Missouri Community Use of School Property

School Administrator and End User Survey Report

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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 Missouri State Alliance of YMCAs Pioneering Healthier Communities team, funded through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2013 to work on Childhood Obesity Policy Improvements, identified Community Use as a critical area to improve public policy in Missouri. Out of a statewide team, six leaders stepped forward to define and lead a project, in partnership with the Public Health Law Center, to learn about and document barriers related to community use in Missouri. As a starting place, this group created a survey for both school administrators and for those individuals and groups using school property (referred to as the “end users.”) This report highlights the key components of the survey and identifies recommendations for next steps.
School Administrator Survey

Who took the survey

The survey was sent to 560 school administrators, and 81 responded. Of those, 40 were superintendents and 29 were principals. Other respondents included facilities managers, activity/afterschool directors, assistant principal, nurse and chamber of commerce director. Respondents had a range of experience (0–20 years), with the average at 5.8 years on the job. Respondents represented large districts (the largest had 84 schools), but the majority were smaller, with 65 reporting 10 or less schools, and 14 having only one school. Every region of the state was represented, as well as every size of community. Most respondents identified as being from small, rural communities.
School property is being used by community members

Respondents reported various levels of use by the community during non-school hours, with only three reporting zero use. Twenty-nine respondents reported 1–10 times of use per month, 22 respondents 11–20 times, 11 respondents 21–40 times, and only three reporting more than 41 times per month. More than 85% reported reoccurring use, as opposed to one-time use. The most common facility used is the gymnasium and sports fields (see Figure 1 below). Playgrounds were generally open for community use outside the school day. Only half of the schools reported leaving their tracks open during non-school hours, with slightly more use (roughly 60%) for sports fields. There was less reported use before school hours during the school week. When asked the most important factors influencing the decision to allow use of facilities for sports and recreation, the most important ranked reasons were building partnerships with community and/or families of students; public service; lack of other recreation/sport facilities in the area; and meeting health and physical needs of community. The least important factors reported were because it was required by policy; as a cost-sharing method and; administrative efficiency.

**Figure 1: Facilities for community use**

Response in School Administrator Survey when asked the question, “What types of facilities are included for community use of school facilities in your district? Check all that apply.” The most common responses were gymnasium (93% of school have this as a part of their facilities), sports field (72%), and cafeteria (62%).

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Community use is already happening, so the goal is to help support more use by community members.
Even though community use is happening, liability is still a concern and is impacting the frequency of use

In the survey, respondents listed liability concerns as the number one issue with community use of school facilities. Other common concerns included equipment safety and potential increase of crime. Lack of requests, insurance, priority of use, and cost were the least likely to be factored in to a decision to not allow use.

Respondents identified several forms of existing written guidance that they use for direction on community use, including school board policy, facility and equipment request forms, joint use agreements/lease agreements, and waiver forms in that descending order. Despite ranking liability as a key barrier to allowing use, respondents still overwhelmingly said liability coverage for scheduled/formal use was very good or good (nearly 70%). There was less knowledge about the liability coverage for unscheduled/informal use, with just over 50% rating their liability coverage was very good or good. Yet, around 20% of all respondents didn't know the liability coverage for either type of use.

Most of the respondents, nearly 75%, reported that insurance was required for use. The majority of schools reported using Missouri United School Insurance Council (43 administrators), 10 reported self-insured, four reported being unsure, and two reported using MPR/MOPEM. Respondents reported insurance and school board policies provided the best protection against liability, with waivers being the least likely to provide protection.

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Missouri offers strong liability protection for schools allowing community use of school property during non-school hours. Furthermore, insurance coverage often fills the gap of that liability coverage. Therefore, training and resources on liability protection and insurance coverage may help eliminate barriers to increased community use of school property.

Increased funding for programming, staffing, supervision, maintenance and facilities would help support increased community use of school property

The survey asked respondents an open-ended question about what would help support increased community use. Many answers came back to funding for the various components that make community use a successful endeavor, with funding for facility construction and maintenance at the top of the wish list. While some respondents were very general about the funding needed, others had specific ideas for the type of facility updates needed to increase use, such as hallway gates or an electronic door system.

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Identification of creative funding streams or shared revenue options for schools could positively impact community use. Even small investments, such as hallway gates, could increase community use of school property.
In some instances, updating written policies and procedures could increase community use

Updating written policies and procedures, including the scheduling system, were also identified as ways to increase community use. While many respondents reported the school board policy as an important tool in limiting liability concerns, those same policies were also identified as creating barriers to use. For example, one respondent reported that community use was limited to school district residents.

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Written policies and procedures are guiding school administrator action relating to community use, so updating those policies and procedures to incorporate best practices could increase community use of school property.
The End User Survey

Who took the survey

The End User Survey was sent to engage community groups, with the objective of assessing the obstacles and potential opportunities to make the use of school property a viable and sustainable option for the communities to be active and healthy. There were 170 respondents who took the survey. Respondents were asked what group(s) they represented, and the survey allowed for multiple selections. The highest identified groups were Public Recreational Department/Districts (36), Youth sports leagues (36), YMCA (32), and other K–12 (32). There was modest representation from Public Health (17), 4-H (14), adult sports league (15), Boys/Girls Club (14), Boy/Girl Scouts (12) and Child Care/Pre-School (14). Other respondents represented YWCA, FFA, health care providers, city/county departments, WeCan, University of Missouri Extension, a development association, colleges/universities, enrichment programs, community centers, foundations, community partnerships, Head Start, faith-based programs, individual community members, for-profit entities and other non-profit entities. When asked about the primary focus of the programming, respondents reported Sport (18%), Recreation/Physical Activity (28%), Art/Music (1%), and Education (29%). Twenty-four percent chose “other”, and then specified combinations of the list above, or more of a more general focus (i.e., “wellness,” “whole child,” or “health.”)

This survey covered the entire state of Missouri, capturing the voices of users in rural and urban areas. As with the school administrator survey, the majority of respondents (36%) represented small rural communities. Nearly 90% of respondents reported participants are physically active during programming, with 66% reporting the primary focus of the programming is physical activity (mostly vigorous physical activity). The primary audience for programming was youth (51%) and youth and adults (43%). Many of the respondents reported using public spaces for physical activities (54%), many reported having their own facilities to be active (50%), and a smaller group reported a partnership with another facility (43%). Many respondents allow other organizations to use their facilities for a fee (51%) and less allow use for no fee (39%), although there was great variability on the other responses.

More access to schools would mean more opportunities to be physically active

As reported above, many respondents reported using other facilities. The most common facilities that are used are schools (78% of organizations use schools in their programming) and parks (69%), but there were several other facilities being used across Missouri. Most respondents were aware of the ability to use school properties for physical activity, with only 11% not knowing about that option. Most respondents had requested use of school property (72%). An overwhelming amount of respondents (78%) responded that having more access to the facilities would help them and their families increase physical activity. Of those who reported that increased access would not result in increased physical activity, the reasons were: cost, staffing or not a need for programming at this time.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Figuring out ways to increase availability of school property for community use would directly relate to increasing physical activity in the community.
Schools are opening their doors, but community groups are being denied due to lack of space or use by other “priority” groups, such as school-sponsored activities.

As reported above, most respondents had requested use of school property (115 respondents). Of those 115, 47 reported being denied access to school property at some point. The reasons for the denial varied, with some common trends being:

- No availability/space (24)
- School events were priority or not a priority user group (11)

In another survey section, respondents reported that scheduling was the major barrier to community use, with 43% citing limited hours of availability, 33% reporting school priorities trumping other programming, and 32% citing not enough space/facilities. When describing the use, respondents often just talked about the gym or outdoor facilities, rather than other school facilities.

Figure 2: Barriers to incorporating physical activity

Response in the End User Survey when respondents were asked, “Do you have any of the following barriers to incorporating some or more physical activity into your programming? Check all that apply.” The top barriers were cost, access to facilities, and that participants did not want it. Some of the other options specified in the “other” category were limits to space and staffing, distance and transportation to/from the locations, and lack of knowledge around programs.

When asked to describe their experience with the school districts, more than 100 responded, many expressing very positive support and interactions with the school district. Many of the respondents shared positive experiences reported written agreements that defined use and responsibilities. Space/availability continued to be the main issue, especially in the winter months. Also, several respondents reported that last-minute cancelations were a big problem. Cost was also cited by several respondents, with a few talking about the rent/school staff costs, but also the costs of the organization sending staff to run the programming at the school.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Identification of additional ways to use school property (such as hallways, weight rooms and classrooms) and maximize scheduling of more groups could increase community use of school property.
Making the process easier for community groups could result in more requests and more use of school property

There were 34 respondents who stated that they had not requested to use school property. Several reported that they were already using school property or their programming didn't need the use of school property. But, a handful of respondents did not know they could request use of school property. Several respondents reported that availability was the major issue, and that school activities had use of the facilities for the majority of the time. A few takeaways include:

- **Scheduling:**
  - No shared calendar
  - Time consuming/district non-responsive
  - Schools bumped users out if school needed facility
  - Scheduling was very difficult and the schools were using the facilities for the majority of the time. Even the process of scheduling was identified as a barrier, as it was time consuming and the school didn't respond quickly.

- **Transportation, especially in rural areas**

- **Limited hours**
  - No time before school
  - Limited after-hours use
  - Have to pay for someone to supervise/clean up

- **Cost of rent and staff time**

- **Past bad experiences/do not want to work with school administrators**

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**Figure 3: Increased access to facilities**

Response in End User Survey when respondents were asked the question, "If you had increased access to facilities, would you increase the amount of physical activity programming you provide?"

Of the 155 responses for this question, 78% answered yes.

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**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Barriers like scheduling difficulty, lack of transportation, cost, and limited hours kept some groups from accessing the school property; some end users had past negative experiences that prevented them from returning with their programming.
Successful partnerships have good communication, including written agreements, sharing of spaces, and a group to oversee the process

As reported above, there are successful models around the state where community groups are using school property. The respondents reported that good communication is key, and several highlighted the importance of a cooperative use agreement or shared usage agreements as useful ways to share space and have clear duties, roles and responsibilities. Other respondents identified having a group that works on community use issues as a helpful strategy to coordinating use of school property.

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Developing tools for schools and community groups to use that build off the successes within Missouri could increase community use in other areas.

Many groups have healthy food practices for participants, but cost and access to refrigeration identified as barriers

The survey also asked respondents about providing healthy food choices during these physical activities that would take place as an outcome of shared use of school properties. Over half provided the answer that they provided food to the participants. However, only 60% reported having a practice of providing healthy food choices, with nearly 24% stating it was required according to a written policy of healthy food and beverage nutritional standards. There are many barriers from this perspective as well. Respondents voiced opinions stating that cost was a barrier to providing healthy foods, along with other barriers including access to a kitchen/refrigeration, and this not being a priority for the program overall. Thirty-two respondents reported having a sponsorship agreement with a food or beverage company, with 119 reporting no such agreement.

**KEY TAKEAWAY:** Community use of school property policies and procedures should account for programming striving to serve healthy food to participants.
Recommendations

Across Missouri, community use of school property is happening. Figuring out how to increase the frequency of use and expand the groups using school property is a critical objective to increase opportunities for community members to be physically active. Based on the survey results, the following recommendations should be pursued in Missouri.

Update the community use policies and procedures

Many school districts in Missouri use a version of the model Missouri School Boards’ Association policy and procedures. Updating the existing templates to incorporate best practices for fees, scheduling, staffing, security, kitchen access, liability and insurance language could help schools implement those best practices. Other templates, such as those used by Missouri Consultants for Education (MCE) should be identified and updated as well. Updates of policies and procedures should be widely disseminated through email, websites, and presented at trainings and annual meetings for school board members, school administrators and other school personnel.

Demystifying liability and insurance for school administrators

Missouri has strong liability protections for school districts and school officials. Creating resources about liability protections and how insurance can help could go a long way in allaying liability fears by school administrators and other personnel. It is critical to include key partners, such as those drafting template policies, those insuring schools and those representing schools, in the development of these resources. The resulting information should be presented to the school administrators and other
school personnel through trainings. Stakeholders could also pursue state legislation to clarify liability protections for school administrators and school personnel when allowing community use of school property during non-school hours.

Creating tools to support community use

Schools may not have the time or resources to identify ways to increase community use of school property. Therefore, stakeholders could create a “Community Use Toolkit for Schools” that might include resources that identify 1) success stories of community use in Missouri, 2) partners and technical assistance resources for schools, 3) grant opportunities for community use, and/or 4) handbook information for community users. This information could be housed on a website that is easily accessible to school districts and community users, and include a repository of forms and resources used by school districts, sortable by school district and community size.

Identify best practices for scheduling

Scheduling is a major barrier to community use. Therefore, identifying tools to help schools better utilize existing scheduling software and/or communicating the scheduling process to the community is an important first step. This could be part of a larger effort to identify templates and handbooks for schools to use that incorporate the best practices into the Missouri community use context.

Investigate funding streams

Cost is a huge barrier to increasing community use. Even small investments in gates or updated facilities could go a long way to increase the availability of space on school property. There successful models of using cooperative agreements with other local entities to defray costs. Furthermore, there are existing funding opportunities through public and private entities that support community use of school property, and increased access to physical activity and healthy food more generally. Helping schools and end users find and access those funds is an important step at addressing the cost issue.

Next Steps & Conclusion

In sum, this process identified tremendous interest and broad support for community use of school property, both by school administrators and by the community users themselves. Furthermore, community users reported they would be more physically active with increased opportunities to use school property. Finally, the survey identifies the importance of thinking not just about physical activity, but also considering healthy food options during the conversation and implementation of the recommendations to increase community use of school property. The barriers to use are not insurmountable, and Missouri stakeholders can make significant progress by updating policies to facilitate community use, break down barriers to understanding liability and insurance, and tackle scheduling and funding with targeted interventions. There are opportunities for leadership in the various sectors to implement the recommendations at a local and statewide level. The result will be a healthier, more active Missouri.