



Active Kids,
Healthy
Community

Successes, Limitations, and Barriers to Community Groups' Usage of Public Schools

***"... It's a shame to think that there's a gem sitting unused,
when it could be a benefit to the community."***

Introduction

Research confirms that the more active children are, the healthier they will be now and when they grow up. The District needs to ensure residents in all wards have equal access to clean, safe, and convenient places for recreational activities, especially given growing rates of violence/trauma and chronic diseases in many of the District's communities that might partially be addressed when children and adults engage regularly in physical activity out of harms way.

Shared use, or facility use, agreements allow community groups, non-profit organizations, and local government agencies to make use of public school facilities and grounds when school is out during evenings, weekends, and vacation time. As the community seeks safe, clean, and convenient spaces to be physically active, they should be able to readily use the gymnasiums, sports fields, courts, tracks and other facilities at their local public schools. In a survey of community groups conducted by Advocates for Better Children's Diets (ABCD), every one of the community groups stated that school recreation facilities should be accessible to the community outside of normal school hours, including before school, evening, weekend, and summer.

"They're public resources that are in many ways taxpayer funded. They should be open for general use. They are also safe spaces for adult and child recreation. Opening up some of these spaces creates diversions and keeps kids engaged..." - Anonymous Survey Response

In the District of Columbia, there are many steps in the process to apply and receive approval for shared use of school facilities. Prior to the proposed date for shared use of a school facility, an organization must first complete an *Application to Use Facilities* form, then receive approval by the school principal, and, lastly, wait at least 20 days before the application is reviewed and approved by the Department of General Services (DGS) Realty Office. The applicant must show proof of public liability insurance coverage and pay the associated fees for the use of identified space plus additional fees for kitchen, custodial/maintenance, and security services.

ABCD is reaching out to community groups and residents to encourage children and families to get active after school, on the weekends, and in the summer when schools are vacant. Schools in several areas of the city are regularly open for the community to use, but this practice is not universal. In data collected through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request¹ from the Department of General Services, ABCD discovered that shared use agreements for recreational activities are only utilized by 50%

¹ Advocates for Better Children's Diets, 2015 FOIA-03469, DC Department of General Services, June 16, 2015.

of Ward 8 schools, 36% of Ward 5 schools, and 25% of schools in wards 4 and 7.² The underutilization of facilities at schools in these priority communities tracks with the high rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other chronic diseases in these wards.³

ABCD conducted a survey of community groups that have used schools for recreational activities and analyzed their responses regarding successes, limitations, and barriers of the current shared use agreement process in the District in this report.

Data Collection

ABCD identified community groups who are currently or have previously entered into shared use agreements with public schools in priority wards 4, 5, 7, and 8. These groups were identified through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) for shared use agreements from D.C. Department of General Services request showing community organizations that have used school facilities in all wards for various activities from June 2013 through June 2015. The FOIA list of D.C. public elementary schools, middle schools, and education campuses was narrowed to schools in only wards 4, 5, 7, and 8. Only community groups that were using the school spaces specifically for physical activity were included in the survey sample.

The survey was conducted in August and September, 2015. Sixty community groups were initially emailed the survey, and then contacted by phone to complete a brief survey. (Many groups required multiple phone calls, emails, or both to reach.) 29 community groups responded through email to the survey, a rate of about 50 percent of those requested.

The survey includes 12 questions, seven of which are open ended. The answers were then consolidated into categories for analysis. The analysis of the responses included frequency of responses for each question and the percentage of the total number of responses to question on benefits and one on barriers. The responses to the other questions were summarized in qualitative descriptions in place of quantitative analysis.

Findings

The following sections depict the responses to survey questions from community groups that have entered into shared use agreements with public schools in the District of Columbia.

Benefits to Using School Spaces

Table 1 summarizes the benefits identified by community groups in an open-ended question, “What are the benefits of using school space for your activity?”

² Advocates for Better Children’s Diets. Opportunities to Share Clean, Safe Spaces at Public Schools. Washington, DC August, 2015.

³ DCDOH. *D.C. Community Health Needs Assessment, Volume 1*. Washington, DC. Feb 28, 2014. http://doh.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doh/page_content/attachments/DC%20DOH%20CHNA%20%28Final%29%2004%2030%202014%20-%20Vol%201.pdf. Accessed October 8, 2015.

Table 1: Benefits to Community Groups Using Public School for Physical Activity

Response category	Tally	Percent
Accessibility/Convenience of location/Close to home	18	62%
Kids' familiarity space/ Comfort with school environment	11	38%
Quality of facilities	7	24%
Safer/Keeps kids off street/supervision	5	17%
Helps parents	3	10%
Size of space	3	10%
Cost	2	7%
Consistency/Long-term	1	3%

The responses point to accessibility/convenience, familiarity, quality, and safety as the top four benefits. It is clear that use of schools helps keep children safe, away from negative activity, and close to home. Here is a sampling of what the groups said directly—

“...We’re able to serve youth in our program much better. We also help at risk youth stay away from crime and deviant behavior. We keep kids focused, active, and off the streets.”

“The local schools and community centers will always be places of comfort and support in the community. Its accessibility provides a safe haven for the kids. It helps bond the community together.”

Barriers to Using School Spaces

In an open-ended question, “What are the barriers to using school space for your activity?” community groups identified these barriers to using school space for their recreational and physical activities.

Table 2: Barriers to Community Groups Using Public School for Physical Activity

Response category	Tally	Percent
Navigating government system/paperwork	9	31%
Limited availability/accessibility of space	6	21%
Security and maintenance/custodial costs	5	17%
School administration/athletic director uncooperative	5	17%
Too many steps in the process/too lengthy	3	10%
Overall cost	3	10%
Competition from other groups	3	10%

School programming	1	3%
Children bored with same setting	1	3%
Parking/traffic	1	3%

Table 2 shows the four main barriers to entering into shared use agreements were navigating government system/paperwork, limited availability of space, low priority for school administration, and security and maintenance costs. These areas of concern point to an inefficient process of reviewing and approving these agreements that can deter groups from using the clean, safe, and convenient school space. Here are some specific quotes from the responders—

“The process of the application and getting the space reserved can be tedious. There is a lot of paperwork, and getting it approved with all the specifications (site date, etc.) can be challenging. There are a lot of steps in the process.”

“The administrative staff is not responsive. Took at least 10 phone calls to figure out from several schools that there was no space available. It would be nice to have a central system to view inventory of school facilities or at least a central person coordinating efforts effectively.”

Costs Associated with Shared Use Agreements

Applicants for use of school facilities must agree to pay a pro-rated rental fee based on the type and space of facility and days of rental. Dependent on the facility rented, there may be additional fees for personnel related to custodial, engineering, security, repairman, and food services. A third requirement is for insurance coverage and presentation of policy, level of coverage, and insurance company information.

Sixty-nine percent of the responding community groups found the costs of using the space “A Good Deal” or “Acceptable”; but 31 percent found the costs “Expensive” or “Too Expensive.” Many of the responses stated that the set rental fees were acceptable, but the additional charges for maintenance or security made the overall cost expensive. These fees vary depending on the contracted services and use of the space.

“...They’re not necessarily a barrier, but I think they’re prohibitive. There are additional fees that are charged for staffing at facilities beyond what you would pay for just a rental. You end up paying more than you should have to. You’re paying for services that you’re not always using or not always receiving even though you’ve paid for them.”

As previously mentioned, groups are required to obtain insurance policies, while the amount of the policies vary, 93% of groups reported that the cost of maintaining the required insurance is not a barrier to securing the school space. Since the survey was only conducted of groups who have entered into agreements, we cannot assess if the requirement of liability coverage is a barrier with groups who have not received shared use agreements.

Some survey respondents also indicated the fees are much lower and acceptable when they have an arrangement through a separate (often larger) association rather than if they worked directly with the school. Some groups partner with the Home and School Association or with the D.C. Parks and Recreation Service.

Conclusion

While shared use agreements are being utilized in many public schools in the District, there are opportunities to expand the usage and offer physical activity in safe, convenient, and clean spaces. Based on the barriers identified in the survey, including navigating the system, cost of fees, and difficulty communicating with school administration, there are many simple solutions D.C. Public Schools and Department of General Services can take to maximize use of these spaces for the community.

When the community groups were asked, “How would you rate your experience in the process of applying to reserve space and communicating with the school?,” respondents gave D.C. Public Schools and DGS a total cumulative “GPA” of 2.59 on a 4-point scale, or a C+.

Participants were also given an opportunity to share their suggestions on ways to increase their communities’ use of school recreation areas, some of the responses included—

“It would be beneficial to have a community advisory council for schools to facilitate partnership between schools and the community. For example, holding regular [town hall] meetings would be good. There has to be a mandate from above saying we want schools to increase collaboration with the community.”

“Have an easier, more defined person at these facilities that can serve as the first person of contact for the space. This clearly defined person should be someone who you can reach and who you can rent through. In the current system, it varies from school to school who serves in this role, if anyone.”

“... At a minimum, there should be a web-based system where you can log on and request the space. (DC Parks and Rec, for example, has a minimum web based system where you can log on and request space). There is a permitting window – for example between January 1 and 21 – there is a window where you can request to use the space. The people who do that on the school level (DCPS) don’t have anything. It’s very paper based and very cumbersome to the point where it just creates more barriers.”

D.C. has the ninth highest childhood obesity rate in the United States, according to Child Health Data⁴. Currently, 35% of the District’s youth are overweight or obese, and these numbers appear even worse in some neighborhoods in the city. Recreation areas at D.C. public schools are a valuable resource to provide physical activity, safety, and sense of community. These facilities are legally available to community groups, but many are not being used for numerous reasons.

As residents seek safe and clean spaces to be physically active, they should be able to join their community in utilizing the gymnasiums, courts, and outside recreational facilities at their neighborhood public schools. The District leadership needs to ensure that logistical improvements will be made to the process of providing shared use agreements to allow these open recreation facilities to be used by the community.

⁴ Child and Adolescence Health Measurement Initiative, 2011 National Survey of Children's Health, <http://www.childhealthdata.org/browse/allstates?q=2415>, accessed July 31, 2015.

Next Steps

Responses from the community organizations seeking and using the D.C. shared use agreements at public schools provide some specific recommendations for next steps to ensure safe and familiar neighborhood schools are open to children and adults throughout the District. They've cited facility access/convenience, keeping kids off the street, and familiarity with location as the biggest benefits of using school space for recreational activities. The focus on promoting and implementing shared use of safe spaces at public school recreational facilities in all D.C. neighborhoods may be a universally appropriate approach to three issues contemplated by D.C. leadership –

- How to encourage neighborhood engagement and safety
- How to be equitable in capital improvement of school facilities
- How to address trauma (poverty, violence, homelessness) to improve educational outcomes for youth

Despite the existence of shared use agreements for public school facilities in the District, community groups reported barriers to frequent and robust use of recreational facilities in neighborhoods. Based on these responses, the following may be next steps for D.C. leaders to explore –

1. Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the current process for seeking approval for shared used by:
 - a. Identify an agency that approves and oversees the agreements; has a high priority to promote public health and public safety; and has connections to community residents
 - b. Improve transparency of the process that offers easy access for all community groups and public schools
 - c. Centralize applications and approvals that will:
 - i. Allow a community group, when approved for use of one school's facilities, be added to a list of qualified groups that would be eligible for additional shared use requests
 - ii. Permit community groups to find alternative schools for their activities when initial school is unavailable
 - iii. Set up a consistent time frame for approval or denial of applications for school use
 - iv. Establish and make transparent criteria for approvals and denials
 - v. Modify the requirements for shared use agreements as needed
 - d. Balance the use of school facilities between local government entities and community groups, both national and local
2. Convene a one-year advisory group (task force) representing adult and children residents; community groups; principals from public and public charter elementary, middle and high schools; local government agencies; recreational organizations; and public health professionals to develop a comprehensive plan that balances the needs of and removes barriers for schools, local government and community groups when sharing use of school recreational facilities.

3. Appoint a liaison to connect schools and community groups and create a clearinghouse where schools could search for programming they would like to bring to their community, and groups could see what locations and times are available.
4. Deliver technical assistance to local schools and to community groups through individualized assistance, a D.C. shared use technical assistance toolkit, and publicly accessible website through the lead agency with shared use resources and existing shared use agreements.
5. Establish a shared use program fund and eligibility for use of funds that would:
 - a. Assist both schools and community groups in high-risk neighborhoods with limited safe recreational spaces to cover: the custodial/maintenance fees, security costs, and repairs of fields, equipment, and floors of facilities to open school recreational spaces for community use
 - b. Explore mechanisms to extend liability coverage to non-profit community groups lacking the funds for adequate liability coverage required by shared use agreement.
6. Institute system for monitoring:
 - a. Applications and approvals for shared use of recreational facilities by local governments and community groups
 - b. School recreational facilities opened by neighborhood, time, and days of week and for documenting the effect and extent of expenditure of shared use program fund

For more information on the Active Kids, Healthy Communities initiative, please contact Franciel Dawes at franciel@diets.org or visit www.dcactivekids.org.