

IMPROVING YOUTH SPORTS: ROLE OF STATES

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNANCE AND SUPPORT



OVERVIEW

State governments have significant authority to influence, develop and regulate youth and school sports activities to serve constituents.

Research by the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program found that these levers are used increasingly, if inconsistently, to address gaps related to safety and access to sports.

Key mechanisms that states can employ include:

Legislation and Regulation

State legislatures can pass laws pertaining to aspects of youth and school sports, such as coach qualifications, safety standards and the implementation of concussion protocols. Laws and regulations help ensure that programs prioritize the well-being of young athletes. States also help set P.E. and recess standards in schools.

- ✔ Colorado's [Safer Youth Sports Act](#) requires all non-scholastic youth sports organizations to implement codes of conduct and carry out background checks; it also mandates coach training in abuse prevention. Organizations must create a "prohibited conduct policy" for everyone involved in kids' sports, including parents, and build an online portal to report abuse.
- ✔ In 2024, Maryland became the first state to [adopt](#) the [Children's Bill of Rights in Sports](#), which codifies children's rights to participate in safe and healthy athletics. The state also passed [legislation](#) requiring its own Department of Education to develop guidelines for coaches to help them identify mental health challenges among their athletes.
- ✔ [Alabama](#) requires coaches of kids ages 14 and under in "high-risk" sports outside of school to pass safety courses on injury prevention. A [not-for-profit](#) working with the state health department has trained 50,000+ coaches since 2019. Arkansas recently enacted a [similar law](#).
- ✔ [California](#) and [Washington state](#) in 2023 mandated 30 minutes of daily recess for elementary school students. California also passed legislation requiring background checks for all coaches, and more training on abuse prevention and identifying heat illnesses.
- ✔ [Ohio](#) passed legislation in 2023 that requires all school-based coaches to receive mental health training, helping them understand the risk factors and symptoms associated with mental illness, in addition to the mandated duties coaches must carry out before receiving their "pupil-activity [permits](#)." Maryland passed [similar legislation](#) in 2024.
- ✔ [California](#) since 2021 has limited youth tackle football teams to just two full-contact practices per week, not to exceed 30 minutes. The law requires that coaches be trained in head injuries, that a medical professional be present for all games and that an authorized person attend all practices to remove injured players if necessary.
- ✔ [New York](#) mandated in 2023 that all youth sports programs have an AED or a plan for how to apply one.

Funding and Support

States can allocate funds to support youth sports initiatives, including providing financial assistance to schools and community organizations for equipment, facilities and program development. Additionally, states may offer grants or subsidies to families to make sports affordable.

- ✔ [New Jersey](#) appropriated \$25 million in FY2024 to renovate playgrounds, public pools, parks, fields and other recreational facilities. Spurred in part by the impact of COVID shutdowns on kids, the grants are aimed at reducing inequities in sports options for youth around the state.
- ✔ [New York](#) dedicated a cut of proceeds from mobile sports betting when it was legalized in 2021. Approximately \$5 million a year gets distributed to non-profit sports organizations by a state agency. In 2024, New York also appropriated \$10 million in a one-time distribution to a youth sports team fund. Ohio later approved, then revoked, \$12 million a year for school and youth sports.

- ✓ [Illinois](#) in 2022 appropriated \$10.5 million for sport-based youth development across the state; the funding served 25,000 youth in 51 programs and trained over 2,000 coaches. Other states that recently reached into the budget include Massachusetts, Maryland and Minnesota.
- ✓ [Washington](#) dedicated \$42 million to youth athletic fields as part of a 1997 deal to build a new Seahawks stadium; that fund was raided in 2023 to upgrade minor league baseball facilities.

Partnerships and Collaborations

States often collaborate with various stakeholders, including schools, sports organizations, healthcare providers, community groups and federal agencies, to develop and implement strategies for increasing youth sports participation. These partnerships leverage resources and expertise from multiple sectors to support sports programs and facilities.

- ✓ Minnesota's [Amateur Sports Commission](#) funnels state funds to local areas to promote access to hockey rinks. The [Maryland](#) commission helped sport providers return to play during the COVID pandemic. Though most commissions are local, Minnesota's and Maryland's serve the entire population and have responsibilities besides holding recruiting events and getting heads in beds.
- ✓ All states benefit from the [Land and Water Conservation Fund](#), which has helped build 40,000+ recreation spaces across the country. State-based offices determine the [criteria](#) every five years.
- ✓ The [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#) program is used by many states to provide monthly cash payments for low-income families with children, but the federal government also lets states spend the money on programs. In 2023, [Oklahoma](#) distributed \$38 million through non-profits including [Fields & Futures](#), which supports school-based youth leagues in grades 3-6.

Education and Awareness Campaigns

State governments can launch public awareness campaigns to promote the benefits of sports participation and encourage healthy lifestyles among children. These campaigns may focus on topics such as physical fitness, sportsmanship and the prevention of injuries.

- ✓ All 50 states now have what are called [Lystedt Laws](#). The catalyst was a 13-year-old boy from Washington, Zackery Lystedt, who suffered a catastrophic brain injury while playing football for his middle school in 2006. The law, while hard to enforce, prohibits young athletes suspected of sustaining a concussion from returning to play without the approval of a healthcare provider.
- ✓ In California, the Governor's Advisory Council on Physical Fitness and Mental Well-Being was established in 2021. Chaired by First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the council launched the [Move Your Body, Calm Your Mind](#) campaign two years later, with one of its goals being a "more positive and inclusive sports culture" for youth.
- ✓ Massachusetts began a campaign in 2009 to encourage residents to exercise more and eat better. Some of the grant money from [Mass in Motion](#), which comes from state, federal and private sources, is awarded to cities and towns to [improve](#) parks, playgrounds and open spaces.

Monitoring and Oversight

State agencies may be responsible for monitoring and overseeing youth and school sports activities to ensure compliance with state laws and regulations. This includes conducting inspections of facilities, investigating complaints or incidents, enforcing penalties for violations of sports safety standards, and working with state high school interscholastic federations.

- ✓ There are 51 state associations that govern interscholastic sports. Most of these entities do not directly fall under the umbrella of the state departments of education. However, states often can influence the direction and policies of the federations. This form of power has recently become an issue with [Name, Image and License \(NIL\)](#) legislation and [transgender athletes](#).
- ✓ Puerto Rico, a territory of the U.S., requires all organizations offering youth programs to register with the [Department of Recreation and Sports](#), which reports to the governor. That mandate allows the state to track trends, communicate in a timely manner with providers during crises such as pandemics, and offer parents safety assurances regarding the protection of their child. All coaches in Puerto Rico must pass criminal background checks, paid for by the state.
- ✓ Many countries the size of U.S. states create [governance mechanisms](#) that allow leaders from across sport systems to connect, advocate for funding, and promote mass participation. [Norway](#) shapes policy through a sport confederation comprised of representatives from each sport and state (i.e. county), as well as the Olympic committee.

Read our Aspen Institute [report](#) by Linda Flanagan on five states' approaches to guiding youth sports. How is your state doing in terms of youth sport participation? [This government tool](#) has the data.