and infrastructure. Therefore, attendees considered the ways that hosting an Olympic Games could best leave a legacy of community facilities. The table discussed the barriers to achieving legacy, as well as opportunities to enhance the legacy left after Games.

Most of the significant challenges identified by leaders revolved around costs and conflicting needs and goals. To begin with, major athletic facilities are not only expensive to build, they are costly to maintain. This means that sustained facility use will require sustained funding. When that cost gets passed on to the local grassroots sport organizations that would use such facilities, it increases costs for everyone, potentially pricing out individuals, teams, and leagues. Participants argued that what can happen is a diversion of funds from the grassroots to the elite level, stunting sport growth and participation in the long term. In addition, the range and quality of facilities needed to host an Olympic Games is far more extensive than the facility needs of a community. This creates a natural disconnect, and facilities are constructed without relevant local demand. They are also designed for entertainment rather than participation purposes; facilities are far larger, with far more seating, than they need to be for local use.

A lack of adequate planning and lack of focus on community development and engagement were also discussed in great depth. To begin with, legacy is a required component of any bid; however, the bid committee that develops the concept of legacy is different from the planning

committee that actually plans the games. This disconnect can cause inconsistencies and lack of prioritization down the line. In addition, despite requiring planning for legacy, there is no real mechanism in place to require and/or help cities to follow through and maintain their legacy initiatives. One of the greatest barriers to building and sustaining a legacy of community facilities is that we still don't know exactly how to do it. Related to this problem is that community engagement in planning and execution is often missing or limited, resulting in plans that displace individuals and businesses or place facilities in inaccessible locations. Community development is often secondary to hosting a successful event, which means that many of the alliances necessary for sustained legacy afterwards are never properly identified and built.

While there are many barriers to establishing and achieving legacy, particularly in regards to community facilities, these barriers are not insurmountable. The group identified three direct ways in which a legacy of facilities can be leveraged to better benefit the community. Once the facilities exist, they can be used to host other events, creating an on-going cycle of development and global exposure. In addition, hosting the games and having world-class facilities can generate interest in new sports that can translate into demand if properly managed. Bid committees can include participation targets into their definition of legacy, much as [London did with the 2012 summer Olympics](#), and then use the interest around both the Games and the state-of-the-art facilities to showcase new and different sports, with the ultimate goal of increasing participation. Then, after the Games, schools, recreation departments, and after-school programs should seek to use the facilities for activities. The existence of community recreation facilities creates the opportunity for new joint programs and collaborations among existing community-based organizations, particularly those that include sport as a component of their program. For example, the Chicago 2016 bid included youth sport participation among disadvantaged and at-risk youth as part of their concept of legacy. Despite losing the bid, World Sport Chicago still carries forward these initiatives by creating community partnerships that expose children to new sport opportunities.

The Olympic legacies group also identified two indirect opportunities for communities to benefit from a legacy of facilities. As mentioned, if facilities lead to increased economic activity and development, sports commissions could require a "community benefit" fee that would essentially collect funds to be used for maintenance and staffing that would allow local community members and sport organizations to use the facilities for no or little cost. This would provide a direct source of revenue earmarked specifically for maintaining facilities for community sport participation. Equipment donations and coach training could be considered as alternatives to a fee. Instead of local, grassroots organizations indirectly funding elite sport, this would redistribute funds so that the system is reversed, and elite sport contributes directly to the development of sustained sport participation. Another indirect opportunity is to use the bid process and any subsequent hosting of major sport events as a tool to develop human capital – the enlarging or building of a volunteer base, as well as improvement in the skills/leadership of local residents.

Gary Hall, Jr., former swimmer with 10 Olympic medals, proposed in the participants' post-event survey a holistic concept that integrated several of the ideas presented. "After the

conclusion of the Olympic Games, facilities should be further developed, with each being converted into a hybrid ‘active living’ community focused on sport and sports medicine,” Hall wrote. “Think: golf community or ski lodge/residences, but with soccer fields and volleyball and weight room and on-site physical therapy, sports medicine, massage, yoga, pilates, or acupuncture. Centralized athlete housing at the Athlete's Village should be decentralized; housing should be on-site at the sport venues and converted to residences after the Games. Additional sport fields and courts should be added to a pool venue and vice-versa so that the sport communities offer a variety of on-site options. Arrange a school bus to drop off from each of the surrounding schools (on an existing bus route) so that kids can go directly from school to the sport complex. Promote sport enrollment to working parents as after-school care.”

Barriers

- Cost of building/maintaining facilities
- Retrofitting to meet local needs
- Misalignments in planning groups
- Lack of knowledge on how to succeed
- Lack of community engagement

Opportunities

- Grow variety of local sport options
- Inspiration from sites of excellence
- Promote culture of sport participation
- More economic development
- Improve human capital (volunteers)

The breakout sessions lasted for roughly two hours, and upon completion, the groups reconvened to share their findings and strategies with input from everyone. During this concluding discussion, a suggestion was made that received a lot of positive feedback and warrants mention. Leading corporations in the outdoor industry have collaborated on a give-back initiative called “[1% for the Planet](#).” Each year, participating companies agree to donate 1% of their sales into a pooled fund that then redistributes the money to various non-profits with missions and programs consistent with positive environmental change. The idea was that a similar system could be created within the sport industry – a 1% for Play initiative that could help fund, among other items tied to getting more children active through sports, recreation infrastructure. While the idea was not discussed at length, it is a concept and strategy that will be explored further as the Project Play report is finalized and focus shifts to activation.

NEXT STEPS

The insights and findings from the day will help inform the recommendations made in the final report of Project Play, which will offer a new conceptual model for youth sport in America with eight supporting strategies. One of the issues addressed will be places to play. In its entirety, the report will address ways that a variety of sectors can help get every kid active through sports. The report, presented as a playbook for stakeholders to work together, will be released in late January.

Following the release of the Project Play report, the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program will host the Project Play Summit on Feb. 25, 2015 at the Newseum in Washington D.C. There, up to 300 leaders from sport, health, government, business innovation and other realms will explore and consider opportunities to activate on the ideas flowing from the report.

To receive a PDF copy of the report and be alerted to updates around the Summit, including registration details, sign up for the [Project Play mailing list on the front page of the website](#).

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

- [Research brief](#) by J.O. Spengler and Ori Baber from the University of Florida's Sport Policy and Research Collaborative: "Places to Play: A Summary of Key Characteristics of the Built Environment that Support 'Sport for All, Play for Life' Communities."
- [Event program](#), including list of attendees, informational charts and other materials
- [Event page](#) on Project Play website, with related news media features

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