

Shared Use of School Property in Washington

Reporting the Results of Statewide 2015
School Administrator and End User Surveys

DECEMBER 2015





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Children learning about healthy meals in after school programs.

Introduction

What is shared use?

Shared use is when school districts, governments, or other organizations allow communities to have access to their facilities. It can be a formal or informal agreement, laying out the terms and conditions of property, space, and equipment usage. This agreement is oftentimes in the form of a policy enacted by a school or higher governing body that includes details about fees, liability, scheduling, and types of facilities for use.

Why is this important?

Shared use of school property is about promoting public and individual health by maximizing community resources to meet collective needs. Regular physical activity has many important health benefits. Both the obesity epidemic and high rates of chronic disease are driven by sedentary lifestyles

and a lack of physical activity. In response to this, shared use agreements are becoming a popular strategy that community and school partners are utilizing to increase opportunities for affordable and accessible physical activity.

To promote physical activity, there must be access to safe, affordable, and convenient recreational facilities. These types of recreational spaces and facilities are out-of-reach for many community members, due to cost or availability. School space can be utilized for the public good by providing safe and accessible places designed for the community. Access to school property can facilitate physical activity through recreation and sport activities before, during, and after school hours.

Research suggests that after-school programs and community recreational use of school property are associated with the following benefits:

- Community cohesion¹
- Shared economic benefit²
- Reduced childhood obesity rates³
- Potential crime reduction⁴
- Enhanced academic performance⁵

2015 Surveys of Shared Use in Washington State

In 2013, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded the Washington State Alliance of YMCAs Statewide Pioneering Healthier Communities team to work towards improving the childhood obesity policy. Shared use of school property was a critical area identified to improve public policy in Washington. To better understand what was happening across the state, two surveys were designed to learn more about the shared, community use of schools as a place for physical activity, recreation, and food facilities.

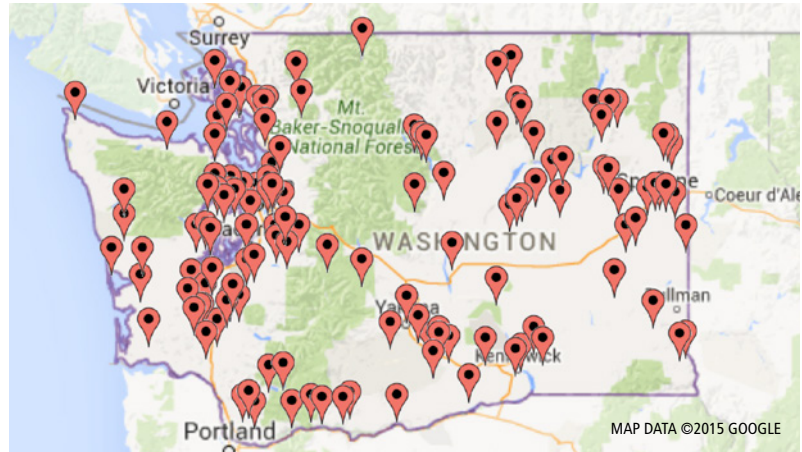
In order to examine the shared use landscape from both perspectives, a working group designed two distinct surveys; one for school administrators and another for those individuals and groups using school property (referred to as the “end users”). These surveys were sent to the following respondents:

1. **School administrators:** Superintendents, principals, and other decision makers who impact the process of how and if school property is shared with its community.
2. **End users:** Independent individuals who use or request to use school property, participants of programs that take place on school property, and individuals who run programs using the school property.

This report highlights some of the key findings of the surveys and identifies recommendations for next steps.

Figure 1: Map of responses from school administrator survey.

Each region of the state was represented in the results, with the greatest number of respondents from the Northwest region.



Who took the surveys?

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The survey was sent to all Washington superintendents and principals. 161 responded, representing the majority of the school districts across the state (see Figure 1). The most common positions held by the respondents were school principals (62 percent) and superintendents (30 percent). Other responses came from school board members, facilities managers, business managers, district administrators, deputy and assistant superintendents, and directors of early learning. Respondents had been in their positions for an average of 7 years. The highest number of districts in the sample (41 percent) were located in small rural communities (identified as small rural, non-metro county with an urban populations of 2,500-19,999) with fewer districts located from metropolitan, large rural, and isolated communities.

END USERS

The survey was completed by 82 end users, who were overwhelmingly leaders of groups (96 percent) which included: Girl Scout leaders, leaders of adult programs (14 percent), youth sports leagues (32 percent), leaders of Boys and Girls Club (17 percent), YMCA groups (35 percent), and child care and pre-school groups (35 percent). Other respondents came from: 4H, Future Farmers of America, YWCA, college or university programs, Head Start, faith-based recreational programs, health care, Washington State University Extension, and public health departments. A smaller portion of respondents also identified as an individual member of the community that independently uses school property (5 percent).

What is currently happening with shared use in Washington?

The vast majority of school districts are already participating in some form of shared use, with only 2 percent of school administrators reporting that no form of it occurs in their community. Most end users (88 percent) also reported participating in shared use of facilities. This sharing of space is happening in a variety of forms. While the most common type of shared use happens as structured,



Edwin Pratt Park

supervised use with a contract (66 percent), schools in Washington are also participating in shared use through structured, supervised use without a contract (22 percent), unstructured, informal with a contract (28 percent) and unstructured, informal without a contract (25 percent).

On average, shared use is occurring on a regular basis. Over half of school administrators (53 percent) reported that community members or organizations use school facilities more than 21 times a month (Figure 2). The overwhelming majority reported recurring use (i.e. weekly) of recreational use for physical activity, with the most popular facilities being sports fields, gymnasiums, and cafeterias (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Frequency of shared use.

Responses of school administrators when asked, “Approximately how many times per month do community members or organizations use your school district’s school facilities during non-school hours?”

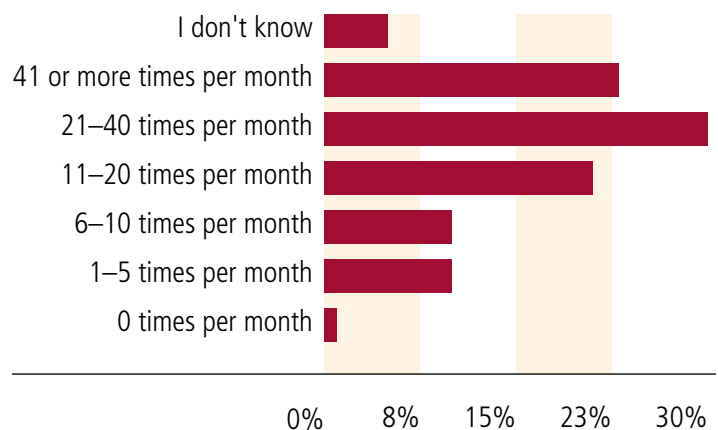


Figure 3: Facilities for shared use.

School administrators responses to, "What types of facilities are included for community use of school facilities in your district? Check all that apply." Responses to "Other" included auditoriums, stadiums, tracks, performing arts centers, community meeting rooms, and tracks.

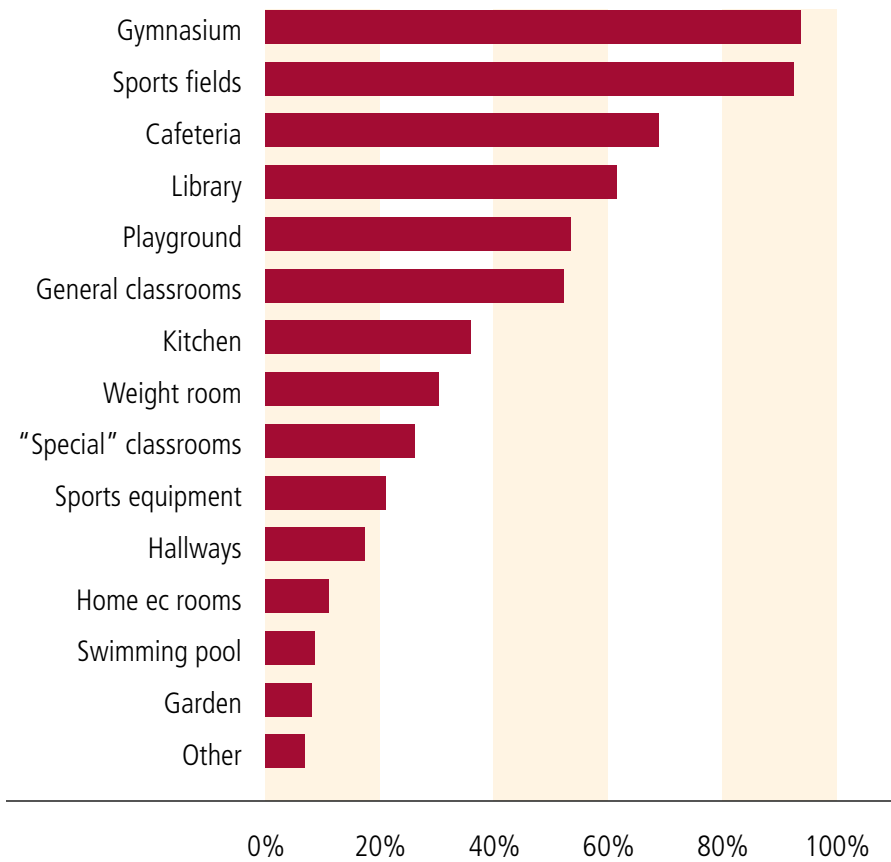


Figure 4: Barriers to shared use.

The top four barriers of shared use that were identified in the two 2015 surveys were cost, scheduling, lack of access to adequate facilities, and liability concerns.



What are the barriers to Washington shared use?

While shared use of school facilities is happening widely across the state of Washington, over two thirds of end users report that if they had increased access to facilities, they would increase the amount of physical activity that they provide. In order to help meet this demand, it is important to understand what is preventing increased shared use. The 2015 surveys of Washington school administrators and end users identified four main barriers to shared use: cost, scheduling, liability concerns, and lack of access to adequate facilities.

Cost

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

School administrators indicated cost as a principle barrier to community use of school property. More specifically, respondents mentioned the costs to compensate staff to supervise time, security, and maintenance as concerns. A majority of respondents (87 percent), specified cost as an important factor that influences their decision to *not* allow the use of recreational school property, facilities, and equipment by the community during non-school hours. Therefore, cost is a main consideration when determining whether or not shared use by community member will be approved.

END USERS

One third of end users also identified cost as a main barrier in requesting the use of school property. These users reported cost “does” or “might” decrease the amount of requests that they submit to the school. Subsequently, 18 percent had not ever requested the use of school property for physical activity programming. Even once the use of the facilities has been established, cost can also inhibit the

Figure 5: Use of electronic scheduling system.

Responses in the School Administrator Survey when respondents were asked, "Do you have an electronic scheduling system (i.e. Rediker, a Sc TimeTables)?"

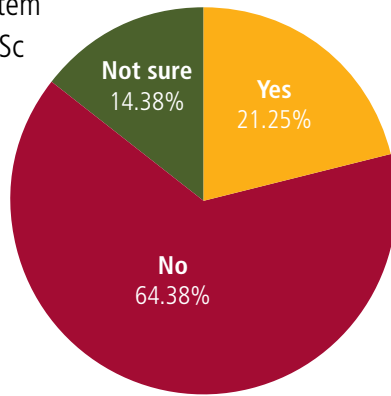
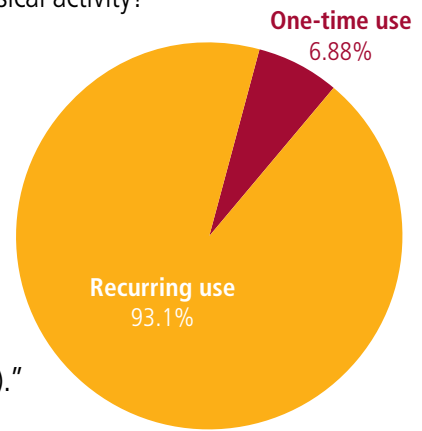


Figure 6: Common forms of recreational use for physical activity.

Responses in the School Administrator Survey when respondents were asked, "What is the most common form of recreational use for physical activity?"

Respondents were able to indicate either, "one-time use (i.e. group requests for a one-time fun run event)" or "recurring use (use for an extended period) (i.e. group requests for weekly basketball practice)."



amount of physical activity programming that is provided at the time of the use. End users indicated cost was the second highest barrier to incorporating some or more physical activity into programming.

Scheduling

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

School administrators reported scheduling as another key barrier to shared use. This could be due to a lack of a mainstream scheduling system for community members to use. While some types of shared use does not require an organized scheduling system, other types could benefit from it. Over 60 percent of school administrators reported that the school/school district leaves playgrounds, tracks, and sports fields open before and after school hours on weekdays, weekends, school holidays, and summer break. This type of open access may not require a detailed scheduling system. However, in other cases, a high demand of school property can result in scheduling conflicts that make it difficult to secure a time. Because the most common form of recreational use for physical activity is recurring use, or use for an extended period of time (93 percent) (Figure 6), the scheduling for school property can quickly turn into a complex system. Yet only approximately 1/5 of school administrators report using some type of electric scheduling system (Figure 5).

END USERS

Scheduling is a barrier in requesting use of school facilities as well as a common reason for denial of use. End users indicated scheduling as a top barrier (53 percent) to submitting requests to use school property. Additionally, half of end users reported that in the past they have been denied access to school property and the top reason for this denial was due to scheduling conflicts (50 percent).

Access to Adequate Facilities

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

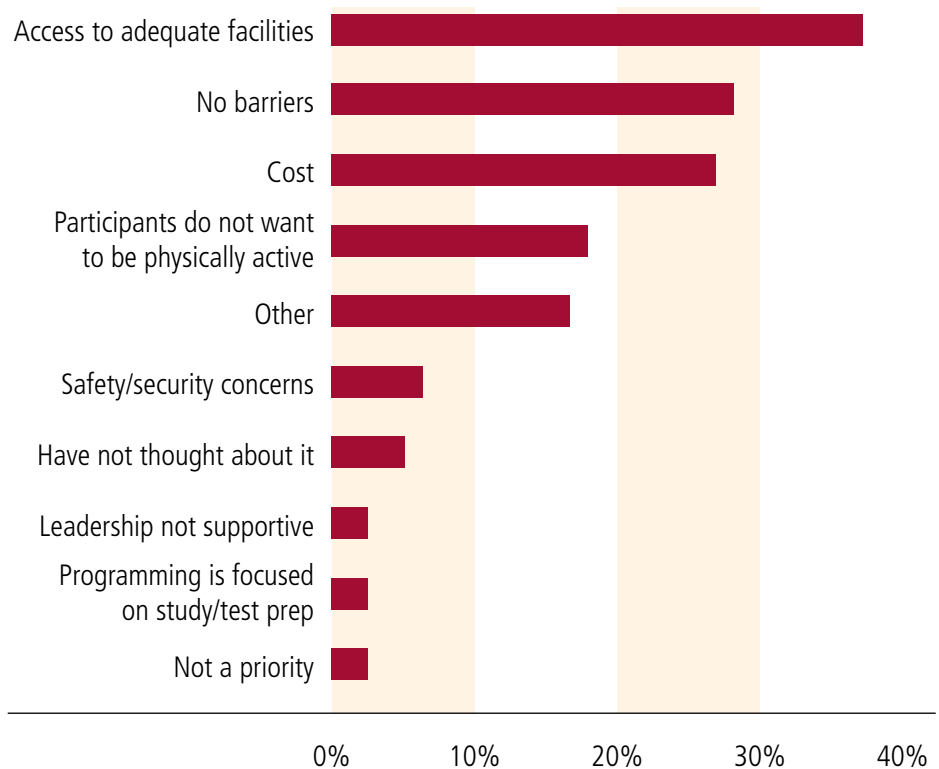
Respondents were asked an open-ended question concerning barriers that their school/school district experiences that may limit community use of school property. In addition to the other barriers outlined in this report, the limited number of facilities and general lack of access to existing facilities were mentioned by 18 percent of respondents. School administrators reported having high facility demands for a limited number of spaces such as gymnasiums and sports fields. This speaks to a larger issue of resource scarcity. The lack of other recreational and sport facilities in the area was indicated by 76 percent of respondents as an important barrier in a decision to allow the use of sport and recreational use of school property by the community during non-school hours.

END USERS

While 88 percent of end users indicated that shared use of facilities already happens in their communities, 68 percent also indicated that they could increase the amount of physical activity in programming with increased access to facilities. Respondents indicated lack of access to adequate facilities (37 percent) as the most challenging barrier to incorporating some or more physical activity into programming (Figure 7). They also ranked it as the second highest barrier (38 percent) that has or might prevent them from requesting to use school property. These responses demonstrate the issues of funding and resource scarcity.

Figure 7: Barriers to incorporating physical activity.

Responses in the End User Survey when respondents were asked, "Are any of the following barriers to incorporating some or more physical activity into the programming? Select all that apply." Responses to "Other" included adequate staffing, time, and issues of space during winter months.



Liability

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

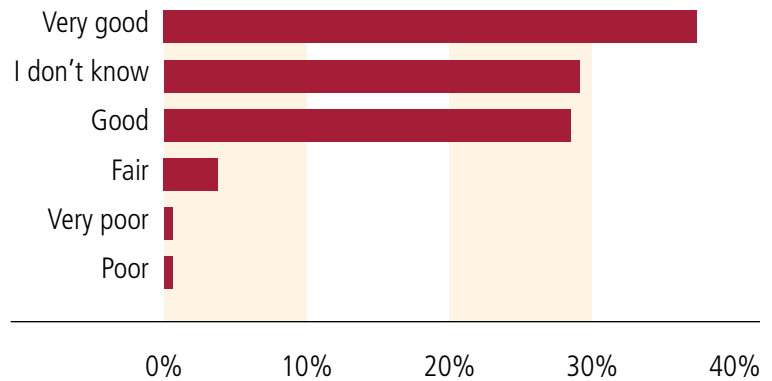
The survey also indicated that there is a need for greater transparency regarding district provisions for liability in the context of shared use of school property. School administrators tended to have a relatively high confidence in their school’s liability protection. They rated their district’s current liability protection for injuries or damage to property during scheduled and formal community use of school facilities during non-school hours as “I don’t know” (29 percent), “very good” (37 percent), and “good” (28 percent) (Figure 8). However, respondents indicated liability concerns as an important factor (78 percent) in a decision to not allow the use of recreational school property, facilities, and equipment by the community during non-school hours. For the same question, insurance concerns were ranked with a 73 percent importance. These responses indicate administrators can be cautious about opening the school’s doors to the community due to insurance and liability factors.

END USERS

Liability is a concern for end users in the issue of shared community use of school property to a lesser extent. Eleven percent of respondents indicated liability risks as a barrier that has or might prevent them from requesting to use school property.

Figure 8: Ratings of liability protection.

Responses in the School Administrator Survey when respondents were asked, “How would you rate your school district’s current liability protection for injuries or damage to property during scheduled/formal community use of school facilities during non-school hours?”





Opportunities & Conclusion

Overall, the surveys identified that there is significant interest and widespread support for shared community use of school property, both by school administrators and end users. It is promising that end users reported that they would provide more opportunities for physical activity given the appropriate support and access.

In closing, it is important to highlight key considerations to influence the future direction of shared use of school property in Washington. In addressing the barrier of cost, it is important to promote shared use of school property as a cost-effective way to encourage physical activity and promote community growth. Additionally, school administrators and community members should be encouraged to seek creative funding streams to support and defray the cost of shared use, such as standing grant programs and partnerships with local governments and/or community nonprofits. Valuable strategy options can include designation of a grant writer or a volunteer community liaison to spearhead shared use cost efforts.

When considering barriers around scheduling, a valuable first step is to evaluate current system(s) that are being used by the district and other programs. From there, it may be helpful to explore the possibility of implementing an online scheduling system that can be readily available and user-friendly, allowing scheduling, time management conflicts, and priorities of space-giving to be fully transparent to the community. School districts can explore the idea of designating a communications point person to manage the scheduling system. It may be beneficial for school districts to establish a partnership with the School Board Association and Office of Superintendent and Public Instruction to find model policies and learn from previous efforts.

In addressing the lack of access to adequate facilities, a school administrator or shared use advocate may explore options of partnering with local government, nonprofits, or the private sector. In doing this, it may be helpful to begin by assessing the available spaces and resources available in the surrounding area and determine if a partnership with owners of this space would allow for additional use. This asset mapping is an important first step in addressing the reported barriers of scheduling and lack of access to adequate resources.

As opportunities and potential partners are identified, additional effort needs to be placed on improving clarity and transparency of district provisions for liability in the context of shared use of school property. Both school administrators and end users need more concise information on shared use agreements, risk management, and insurance coverage. In particular, there is a need for greater awareness of government immunity granted to school districts from liability for injuries related to shared use of school property.

The barriers around shared school property use are not insurmountable. Washington stakeholders can make significant progress by updating policies to facilitate community use, breaking down barriers to understanding liability and insurance, and tackling scheduling and funding with targeted interventions. There are opportunities for leadership in various sectors to implement the recommendations at a local and statewide level. The result will be a healthier, more active Washington.

Endnotes

- ¹ William C. Sullivan et al., *The Fruit of Urban Nature: Vital Neighborhood Space*, 36 *Env't & Behavior* 678, 695–98 (2004), available at <http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/pdf/FruitOfUrbanNature.pdf>.
- ² 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://www.21csf.org/csf-home/publications/Concept-PaperJointUseofPublicSchools.pdf>.
- ³ 2012. *Promoting Physical Activity through the Shared Use of School and Community Recreational Resources*. Retrieved at http://activelivingresearch.org/sites/default/files/ALR_Brief_SharedUse_April2012.pdf.
- ⁴ Nat'l Crime Prevention Council, *150 Tested Strategies to Prevent Crime from Small Cities, Counties, and Rural Communities: a Resource for Municipal Agencies and Community Groups* 186–87 (2000).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*