



Community Recreational Use of School Property: Why is it Important?

Being physically active is important for both individual and public health.¹ The obesity epidemic is driven, in part, by the lack of physical activity and presence of sedentary lifestyles. For people to be physically active, they must have access to safe, affordable and convenient recreational facilities. However, many communities do not have these recreational facilities available to them. As a result, public health advocates are focusing attention on ways to increase community access to safe, affordable and convenient places to be physically active.² Communities with limited access to public recreational space are exploring opportunities to partner with schools for the use of school property to promote physical activity in the community. 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.³

How do schools promote community activities on school property?

In Minnesota, many schools have a community education department that coordinates community use of school district facilities. How this looks depends on the size of the school district. In general, the goal and mission of each district is to maximize the use of school facilities during non-school hours, without interfering with the education of its students.

While communities are key stakeholders of public school facilities, the local school boards



set policies and procedures and oversee operations of school facilities use.

In many Minnesota communities, the biggest need for space is for physical activity. Therefore, it is important that school districts allow for community recreational use of school property.

What do we mean when we say recreational use?

In general, the term “recreational use” is synonymous with “physical activity.” While recreational use of school property might generally spark visions of organized team sports, recreational use can in fact include a wide range of activities, such as walking or playing on the playground, and even passive recreational or leisure activities like gardening or bird watching.

For schools, recreational use of school property by community members for physical activity is generally associated with community access to the school’s outdoor playgrounds, tracks and fields, although it can be for indoor gyms, pools or other indoor recreational equipment. Often this includes organized and formal or unstructured and informal sports. In sum, recreational use of school property promoting physical activity can generally be categorized in one of the four groups:

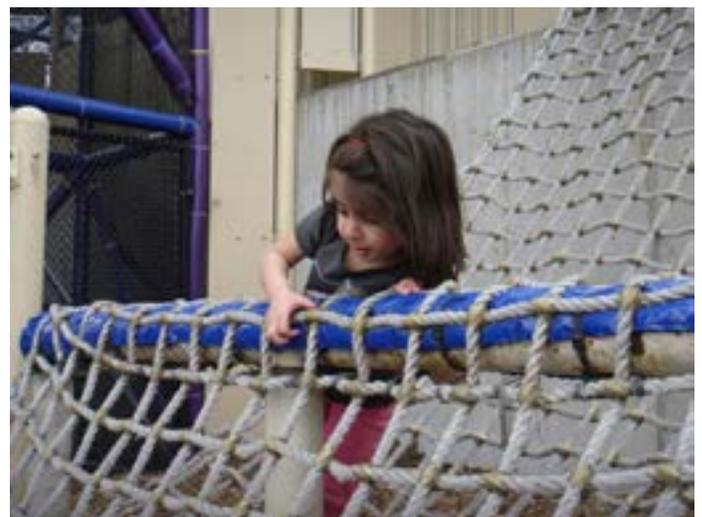
- Unsupervised (or informal) physical activities on outdoor school property, such as children playing on a playground or an informal game of basketball;
- Unsupervised (or informal) physical activities on indoor school property, such as open gym or walking the hallways in bad weather;
- Organized (or formal) physical activities on outdoor school property, such as youth soccer leagues; and
- Organized (or formal) physical activities on indoor school property, such as YWCA swim classes or youth basketball.⁴

The community use of school property is not limited to recreational activities, and could also include other activities such as voting, public events, religious meetings, and other group meetings.

Why should schools allow community use of school property?

School boards have several incentives to allowing community recreational use of school property. Making indoor and outdoor school space available helps the community stay active, creates community support for schools, and allows for a community gathering place. In a survey of school districts sponsoring bond issues in Minnesota, LERN Core Services determined that those who participated in community education activities were more likely to vote in favor of the bond issue, regardless of whether or not participants had children attending the school.⁵

There are 336 public operating elementary and secondary independent school districts in Minnesota. Each allows some form of community use of school property. As communities and school districts work together, the schools become the hub of activity for participants of all ages.



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Endnotes

- ¹ Lawrence H. Kushi et al., *American Cancer Society Guidelines on Nutrition and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention: Reducing the Risk of Cancer With Healthy Food Choices and Physical Activity*, 62 *Cancer J. Clinicians* 30 (2012), available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.3322/caac.20140/full>; William L. Haskell et al., *Physical Activity and Public Health: Updated Recommendation for Adults from the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Heart Association*, *J. of the Am. Heart Ass'n.*, 1081 (Aug. 1, 2007), <http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/116/9/1081.full.pdf>.
- ² Kushi et al., *supra* note 1, at 32; *Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity within a Generation: White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity Report to the President*, Let'sMove.Gov, 82–84, 97 (May 2010), http://www.letsmove.gov/sites/lets-move.gov/files/TaskForce_on_Childhood_Obesity_May2010_FullReport.pdf.
- ³ James F. Sallis et al., *Environmental Interventions for Eating and Physical Activity: A Randomized Controlled Trial in Middle Schools*, 24 *Am. J. Preventative Med.* 209, 209–10, 215–16 (2003), available at <http://download.journals.elsevierhealth.com/pdfs/journals/0749-3797/PIIS0749379702006463.pdf>.
- ⁴ See generally Mary Filardo et al., *Joint Use of Public Schools: A Framework for a New Social Contract*, CENTER FOR CITIES & SCHOOLS, 2 (2010), <http://128.48.120.222/uc/item/44m449tp>. For a more detailed discussion of these terms see the policy issue brief, [Finding Space to Play: Legal and Policy Issues Impacting Community Recreational Use of School Property](#).
- ⁵ Julie Coates, Vice President, LERN Core Services, Presentation at Minnesota Community Education Association Fall Conference (Oct. 31, 2013) (presentation slides on file with author).