



## **“Designing for Universal Access: How to Reach All Kids?” Roundtable Summary**

Despite all of the energy today that goes into organized youth sports in some communities, the system misses a lot of kids. Of the 51 million children between the ages of 6 and 17, only 27 million play a team sport in any form (organized or casual) even one time during the course of the year, according to a 2012 survey of U.S. households by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. Less than 16 million – just three of every 10 kids – play sports on a regular basis. Indeed, the shut out and pushed out, as well as those who opt out, are the norm, denied an experience that has the potential to deliver an array of social, health and other benefits.

The barriers to participation are greatest among vulnerable populations, children whose family or personal circumstances – economic, physical or otherwise – limit their access to the youth sport system as currently structured. Understanding and addressing the needs of these underserved groups is integral to the conceptualization and development of “Sport for All, Play for Life” communities, the guiding vision of the Aspen Institute’s Project Play.

On Jan. 15, 2014, the Sports & Society Program convened 25 national leaders in sport, health and coaching at the Clinton Health Matters Conference in La Quinta, Calif. The goals of the roundtable were to gather expert insights into the barriers faced by populations with lowest sport participation rates, identify common themes among these disparate populations, and begin to create opportunities for leaders of these groups to collectively address the deficits.

### OUTCOMES

The roundtable established a common understanding and point of view on:

- The need for social inclusion as a bedrock principle in community sports programs
- The need for leaders in the silo-ed underserved space to develop shared strategies
- The importance of coaching and program funding in greatly lifting participation rates

### AGENDA AND STIMULUS MATERIALS

The agenda and conversation were structured around five key groups of underserved children:

- Reaching low-income kids
- Reaching across cultures
- Reaching all girls
- Reaching the physically challenged
- Reaching the intellectually challenged

Each agenda item was introduced with a summary of the available research on sport and physical activity rates among those populations, as prepared in a report by the University of Florida Sport Policy and Research Collaborative (SPARC). The insights and observations below were captured in response to that data and those observations.

### TOPLINE FINDINGS AND SELECT OBSERVATIONS

Among discussants, there was significant support for taking action in three, cross-cutting areas:

1. *Consistent messaging:* Many of the programs that serve vulnerable populations simply need funding to serve more kids. Making the case depends on raising public awareness of those deficits, and the benefits provided to society when sport meets the needs of children and communities. So, what messages and communications tools are needed to amplify and elevate the barriers in the public mind? And what research is needed?
2. *Program design:* Effective ways to be more inclusive already exist – whether it’s proactive outreach, finding ways to appeal to certain populations, combining/integrating different populations, or modifying the program appropriately.
3. *Coach as catalyst:* Coaches are the first line of inclusiveness. They recruit, they role model, they decide who plays. The trick now is to figure out how to recruit more of them, from a greater diversity of backgrounds, and provide training that is not only standard in working with all kids but is specific to a given underserved population.

Following is a brief summary of the key themes observed in each of the specific areas:

#### **Low-Income Barriers**

Research shows that the mean age of entry into team sports for children from homes with incomes of \$100,000 or more is 6 years, 3 months; for kids from homes making less than \$35,000, it’s 8 years, 1 month. Earlier is not always better in adult-driven youth sports, given the potential for overuse injuries, burnout and other consequences of competition and training regimens that are not developmentally appropriate, but delayed entry can also limit a child’s access to the sport system, as play consolidates around the most committed participants.

Roundtable discussants agreed that a broad spectrum of issues impacts the sport participation of low-income kids. In addition, many of those kids face multiple barriers (i.e., girls, kids with physical and/or intellectual disabilities).

**Rising costs:** Texas A&M professor George Cunningham noted that, “The data are very clear. Income predicts activity levels and participation: it costs thousands of dollars to do the elite stuff.” In his post-event survey response, he added, “The biggest strategy to increase opportunities is to provide fully funded programming within the schools. This would make sure that all students had a chance to participate. While I appreciate the need for competitive varsity sports, if you want full access, it needs to be of the intramural variety. There is a lot of research out of North Carolina (see Mike Edwards at NC State) showing that intramural sports at the junior high and high school level offers more variety, has remarkable participation rates, and because students are involved in the delivery, builds leadership skills. This would also have to be fully funded, as even ‘nominal’ fees are out of range for many, many students.”

**Fundamental movement skills:** “Kids aren’t receiving the fundamental skills to play at all once they get to our program. They don’t have Physical Education in elementary school and then they get to middle school where there are competitive sports. That’s when they drop out.”—Normandie Nigh, Executive Director, A World Fit for Kids. Only four percent of elementary schools and eight percent of middle schools require daily PE.

“Starting early is huge for motor skills. We also provide training to parents because coaches can only be there so much. We want to make it competitive but fun. We try to make it a real game, and there are scalable ways to do that. We don’t want to lose the opportunity to build skills.” —Janet Froetscher, CEO, Special Olympics

**Safety:** “There’s a lack of facilities, trained coaches, safety. Parents aren’t going to let kids play somewhere without supervision. In concentrated poverty neighborhoods, there often aren’t sidewalks. Parents say ‘we don’t want our kids out there, especially our girls.’ You have to create a safe place.” —Janet Carter, CEO, Coaching Corps

**Single-parent homes:** Data show that kids from single-parent homes start sports at a mean age of 8 years, 8 months, a full two years later than kids from married families. “We work with all volunteer coaches. When they come on the field, they’re unemployed, working parents, single parents. They have their own barriers. One mom said she was motivated by the fact that she had an overcrowded house. Getting on the field did something for her mental health.”—Crystal Echo Hawk, Executive Director, the Notah Begay III Foundation

**Diversity of sport options:** Most team sports have lost participants in recent years, and the few that have grown, such as lacrosse, have done so largely in the suburbs. “We’re in lots of low-income communities. Access isn’t so much of an issue; the cost is \$25 a year. The challenge is diversity of opportunity. As we expand our portfolio, a golf program is great when a PGA pro comes in, but that’s not scalable.”—Wayne Moss, Sr. Director, Healthy Lifestyles, Boys & Girls Clubs

**Orientation of the adults in charge:** “Go Girl Go ...delivers to low-income girls. To reach the most, we go to the 20 largest cities. We don’t even call them coaches. We started calling them that, but now they’re program leaders. Program leaders were themselves surprised that girls wanted to do physical activity and be competitive, like, ‘Wow, it’s 100 degrees out today and they want to go out.’ We have to change the mindset of people leading the programs.”—Marj Snyder, Research Director, Women’s Sports Foundation

**Competing priorities in low-income communities:** “There are a lot of competing priorities for low-income and vulnerable populations; this is just one of many. If you look at participation figures, participation is higher for people who don’t have those issues and priorities to deal with, and rates of volunteer coaching are higher in less vulnerable populations because they don’t have those issues to deal with.”—Nathan Plowman, Partnerships Director, Access to Sport, Nike, Inc.

How to improve the experience, and increase quantity and quality of coaches, in low-income communities:

**Be flexible:** “Don’t assume. Don’t assume that the way you think it’s going to go, is the way it’s going to go. Just because you schedule a meeting doesn’t mean they’ll come. Lives are tragic in low-income communities. They still want the training... but you have to be flexible.”—Anita DeFrantz, President, LA84 Foundation

**Be innovative:** “We need a campaign to raise the public's willingness to volunteer as a coach for vulnerable populations of children, combined with the development of an open source technology platform that is the ‘go to’ source for coach training and support.”—Janet Carter, CEO, Coaching Corps

“It becomes the message from parents and caregivers. How do we use sport for youth development. How do we use sport to teach life lessons? At the end of the day, all kids want to play. To the extent that we promote play and movement, kids will want to do it.”—Wayne Moss, Sr. Director, Healthy Lifestyles, Boys & Girls Clubs

**Get parents on board:** “Around this table, we share the value of this [sport and physical activity]. With a family in need, we should never presume that valuing physical activity is there. Maybe that falls on us to bring to light some of the value and the benefits.”—Shale Wong, M.D., Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine, and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Senior Program Consultant

**Build capacity in the community:** “You can pair someone [an experienced coach] from outside the community with someone from inside the community. One of the things that happens is a mutual learning that goes on between the two. We need to build capacity within the community, not just go parachuting in.” —Janet Carter, CEO, Coaching Corps

## Cultural Barriers

The mean age for entry into organized sports among Caucasians is 6 years, 6 months; for African Americans it is 7 years, 7 months and for Hispanics it's 8 years, 2 months. As noted in the SPARC research brief prepared for this roundtable, "Significant events and practices in American history, such as segregation and racial exclusion, have severely limited racial minorities' participation in sports." In addition, access to sport and physical activity can be associated with nationality and immigration status is noted as a particularly unique challenge.

**Communication, customs:** "In Santa Clara County (Calif.), 50 percent of families speak a language other than English. There are 100 languages spoken. In places BAWSI serves, there are languages spoken that I've never heard of. There are girls from Afghanistan and Iraq who show up dressed differently. They have never played before. We need to understand how that impacts their experience." —Marlene Bjornsrud, CEO and Co-Founder, Bay Area Women's Sport's Initiative

"You absolutely have to understand the culture and language. We have 'code talkers' and create translations for certain words. It's about teaching them to be a champion for physical activity and sport." —Crystal Echo Hawk, Executive Director, the Notah Begay III Foundation

**Deportation fears:** Multiple speakers highlighted the challenge of engaging kids from homes where the parents have immigration issues. "There are over five million children with mixed legal status in our country. In particular, immigrant parents from Mexico are very hesitant to sign a permission slip even if it's just simply one name. There's tremendous fear about the implications." —Marlene Bjornsrud, CEO and Co-Founder, Bay Area Women's Sport's Initiative

**Family expectations:** In some cultures, adolescent girls are expected to take on family responsibilities with younger siblings to help their parents. Additionally, "For immigrant families, parents think their daughters are less interested. We're interested in the role of sport in the lives of families. Families who have kids who play sports say that the family lives are much more fulfilling and satisfying. It's powerful in both dual and single parent families." —Marj Snyder, Research Director, Women's Sports Foundation

**Priorities:** Among kids ages six to 11, a full 20.1 percent of boys and 15.7 percent of girls are obese, in part due to physical inactivity. Minorities have the highest rates, but the communities that many live in face an array of challenges, from failing schools to crime. "Vulnerable communities show incredible capacity to self-organize around issues which are of huge importance to them, so one question might be, 'Where in a list of priorities does this sit?'" —Nathan Plowman, Partnerships Director, Access to Sport, Nike, Inc.

How to improve the experience, and increase quantity and quality of coaches, for these kids:

**Young coaches (e.g., alumni, HS students):** “One of the most powerful ways to overcome barriers is within our own systems. We’ve spent a ton of time activating youth. They’re huge in terms of bringing others in, becoming coaches.” —Janet Froetscher, CEO, Special Olympics

“Develop coaching ‘camps’ for older youth and young adults to come together and learn about universal design in sports (with an associated certification) — with a goal to then return to their home communities for program implementation and monitoring.” — Cheri Blauwet, MD, Sports Medicine Fellow, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago

**Societal infrastructure that enables play:** “Insurance has doubled in the past year. Now we have to have teachers who are already in the school system, we have to send them through a second finger-printing. We also pay worker’s comp for all of those people.” — Normandie Nigh, Executive Director, A World Fit for Kids

**Role models:** Original research developed for Project Play and introduced at a November roundtable on coaching show that three-quarters of all youth coaches are male. “How do you engage more women to volunteer as coaches? Because building that relationship with an immigrant family, with a coach who looks like the daughter, is huge.” — Marlene Bjornsrud, CEO and Co-Founder, Bay Area Women’s Sport’s Initiative

## Barriers for Girls

Of the vulnerable populations discussed, we know the most about the sport and physical activity trends of girls. Despite large participation gains among girls since the introduction of Title IX in 1972, a gap remains between girls and boys at every level—from grade school to high school and community to competitive sports. Overall, boys have more access to sport and are more physically active. Roundtable respondents discussed possible reasons and solutions.

**Lack of enforcement of policy:** “Most schools are not in compliance with Title IX... The Women’s Sports Foundation, the National Women’s Law Center are overloaded with phone calls with problems from parents saying ‘This is not right.’ Or even if there is the sports team, they don’t have adequate coaches. It’s only with the threat of a lawsuit or someone comes in to educate that some changes are made.” —Deborah Slaner Larkin, Founder, Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sport and Health

**Lack of encouragement:** “Girls put more pressure on themselves because they don’t get the recognition that boys do.” —Joe Bear Ortiz, Youth Ambassador, Alliance for a Healthier Generation

“We don’t have a powerful, compelling message, I don’t think we have enough of the right messengers, and we aren’t getting the attention of the people who need to carry the message.” —Normandie Nigh, Executive Director, A World Fit for Kids

**Lack of opportunity:** Girls start playing sports midway through age seven, nearly a year later than boys. There are often fewer community sport options, then as they get older school sport options for the casual athlete are not plentiful. “What we’ve seen is the loss of teams at the lower-than-varsity level...and there aren’t intramural opportunities [so girls don’t play].” —Marj Snyder, Research Director, Women’s Sports Foundation

**Quality of experience:** “Participation rates tell one side of the story... We tend to see a lot of programs, especially mixed gender programs where X number of girls are signed up, but they aren’t having the same experience boys are having. So you get them all through the door in equal numbers, but...we’ve actually seen programs where all the boys are playing basketball and all the girls are watching.” —Nathan Plowman, Partnerships Director, Access to Sport, Nike, Inc.

How to improve the experience, and increase quantity and quality of coaches, for girls:

**Meet girls where they are:** “We could make vast improvements if we took the perspective that we should meet girls where they are and not where we think they should be, doing what we think they should be doing... If you want to capture girls in, say, New York City, you need to ask them what they like to do. Maybe it’s dance, maybe it’s Double Dutch...many people from high-rise buildings in the Bronx are from Caribbean nations, and the number one sport for girls there is netball. Can we meet girls where they are with what they want to be doing?” —Marj Snyder, Research Director, Women’s Sports Foundation

**Make sports fun:** This is especially important with some girls, who surveys show often play sports for social reasons, more so than boys on average. “Sports are supposed to be fun. If the coach isn’t making it fun, they need some time off. Maybe they need to take retirement and let someone else coach.” —Anita DeFrantz, President, LA84 Foundation

**Broaden the definition of sport:** Girls are interested in a wider array of sports and physical activities than boys are, several speakers noted. “In LA we introduced Step, Dance and Double Dutch—gender segregated. Almost immediately we saw a reversal in participation levels at lunch recess. We’ve sold ourselves short by not being more compulsive about gathering data.” —Jill Vialet, CEO, Playworks

“It’s not just about providing access to existing experiences. It’s about understanding what the new experiences we need to create are. It’s about broadening the definition and offering more things. This is why universal access is so important, because if you design for the hardest to reach—i.e., if you look at girls and say that some want to play traditional sports, but some don’t and we have to work harder to create experiences that they will enjoy. In doing so, you create the things that boys will want to do, too. So boys who aren’t interested in the traditional sports have access to these experiences as well. That’s why this theory that if you design for the hardest to reach populations, you

will gradually get everyone else engaged.” —Nathan Plowman, Partnerships Director, Access to Sport, Nike, Inc.

**Engage role models to increase visibility:** “Media might play a role in this. Boys see athletes on TV. They go out and want to be that guy. Girls don’t have that experience. Universities need to be much more intentional to invite young girls who don’t play sports to come to youth sporting events.” —Marlene Bjornsrud, CEO and Co-Founder, Bay Area Women’s Sport’s Initiative

**Women volunteers:** “We need a commitment that 50 percent of volunteer coaches are female. When you get two female coaches out to a school, just playing basketball where there isn’t any basketball, on day one a few girls might join. The next day, more will show up.” —Janet Carter, CEO, Coaching Corps

## Barriers for Children with Intellectual and Physical Disabilities

The data show that people with disabilities have far higher rates of sedentary lifestyles than people without disabilities—47 percent versus 27 percent. Broadly speaking, participants emphasized awareness and disability-specific program design as key issues to focus on.

**Stigma and fear:** “It’s not just ‘let’s let the kids play basketball.’ It’s: ‘How do we structure it so they want to play?’ There’s a stigma with our population. There are low expectations. Sports can break that down. There’s fear. People don’t know what to do. Sports changes that and can breed respect.” —Janet Froetscher, CEO, Special Olympics

**Lack of creativity:** “There’s a better understanding now that kids with disabilities can be part of the sports culture... but no state is doing it well. There’s no school that provides a pathway for students with disabilities to be varsity athletes. We see an opportunity to create sports that are for both people with and without disabilities — e.g., wheelchair basketball for all. Technology and innovation can affect everyone too. Overall, we need more research, more ongoing data collection.” —Eli Wolff, Program Director, Inclusive Sports Initiative, Institute for Human Centered Design

**Elitist perspective:** “Just because you have an intellectual disability, doesn’t mean you’re not a good athlete.” —Janet Froetscher, CEO, Special Olympics

How to improve the experience, and increase quantity and quality of coaches, for disabled kids:

**Change the framing:** “So much of it comes down to recognizing athletes as athletes. I’m an athlete with a disability or a female athlete. We don’t need descriptors. It needs to move from a human interest story to a sports page story.” —Cheri Blauwet, MD, Sports Medicine Fellow, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine

**Create multiple competition formats:** “We bring people with and without intellectual disabilities together. What we’ve learned is that you’ve got to split it into three different levels. One is purely competitive where you have your really strong athletes and they play with athletes without intellectual disabilities...Others are where you deliberately build a structure where you’re mismatching folks where one half is really mentoring the other half...and the other is pure recreational play...you create an experience where everyone is having just a fun experience. You have to be careful about how you structure it and what you want to get out of it.” —Janet Froetscher, CEO, Special Olympics

**Ramp up program design:** “Structure is vital in program design. We taught a group of 5-year-olds baseball. Throwing balls with both left and right hand uses opposite sides of the brain. We drew a baseball diamond. A non-verbal kid was humming ‘take me out to the ballgame.’” —David Geslak, Autism Fitness Specialist and Founder, Exercise Connection

**Enforce Department of Education policy:** [Referring to the recent Office of Civil Rights’ Dear Colleague Letter which clarifies expectations of the opportunities public schools must provide to kids with disabilities] “I think the door is open for us to have the conversation. The message is that sport is not a ‘nice to have when you have an extra 15 minutes.’ Sports are an incredibly powerful way to make us more productive, more cognitively ready, more fit to do whatever we want to do.” —Janet Froetscher, CEO, Special Olympics

“It’s an excellent opportunity to help the school districts and to help the sports culture to see that kids with disabilities should be able to access sports. One of the things about the opportunities in the schools is that it’s about the individuality. So you have a particular student with a particular disability and a particular interest in a particular sport, we need to be able to understand that...there’s definitely a level of opening the door. They’re inviting us to the table and looking at how to think through the coaches’ training and the policy aspects, and to look at what kinds of sports [can be adopted].” —Eli Wolff, Program Director, Inclusive Sports Initiative, Institute for Human Centered Design

## NEXT STEPS

Several roundtable members including Ginny Ehrlich, CEO of the Clinton Health Matters Initiative, expressed an interest in leading a smaller work group that could help turn some of the above ideas into collective action. That group plans to convene in New York on April 17.

Opportunities before the group include:

- Defining an agenda and messaging strategy for socially inclusive sports that can be used in communicating with public, stakeholder and internal audiences.
- Developing methods to share knowledge on effective program design.

- Identifying gaps in research that can help make the case for new program investment

#### SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Research report by Michael Sagas and George B. Cunningham, the University of Florida's Sport, Policy & Research Collaborative: [Sport Participation Rates among Underserved American Youth](#)

Full list of participants and other materials can be found on the [Project Play microsite](#).

*The Sports & Society Program thanks Nike for its support of this roundtable series, the Clinton Foundation for hosting the group at the Clinton Health Matters Conference, and the University of Florida for its research report.*

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