



STATE OF PLAY

Colorado: Aspen to Parachute

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS





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Supported by the Colorado Health Foundation

WELCOME

Among Colorado’s Western Slope communities, there’s something undeniably special about the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys. The imposing natural beauty of this place simply beckons. These days, the area is renowned for two things: world-class outdoor recreation and an increasingly exorbitant cost of living. With any high-demand destination comes affluence, and with it, inequity.

Today’s 80-mile corridor from Parachute to Aspen boasts about 85,000 year-round residents across three counties who are predominantly White (70%) and Latino/a (28%). Among them lies a vast diversity of micro-communities rich in cultural nuance, punctuated by a socio-economic and geopolitical spectrum as long and varied as the Colorado River itself. Like in many rural communities of the Rocky Mountain West, families new to the region and with local roots going back generations all find common ground in play, sport and outdoor recreation. Throughout the seasons, how we recreate across this evolving landscape is an integral thread that weaves the fabric of our communities together — and unites us with the world far beyond.

Early in 2023, the Aspen Institute’s Sports and Society Program began exploring the opportunities and barriers for local youth participating in play, sport and outdoor recreation. Informed by data collected from over 1,000 youth surveys from the region’s four school districts (Garfield County School District 16, Garfield Re-2, Roaring Fork and Aspen) — in addition to dozens of focus groups and one-on-one interviews — we set out to amplify the voices of young people and how they play.

This year-long regional needs assessment, titled “State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute,” helps track which children and adolescents are engaged in physical activity, how they are engaged and why some of them may not be as engaged as others. Illuminating pervasive inequities as well as viable opportunities unique to this region, the Aspen Institute’s Project Play initiative took a comprehensive approach to the area’s “state of play” that has helped local community partners better understand strategic next steps, with a focus on supporting families facing the greatest obstacles to equitable participation.

As director of Aspen Institute’s Hurst Community Initiative, I work with community leaders from Parachute to Aspen helping to promote dialogue, build understanding and facilitate more collaborative solutions to the shared challenges of the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys. “State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute” draws on the expertise and commitment of countless community partners who have helped us better understand the regional landscape and learn how to better support local youth in their lifelong pursuit of activities that promote physical, mental and emotional wellness — as well as healthier, thriving communities. Special thanks to champions near and far committed to supporting youth resilience, both in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys and across rural Colorado.

In gratitude,



Evan Zislis

Director, Hurst Community Initiative, Aspen Institute, Community Strategies Group

THE VISION

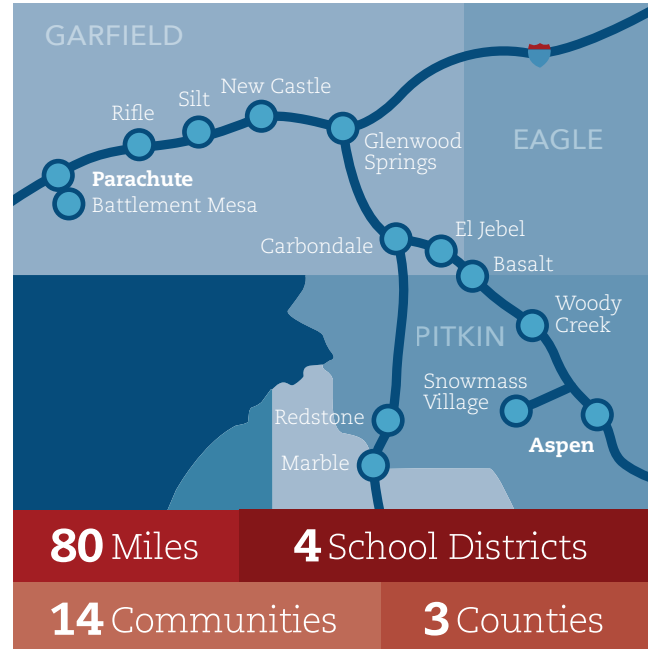
We aspire for every child in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys to have the opportunity to be active through sports, play and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability. Physical activity not only creates benefits for physical and mental well-being; it also offers a sense of belonging.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program analyzed the landscape of youth sports and physical activity in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys from February 2023 to February 2024. “State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute” offers a snapshot of youth engagement in play, sports and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability.

Findings for this report were guided by the Aspen Institute through multiple methods: individual interviews with key stakeholders and community members whose work touches the lives of children; focus group discussions with young people, coaches, sports administrators and parents; surveys conducted of youth; media accounts; and existing reports, policy analyses and publicly available data collected by the Aspen Institute.

ASPEN TO PARACHUTE REGION AT A GLANCE



Learn about the demographics of these communities on [page 45](#)
The region's school districts are Aspen, Roaring Fork, Garfield Re-2 and Garfield County District 16

Some key findings in the report:

Local youth are slightly less physically active than the national average. According to our survey of more than 1,000 local youth, only 22% of children in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys receive 60 minutes of physical activity daily. That's below the U.S. rate (24%). Of the youth taking our survey, local girls are two times less likely to be physically active than boys. Latino/a children (15%) engage in 60 minutes of daily physical activity less than White youth (27%).

More physical activity translates to better mental health. Physically active children reported feeling more excitement, happiness and motivation and less nervous, anxious, worried and depressed. For example, 25% of non-active youth (meaning zero days of physical activity) said they felt depressed or hopeless nearly every day, more than three times the rate (7%) of active youth (physical activity every day).

Transportation to and from sports and recreational activities is a major challenge. Where someone lives tremendously impacts access. While Aspen students can walk across the street to the Aspen Recreation Center from school, many children in Parachute are three to four miles away from the Grand Valley Recreation Center in Battlement Mesa and have limited transportation options. Children do not commonly use Roaring Fork Transportation Authority buses, which serve Aspen, Snowmass Village, Basalt, Carbondale, Glenwood Springs and New Castle. Yet more than half of surveyed youth said they would take public transportation from their neighborhood, if offered, to engage in more outdoor activities.

Youth are motivated by friendships to play sports.

The No. 1 reason kids said they play sports is to be with friends (52%), followed closely by having fun (51%). Winning games ranked sixth and chasing college athletic scholarships was 18th.

Latino/a children participate in outdoor recreation far less than their White peers.

White youth are six times more likely to participate in alpine skiing than Latino/a youth. Large participation gaps also exist in rock climbing, mountain biking, paddleboarding, archery, horseback riding and hiking. Parents and rec professionals told us that costs, transportation, equipment, communication barriers and family priorities are reasons for the major differences.

Soccer is by far the most popular sport played by Latino/a children.

Very few activities, if any, produce the level of enthusiasm and ability that brings the Latino/a community together in this region like soccer. Latino/a youth (42%) said they regularly play soccer far more than any other sport — and much more frequently than White children (19%).

The popularity of soccer among Latino/a youth serves as the inspiration for our main

recommendation, located in the Game Changer section starting on page 36.

Our Game Changer explores how community leaders could use soccer as a tool for social change aligned with the strong desire for purpose and well-being among Latino/a youth. What if soccer could more intentionally be applied to create belonging for youth and educational advancement? We identify three potential ways to do this:

- Offer more affordable soccer at younger ages — and target Latinas
- Use soccer to chart academic pathways toward college
- Bring organized soccer back to Colorado Mountain College

In addition, our Call for Leadership section (page 40) recommends the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys improve transportation to and from sports and recreational programming; create a scholarship portal for underserved children to access more affordable sports opportunities; provide coaching education on positive youth development; and pilot a regional adventure club to grow social connections among children.

"State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute" is the Aspen Institute's 13th community report. The Aspen Institute has produced county reports on Tacoma-Pierce County, Washington, Seattle-King County, Washington, and Mobile County, Alabama; a state report on Hawai'i; regional reports on Southeast Michigan, Western New York, Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes, and Central Ohio; and local reports on Oakland, Baltimore, Harlem (New York), and Camden, New Jersey. Stakeholders in those communities have taken actions based on the recommendations and are seeing results. Learn more about State of Play communities: as.pn/SOPCommunitySuccess.

THE STATE OF PLAY IN ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

SCOREBOARD

FEW YOUTH ARE ACTIVE ENOUGH

Only 22% of youth in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys who took our survey meet the CDC's recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity daily. That's the same as Colorado's average and slightly below the U.S. rate (24%).

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Boys | 30% |
| Girls | 15% |
| White | 27% |
| Latino/a | 15% |
| Elementary School | 24% |
| Middle School | 30% |
| High School | 19% |
| Aspen School District | 32% |
| Garfield Re-2 School District | 23% |
| Garfield County School District 16 | 19% |
| Roaring Fork School District | 19% |

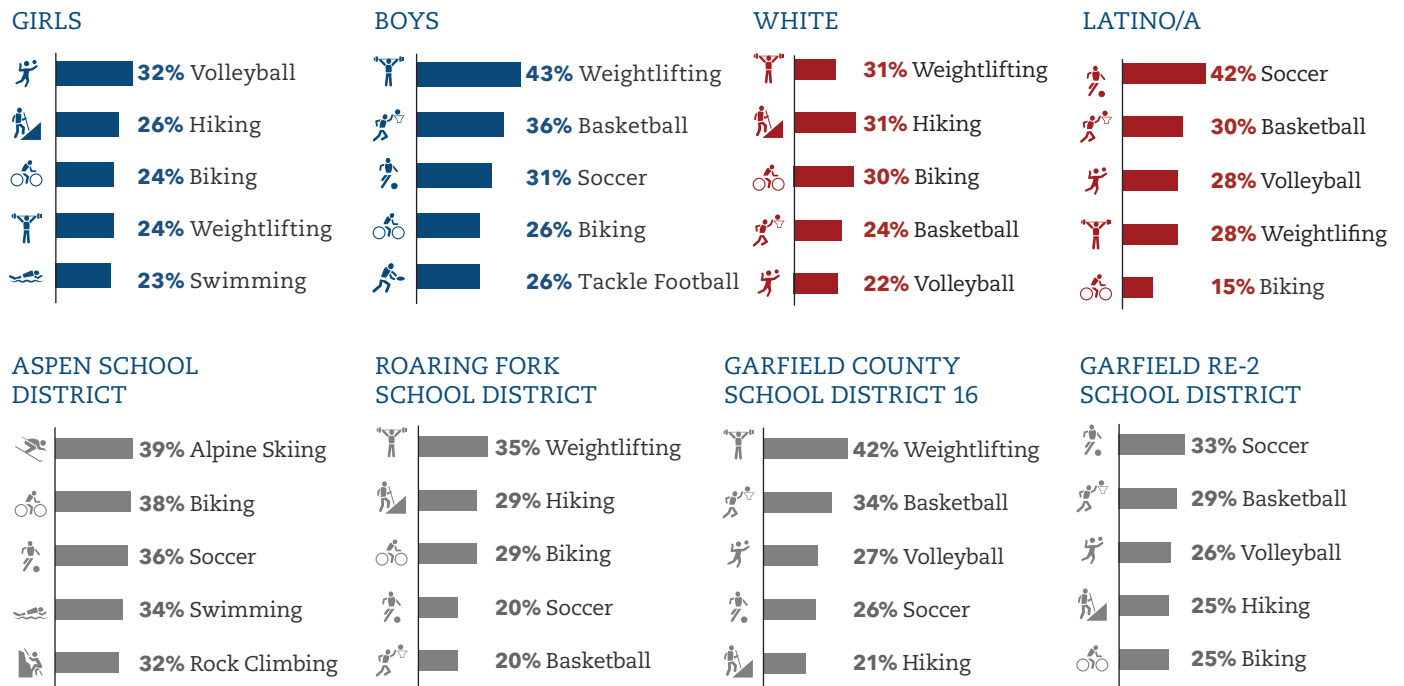
Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey. State and national averages are from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey.

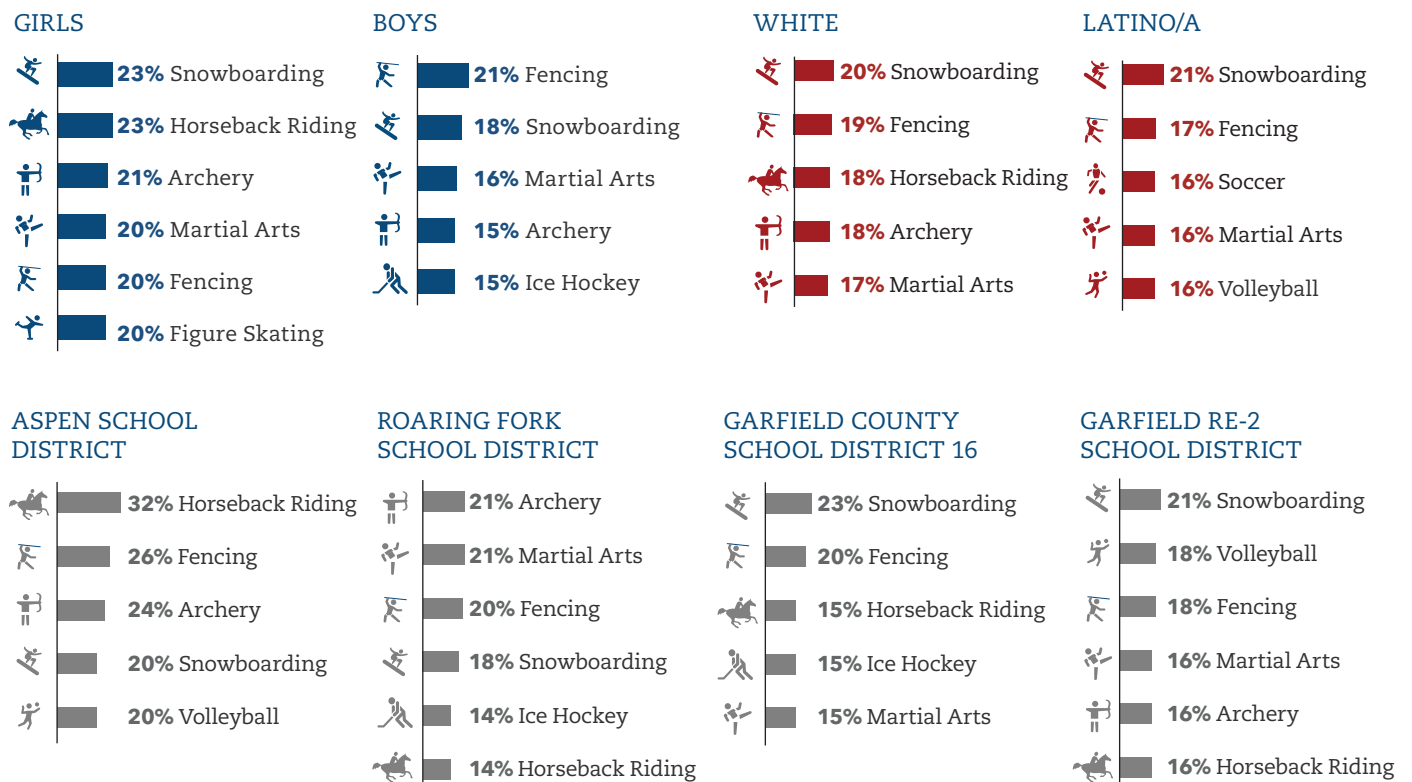


TOP 5 SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH REGULARLY PLAY

Results from Aspen Institute's survey of 1,125 youth. Multiple answers were allowed.



TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH WANT TO TRY



Note: Regular participation is defined as participating in the sport/activity at least 20 days in the last year.



THE 8 PLAYS

+ +

The Aspen Institute's 2015 report, "Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game," identified eight strategies ("plays") that can get and keep all kids active through sports — regardless of race, gender, income or ability. The playbook was developed from the most promising ideas to emerge from two years of roundtables with 250-plus thought leaders. It's a unifying model for action anchored in the values of health, equity and inclusion.

Our State of Play community reports are structured around Project Play's original framework. On the pages that follow are five findings from the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys related to each "play."

- Ask Kids What They Want
- Reintroduce Free Play
- Encourage Sport Sampling
- Revitalize In-Town Leagues
- Think Small
- Design for Development
- Train All Coaches
- Emphasize Prevention

For more on the framework of each play, see the Project Play report at
YOUTHREPORT.PROJECTPLAY.US

1

Challenge: Youth sport is organized by adults

The Play: Ask Kids What They Want

From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

To get and keep kids involved in sports, build the voice of children into the design of activities.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

Youth are motivated by friendships to play sports.

The No. 1 reason kids said they play sports is to be with friends (52%), followed closely by having fun (51%), according to the Aspen Institute’s survey of youth across the region. Winning games ranked sixth and chasing college athletic scholarships was 18th. That’s not to say kids don’t want to compete: 61% of youth said their team’s winning rate makes them enjoy sports more while 29% indicated losing causes them to like sports less. But for most children, a successful sports experience is rooted in social connections. In focus groups held with young people, we heard the value of building friendships through sports, especially when sports allow them to meet new friends from different parts of the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys.



More physical activity translates to better mental health.

Children who are physically active reported feeling more excitement, happiness and motivation and less nervous, anxious, worried and depressed, according to our youth survey. The analysis compared the number of days youth reported 60 minutes of daily physical activity in the last week with how frequently they felt certain emotions over the prior two weeks. For example, 25% of non-active youth (zero days of physical activity) reported feeling depressed or hopeless nearly every day, more than three times the rate (7%) of active youth (physical activity every day). Mental health is a significant challenge for youth, even in wealthy Aspen. “Money can’t buy you happiness, peace of mind or support,” said Travis Buckner, Aspen Recreation athletics coordinator. In focus groups throughout the region, many young people described physical activity as vital to their mental well-being. “It’s kind of a way to get away from the stuff that’s stressing me out,” said a male swimmer and cross-country runner. “It’s like hitting a pause button on life and it just lets you escape reality for a little bit,” said a female swimmer.

MORE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TRANSLATES TO BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

| Negative Emotion Nearly Every Day | Non-Active Youth | Highly Active Youth |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Nervousness/anxiety | 35% | 14% |
| Worry | 21% | 12% |
| Malaise | 22% | 15% |
| Depression/hopelessness | 25% | 7% |

| Positive Emotion Nearly Every Day | Non-Active Youth | Highly Active Youth |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Excitement | 4% | 33% |
| Happiness | 7% | 38% |
| Motivation | 0% | 36% |

Note: Non-Active Youth is defined as zero days with 60 minutes of physical activity per week. Highly Active Youth means seven days with 60 minutes of physical activity per week.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.

Girls are two times less likely to be physically active than boys.

Only 15% of surveyed girls in the region (vs. 30% of boys) indicated that they get 60 minutes of daily physical activity as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Girls (60%) also play organized sports less than boys (68%). Several girls told us that many girls quit sports or don't start due to worries about body image (see page 26) and because they don't see themselves as athletes — a message that gets internalized even more if they get cut during tryouts.



What's the point of putting in so much time and money for club if you can't play for your school?"

"What's the point of putting in so much time and money for club if you can't play for your school?" asked a teenage girl. Sometimes it takes girls demanding more opportunities for action to happen.

In 2023, Rifle High School launched an all-girls wrestling program for the first time, thanks to tireless lobbying by senior Madison Farris, who was new to the school.¹ Previously, girls had to wrestle exclusively within the boys program. Five wrestlers joined Rifle's girls team, making the school eligible for the state girls tournament.

Physical activity is less common among Latino/a youth.

Our survey also found that Latino/a youth (15%) are far less likely than White youth (27%) to engage in 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Socializing with peers — the No. 1 reason children play sports — can be hard for some Latino/a youth. Many Latino/a parents told us their children are not as active due to challenging parent work schedules, lack of nearby parks, high costs to play sports, language barriers, many months of cold weather and the impact of COVID-19. The further away a family lives from Aspen, the less money it typically has.

Aspen School District is 13% Latino/a, and 3% of all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch²; Garfield County School District 16 is 41% Latino/a, and 45% of all students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.³ Several Latino/a parents said their children tend to be more active through encouragement and seeing others participate. This includes support by grandparents if the child lives in a multigenerational home.

Parents play a crucial role in making or breaking a child's sports experience.

In our youth survey, 67% of children said their family made them enjoy sports more (only 5% indicated liking sports less due to their family). Youth rated only their teammates higher than family as a key factor in enjoying sports more. Research shows that active parents are associated with active kids.⁴ “I probably wouldn't do sports if my parents didn't give me

that push and encouragement to try,” said a male athlete at Glenwood Springs High School. A female athlete said she became inspired when her father turned swimming into a fun contest by racing each other. Young people also mentioned feeling pressure from parents, even if it's unintentional. “I'm obviously not as good an athlete as my mom was, and she reminds me of that,” a high school girl said. “I don't think this ever comes out of bad intent. I just don't have the head space to handle that when I'm already beating myself up.” Several youth soccer players said they wish parents would stop yelling instructions from the sidelines, especially when their advice conflicts with the coach. A seventh-grade male soccer player said his father was almost kicked out of three games in one season because he constantly yelled at the referee. “In a couple games I had to go over and tell him to calm down,” the boy said.





Grace Anson, 15

Grace vividly remembers her competitive cheerleading experience around age 6 with a coach who demanded perfection.

“It’s a sport where you have to have the perfect body and athletic ability,” Grace says. “I’ve never been able to do some of that stuff. You get put in the back of the group. I’m like, ‘That’s not fair.’ I think everybody should have their moment to shine. The coach expected everything out of everyone. She would try to change everything about you.”

Grace, now a sophomore at Glenwood Springs High School, found joy elsewhere: in mountain biking. Having started competitive biking only in high school, she regularly competes on her school’s club team and with Roaring Fork Cycling’s Pinnacle team, a top program for high school and elite-level junior racers. Grace wants to see if she can ride in college.

It’s ironic, Grace says, because she used to have to be “bribed” to go on family rides at a young age. Her mom is a certified mountain biking coach. Now Grace can’t get enough of biking, whether it’s leisurely rides or 12- to 18-mile competitive races.

Every new trail is a new adventure. Every coach and teammate is welcoming.

“If you aren’t the best, who cares? If you are, that’s awesome,” Grace says of her mountain biking team. “Nobody really cares how well you do. In other sports, if you’re super good, you talk to other super-good friends. You don’t really expand your social circles like in mountain biking.”

Grace had a rough fall 2023 season, suffering her first concussion after hitting her head on a rock when the bike slipped. She stopped training for about 10 days and gradually came back while the school’s athletic trainer monitored her heart rate and symptoms.

The state championships occurred at the same site where Grace fell. “I started dead last in 74th place and passed 22 girls, which was really awesome,” she says. “I like to say I got revenge on the course.”

Grace also swims the 100 fly, 200 free and 50 free at Glenwood Springs High School, where she plans to start a new sport. She made a deal: If one of her friends tried swimming, Grace would try track and field. “I’ve never done running or track,” she says. “I’ll try pole vaulting.”

Grace finds that sports help get her mind off school. “After I go to practice or a ride, there’s a smile back on my face even if it was a crappy day,” she says.

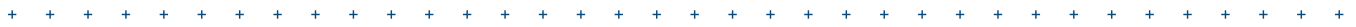
Yet Grace estimates only about half of her friends are physically active. Some tell her they wish they could ride a bike like she does.

“I say, ‘Of course you can do it, just get out of your comfort zone,’” she says. “I like getting out of my comfort zone. It’s a new experience and living life on the edge a little bit.”

2

Challenge: Overstructured sports experiences

The Play: Reintroduce Free Play



From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

Make sure there's room not just for organized play but experiences that children can own.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

Latino/a youth participate in outdoor recreation less due to several barriers.

While skiing is very popular, Aspen's survey found that White youth are six times more likely to regularly go alpine skiing than Latino/a youth. Aspen School District children listed regularly participating in alpine skiing more than any other sport and at much higher rates than other districts. Large participation gaps by race and ethnicity exist in virtually every outdoor recreation activity, including rock climbing, mountain biking, paddleboarding, archery, horseback riding and hiking. "Many families won't travel to Aspen and take our programs even when we offer it at free or reduced rates," said Desiree Whitehead, director of the Aspen Recreation Department. "Probably some of it is due to stigma, since we're predominantly White. I hope it changes more. It's really good to have diversity in this environment." C.P. Martinez, a longtime coach with two young kids, said it's difficult culturally to ask Latino/a parents to send their children to outdoor activities given equipment, transportation and communication barriers, plus family priorities. "To me, it would be like a unicorn to have every one of those factors met and exceeded," Martinez said. "That's why AVSC (Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club) is so great and they're the standard. I can't say enough positive things about them. They actively have

translators go into schools and have ambassadors ask, 'How do we get you as a Latino signed up and what do we need to do?'" AVSC lists 19% of its winter-sport athletes as people of color, while 6% of Pitkin County residents are non-White.⁵

REGULAR YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN OUTDOOR RECREATION

| Activity | White | Latino/a |
|---------------------------|-------|----------|
| Hiking | 31% | 15% |
| Biking | 30% | 15% |
| Swimming | 21% | 11% |
| Alpine Skiing | 18% | 3% |
| Rock Climbing | 16% | 6% |
| Mountain Biking | 15% | 4% |
| Paddleboarding | 13% | 6% |
| Archery | 11% | 4% |
| Horseback Riding | 9% | 4% |
| Kayaking/Canoeing/Rafting | 7% | 3% |
| Backpacking | 7% | 3% |

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.

Where a child lives impacts after-school usage of recreation centers for free play.

Forty-five percent of surveyed youth in the region said they play sports at a rec center, but this varies tremendously based on geography. Only 32% of surveyed youth in Garfield Re-2 School District said they have played sports at a recreation center, compared to 55%-58% in the other three surveyed districts. The Aspen Recreation Center is located across the street from the city's elementary, middle and high schools. When school lets out at different times, children can simply walk to activities like hockey, swimming, weightlifting, rock climbing and hanging out with friends at the Aspen Youth Center. By contrast, Grand Valley Recreation Center in Battlement Mesa also offers quality amenities, but it's three miles away from Bea Underwood Elementary and four miles from Grand Valley High School, both in neighboring Parachute. (Grand Valley Middle School is just 0.4 miles away from the rec center.) There is a local bus loop that's available. Still, "three to four miles is a limiting barrier for a good number of families," said Ari Philipson, Grand Valley High School outdoor coordinator. With so few rec centers, some rural schools take field trips to other communities' facilities for rare access to all-encompassing play. About 12 schools from smaller communities, such as Collbran (population 368), visit Grand Valley Recreation Center in Battlement Mesa (population 4,870). Schools pay \$300 for kids to enjoy the pool, gymnasium, outdoor playground, game room with billiards and table tennis, and other amenities.



Pick-up hockey allows children to enjoy play on their own terms.

It's a setting where kids can try out moves, compete against friends, gain interest — and just play. Carbondale Parks and Recreation offers pick-up hockey and open skating on its largest rink on a first-come, first-served basis unless there is a rec program scheduled. "There is a certain beauty in offering to the public a facility of this nature," said Eric Brendlinger, Carbondale Parks and Recreation director. "Normally, hockey rinks are scheduled down to the minute and have a myriad of rules and regulations associated with those uses." The rink has a divider wall in case fast-paced hockey is needed on one side and family skating on the other. No adult is needed for pick-up hockey, but kids must usually bring their own equipment. To stay safe, Brendlinger recommends children wear a hockey helmet, face mask, hockey gloves and shin pads. Otherwise, just show up and play, not unlike pick-up basketball. Brendlinger believes more pick-up games in any sport could encourage greater physical activity.

Smartphones and social media provide competition to playing outside.

Some parents, coaches and administrators told us a key reason they see fewer physically active children is their time spent on smartphones. "I'm blown away by how much they're using their phones," said one recreational provider. "Several teens told me they average more than 60 hours a week on TikTok." Nationally, nearly 1 in 5 teens say they're on TikTok and YouTube "almost constantly," according to a Pew Research Center report.⁶ U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory in 2023 cautioning that social media can pose harmful risks to the mental health and well-being of brain development.⁷ Still, with so many outdoor options in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys, screen time by youth is much lower here than in other Aspen Institute State of Play communities.

In our survey, 23% of local youth said they are on screens for three or more hours daily for something other than schoolwork. That's far less than youth who were asked the same question in Pierce County, Washington (43%).⁸

“Play” comes in many forms beyond traditional sports settings.

Many young people we spoke with did not list skiing, snowboarding, biking or other outdoor activities as a sport they play even though they participate. These activities are often viewed as simply something they do — a form of casual play compared to competitive play that often defines “sports” these days. By definition, “play” means engaging in an activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than for a serious or practical purpose. Play can mean enjoying the

outdoors. Play can mean dancing, such as with Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklórico. Play can even mean theater, which “fosters holistic, full-body movement,” said Jennifer Johnson, executive director of Sol Theatre Company. Johnson said 20% of her theater participants have special needs. When some children mentioned they don't play sports, Johnson started a chin-up competition and found strong engagement around learning how to be athletic.



In no way is ‘play’ limited to sport.”

“In no way is ‘play’ limited to sport,” she said. That's important to remember when considering ways for children to be active.



3

Challenge: Sameness and specialization

The Play: Encourage Sport Sampling



From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

Resist early sport specialization that limits overall development. Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

Soccer is the top sport Latino/a youth play, yet rec and middle school options are limited.

A far higher rate of Latino/a youth (42%) than White children (19%) said they regularly play soccer. Yet many rec departments don't offer soccer into later elementary-school-age years, and middle schools don't sponsor it at all. Middle schools that compete in the PEG League, comprising Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield counties, can offer football, volleyball, basketball, wrestling, and track and field if they want. "When we first moved to the valley, it threw me off that there's no soccer," said the mom of a soccer player. "It's only through Roaring Fork United (a prominent soccer club), and it doesn't go through the rec center or schools. Roaring Fork United seems to have a monopoly on that." Roaring Fork United Executive Director Kevin Jardine said he would support soccer in middle schools. "Soccer at my school would be a little more affordable, and more kids could probably play," said a Roaring Fork United player in eighth grade. Glenwood Springs High School Athletic Director Craig Denney said adding middle school soccer is feasible depending on when communities play, since the sport might cut into school football participation in the fall or club soccer participation in the spring.

Roaring Fork High School Athletic Director Crista Barlow believes that middle school soccer would be "super popular," but added, "I think it would kill football. You would get a lot of pushback from our longtime locals who grew up on the ranches and want their kids playing football."

Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club explores how to expand in the valley.

Founded in 1937, AVSC is the oldest and largest youth nonprofit in the Roaring Fork Valley, serving 3,260 athletes in winter sports, up 35% since 2019. AVSC raised \$4.1 million in 2023, with \$700,000 of direct financial aid going to 27% of its athletes. AVSC also uses peer-to-peer fundraising, meaning all athletes are encouraged to set up their own fundraising platforms, where 50% of received donations go toward their fees and the other 50% to AVSC's scholarship fund. AVSC also offers equipment loans, transportation and Spanish-speaking support. Because skiing is culturally foreign to many Latino/a families, AVSC uses mountain bike rides between staff and parents as a recruiting tool, hoping parents know they are with someone who's trusted. AVSC staff said immigrant families often fear going to the hospital for a skiing injury, due to lack of insurance or concerns with their immigration status.

Before AVSC executive director Mark Godomsky left in 2023, he had a goal to navigate the down-valley migration of interested athletes and reach families in the mid-valley and beyond. AVSC is partnering with Crown Mountain Park in El Jebel to install a trampoline for youth who live between Basalt and Carbondale.

WHERE ASPEN VALLEY SKI & SNOWBOARD CLUB ATHLETES LIVE

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Aspen | 28% |
| Carbondale | 27% |
| Basalt | 13% |
| Glenwood Springs | 10% |
| Snowmass Village | 9% |
| Other areas/international | 4% |
| El Jebel | 2% |
| Old Snowmass | 2% |
| New Castle | 1% |
| Woody Creek | 1% |
| Rifle | 1% |
| Silt | 1% |
| Redstone | <1% |
| Marble | <1% |

Source: Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club 2023 annual report.

Youth are most interested in individual sports.

When we asked young people what sports they want to try for the first time, individual sports were the most popular. Fencing, snowboarding, martial arts and archery received strong interest from both genders. Horseback riding and figure skating also made the top five sports that girls most want to try. The only team sport that made the top five for either gender was ice hockey (boys). Some individual sports have steep learning curves, which instructors say becomes the biggest barrier to retain youth in these sports. Parents may initially view these sports as a drop-in activity, like playing pickup basketball, without understanding the skills needed for consistent participation. For instance, fencing attracts some children initially because they see sword play on video games or TV, said Greg Domashovetz, owner of Roaring Fork Fencers Club, which primarily serves youth ages 7-18 from Aspen to Glenwood Springs. During the club’s six-week beginner course for \$100, Domashovetz instructs students to think of fencing like a video game with their body. “They’re like, ‘Oh yeah, that makes sense. If one person does this, I should do that,’” he said. “It’s just like the games they play on their phones. The problem is kids get through the introductory course, and they had fun, but there’s so much to do to improve.”

Outdoor rec creates multisport athletes while also impacting team sports participation.

The Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys provide tremendous opportunities for individual sports. But there’s also only so much time for outdoor leisure activities, which can cut into team sports participation. “Outdoor rec sports definitely impact organized team sports here,” said Jacob Ashworth, Basalt High School athletic director. “It’s not a bad thing because you can’t play football forever, and you can hike, mountain bike and raft for the rest of your life.

We just need to find a better balance.” To field teams, rural schools need more students to play multiple sports. Nationally, highly specialized athletes are less common at rural high schools (1 in 20) than at suburban schools (7 in 20).⁹ Rural athletes are three times less likely than suburban athletes to play 60 or more games per year in their primary sport. “I think you see more multisport and better athletes here because kids are skiing, mountain biking and doing all these other sports,” said T.K. Kwiatkowski, executive director of Glenwood Springs Youth Hockey.

Girls play volleyball the most but it’s challenging to access.

About 1 in 3 surveyed girls said they regularly play volleyball, a sport growing in popularity. Middle school volleyball exists as an opportunity to play. But there are challenges to play outside of schools, starting with costs,

which prohibit many low-income girls from participating. The Maroon Belles Volleyball Club, based in Carbondale and Glenwood Springs, offers three to five need-based scholarships annually and “practice player” spots for each of its teams at drastically reduced rates. “But this only helps a handful of girls a season,” said club director Brian Arbuckle. Maroon Belles usually has enough girls ages 12-16 for six to eight club teams, but only has enough coaches for three to four teams. Club volleyball coaches also coach at local schools, volunteer to run the clubs’ administrative duties, and work full-time jobs. The region also has very limited practice facilities, so the Maroon Belles rent space from local middle schools. Practices sometimes end at 9 p.m., which is late for younger kids. Without local tournaments, the teams travel to Grand Junction, Denver, Durango or out of state to play.





Helina McCracken, 13

Helina epitomizes what it's like trying to play multiple sports in this region. Multisport athletes are necessary to field teams given small population sizes. Plus, trying different sports is embraced by many young people.

"I don't like sitting all the time," says Helina, an eighth grader at Carbondale Middle School. "When I don't play sports, I feel like I get out of shape because I'm not running around."

Throughout her young life, Helina has tried soccer (the sport she plays most consistently since beginning at age 3), basketball, gymnastics, skiing, track and field, and volleyball. She recently tried volleyball out of curiosity to see if she's any good, and she now juggles middle school volleyball and club soccer schedules during the same fall season. She received permission from her volleyball coach to leave practices 20 minutes early to attend soccer practice.

"I wish coaches would remember what it was like when they were in middle school, balancing two different sports at the same time, and how it's hard to commit to one certain thing — and it's OK if that certain thing isn't soccer," Helina says.

Helina plays soccer for Roaring Fork United, a program that combines travel and rec teams serving Aspen to Glenwood Springs. She joined a more competitive program at Roaring Fork United in the sixth grade, playing up in age with more travel and time commitment. In fall 2023, she switched to a team with teammates her age, and feels more confidence because of the change.

"Roaring Fork United is nice that they offer scholarships, and Helina usually gets at least half," says Carmen McCracken, Helina's mother. "The problem is, you don't know until the end of the season if you get the scholarship or not, so for some parents the cost is prohibitive. The travel is also difficult, sometimes going three hours to play a game."

Despite Helina's love for soccer — her goal is to make the varsity high school team by her sophomore year — she can't play the sport at her middle school. The region doesn't offer middle school soccer for boys or girls. Even if middle school soccer were available, Helina isn't sure her school would have enough girls interested to field a team. "I would play club more than the middle school because I have more of a commitment to club," she says.

Besides, Helina has other sports she likes to try. For instance, she skis and runs the 200-meter dash in the offseason to condition her legs for soccer.

Mostly, though, Helina tries different sports for a simple reason: "I like feeling athletic."

4

Challenge: Rising costs and commitment

The Play: Revitalize In-Town Leagues



From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

Provide community-based, low-cost leagues and programs that are accessible to all kids — not just youth with the resources and ambition to participate on travel teams.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

The affordable-housing crisis dramatically affects staffing for rec and sports providers.

Between 2020 and the first half of 2023, the median price of a home grew by 135% in Basalt (to \$2.1 million), by 71% in Carbondale (to \$2 million) and by 33% in Glenwood Springs (to \$825,000).¹⁰ Rentals are pricey too. Many people spend long commutes from cheaper housing in Rifle, Parachute or Grand Junction (two-plus hours) to work in Aspen. Roaring Fork Fencers Club, a one-person operation that serves up to 35 youth, would love to add another skilled instructor to scale up but can't. "How can you have staff you can afford to pay to live in the valley?" asked Greg Domashovetz, the club's owner, who charges \$325 a month for regular fencing lessons. "The cost of housing here is equivalent to Brooklyn, and a fencing club in Brooklyn would charge \$800-\$900 per month. We don't have New York salaries here. I would need to raise prices to pay my rent." Finding qualified staff to work at the Aspen Recreation Center keeps director Desiree Whitehead up at night. When the rec center had an opening in 2023 for a fitness and wellness coordinator, 15 people applied — far fewer than she had hoped — and more than half lived out of state. "When you speak to these candidates, they don't really know anything about the housing or where they would live, so you're limited on who you can offer positions to while making sure who you're

hiring someone who has passion to work with kids," said Whitehead. Said Travis Buckner, Aspen's athletics coordinator: "Housing will make or break your opportunities here."

Schools are typically a low-cost sports option, but even there families often must pay.

Our youth survey showed that schools are a far more popular setting to play sports than at parks and recreation centers. Schools are a valuable location to expose children to sports that they may never be able to afford elsewhere. But with few businesses available for financial support, every school district in the region charges athletic fees to families to help cover costs (see page 48 for each district's costs). For instance, Roaring Fork School District charges \$125 per sport for high school athletes and a maximum of \$400 per family per year. The costs are reduced or waived for students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. "The problem today is every school or team has to fundraise for themselves," said Crista Barlow, Roaring Fork High School athletic director. "Don't get me wrong, the district does pay a lot of money for officials and coaches' stipends, and that's great. But we're covering the costs of bus drivers, which have to keep going up because we can't find drivers."

Fundraising for community-based sports is necessary and challenging.

Rural communities in this region encounter a difficult task: There are only so many sponsors to support various activities, and not just sports. “The same few businesses get hit up all the time for everything,” Barlow said. “And how much can a sandwich shop really help? All of the small mom-and-pop businesses are paying \$20 per hour for staff.” At high schools, travel budgets must factor in many games being played far from home. It’s not uncommon for some opponents to be located four to five hours away. Bus trips and occasional hotel stays add up. With so few businesses available to support sports, administrators say they view team fundraisers, donated equipment, community service by athletes and paid attendance at local games as valuable connections with their communities to make the case for support.

Colorado Extreme is bringing hockey to new communities by focusing on equity.

In the city of Rifle, historically known for rodeos, youth were given the rare opportunity to play hockey beginning in January 2024. That’s thanks to an outdoor rink built by the Colorado Extreme, which is making waves locally and nationally with free programming and its messaging around equity. Financed by entrepreneur and former hockey player Sheldon Wolitski, the Extreme began in 2021 with kids playing on improvised teams and in communal gatherings. Now the club has 557 youth playing at rinks in Carbondale (345 children) and Rifle (212). Approximately 31% of the Extreme’s participants are female and 24% of all players are Latino/a.¹¹ And it’s all free. The NHL donated equipment. Wolitski puts significant time and money into the effort. He hired staff such as Carlos Ross — a rare former college hockey player who is Latino — to build relationships in Spanish-speaking communities.

“Hockey is a very White and expensive sport,” Ross said. “What Sheldon is doing is giving other kids an opportunity. For these kids to play in Aspen, it would cost them \$2,000 just to register. Hockey is changing. It’s got to change.” What began in Carbondale gained interest from Rifle parents who sought hockey in their community too. “We think Rifle is going to be more successful than Carbondale,” Wolitski said.



Questions arise about the sustainability of three local youth hockey programs.

Not everyone loves the Colorado Extreme’s arrival, joining Aspen Junior Hockey (founded in 1972) and Glenwood Grizzly Hockey (1998). Grizzly officials are concerned not enough players exist locally to sustain three hockey organizations without cooperation from everyone. About half of Grizzly Hockey’s players live in Glenwood Springs, with another 20% each coming from Carbondale and New Castle.¹² Grizzly leaders believe their offerings (including scholarships) are not much different from ideas promoted by the Extreme. Grizzly leaders said they lost 15 travel players and Aspen lost five to the Extreme in the last year, leaving Grizzly Hockey unable to field a 12U team. “To take 15 kids that were rostered in our association to join (Wolitski’s) team, I can’t say that’s playing nice,” said T.K. Kwiatkowski, Grizzly Hockey executive director.

The Extreme has a recreational, learn-to-play program and travel teams, while Grizzly Hockey offers more recreational opportunities (such as jamborees) for players in between. Wolitski, who takes pride in statewide success by the Extreme’s 10U A team, said he hopes to eventually play the Aspen and Glenwood teams through conversations brokered by the Colorado Amateur Hockey Association. “Unless these other organizations let us in, we’re having to go to Denver, which isn’t too bad,” said Wolitski, who hopes to secure donations for families that need financial help to travel if their children want to play at a higher level. Kwiatkowski said more local games among the three associations makes sense, “but we’re also looking at a finite population and we’re stretched for players over three associations.” In our youth survey, 146 children indicated they want to try hockey for the first time — more than basketball, baseball, soccer and football.

HOCKEY PARTICIPATION AND INTEREST BY SCHOOL DISTRICT

| Percentage of youth who have played or want to try | | | |
|--|---------------------|----------------|-------------|
| | Tried at Least Once | Regularly Play | Want to Try |
| Aspen | 15% | 7% | 7% |
| Garfield Re-2 | 8% | 6% | 13% |
| Roaring Fork | 5% | 4% | 14% |
| Garfield 16 | 5% | 2% | 15% |

Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.



Hillary Maravilla, 9

To watch Hillary aggressively skate at hockey practice, constantly moving and rarely shying away from incidental contact, you wouldn't know she's a hockey newcomer in the last couple years. Why would she know about hockey, which is traditionally a sport only played in winter communities? Her family came from El Salvador, where soccer rules.

Since Hillary was exposed to hockey, the sport has dramatically improved the self-esteem of this fourth grader at Basalt Elementary School who lives in nearby El Jebel.

"She used to always say, 'I can't do this. I'll never be able to do this,'" says Ada Maravilla, Hillary's mother, through a Spanish translator. "Now her mentality is, 'I can do it. I'll keep trying.' If it was up to Hillary, she would be on the ice every day."

Hillary discovered hockey through a learn-to-skate flyer in the mail from the Colorado Extreme, a third-year youth hockey organization gaining recognition for its messaging around equitable access to hockey. All of Hillary's costs to play, including equipment, are currently free.

"I really wanted to try because I've seen a lot of kids play and they say it is fun," Hillary says.

Learning to skate turned into loving the physicality of hockey while playing mostly against boys. Hillary loves contact, in part because that's not allowed as much in soccer, which she also plays.

"In soccer I usually push and I get fouls, so that's how I got the attitude to hit in hockey," Hillary says. "I like hitting. It feels like a good sensation, but it also feels weird because you could get out for a few minutes in the penalty box." USA Hockey prohibits body checking until age 13.

The girl who knew nothing about hockey now watches the NHL on TV, especially the Oilers (and her favorite player Connor McDavid), along with the Avalanche, Red Wings and Devils. She says she doesn't understand why her team includes only three girls while other girls stick to dolls and makeup.

"Maybe because they're more like a girl and not like me," Hillary says. "I'm tougher. Maybe if girls have a little tougher attitude, we could make them go into hockey or any sport."

Hillary now has dreams tied to hockey, like playing in high school or college. If nothing else, she gained confidence in who she is.

"Before hockey, I was just the shy girl and I didn't want to talk to anybody. I just wanted to follow the coaches, be quiet and be my best," she says. "Now I feel more confident. I talk more and say good things about my teammates."

5

Challenge: Not enough spaces to play **The Play: Think Small**

From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

Large sport centers are great — but people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away. Be creative in the use and development of play spaces and how kids can be transported there.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

Getting to and from sports and rec activities is a major challenge.

Where someone lives in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys tremendously impacts access. Children do not commonly use buses through the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (see Call for Leadership on page 40). In our youth survey, 13% of respondents who said they don't use parks and green spaces as much as they want indicated it is because they have no way to get there. If a child lives three miles from a park, that might as well be 30 miles away without access to transportation or feeling safe to go there. Yet 52% of surveyed youth said they would take public transportation from their neighborhood, if offered, to engage in more outdoor activities (versus 22% who said they would not use it and 27% who were uncertain). There was universal interest in better transportation from youth in every surveyed school district.

YOUTH TRANSPORTATION TO ATHLETIC ACTIVITIES

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Driven in car by parent or carpool | 75% |
| I play sports at my school | 27% |
| I took a school bus | 24% |
| I drove myself | 20% |
| I walked | 18% |
| My program provided transportation | 12% |
| I biked/skateboarded/scootered | 9% |
| I took a RFTA bus | 5% |
| I took the town shuttle | 2% |
| I took a city bus | 1% |

Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.



Expanded bike-share service offers more transportation options for youth.

WE-cycle, a nonprofit bike-sharing service that offers more environmentally friendly transportation, is designed to cover the first and last mile from bus stations. That's a vital need to get children to and from activities. WE-cycle recently lowered its age limit from 16 to 14 due to requests by parents. "We've seen a transformation, primarily among Spanish-speaking families who are riding as families and accessing bikes in ways they didn't previously," said Mirte Mallory, co-founder and executive director of WE-cycle. At no cost, anyone can ride for up to 30 minutes in Aspen, Snowmass Village, Basalt, Willits, El Jebel and Carbondale. WE-cycle hopes to expand service to Glenwood Springs. Late fees cost 50 cents per minute on pedal bikes and \$5 per minute on e-bikes for any ride exceeding 30 minutes to discourage longer rides. Some of the most popular bike stations are near schools, especially Basalt High School. WE-cycle works with schools to educate youth about safe and responsible bike-share use. WE-cycle, the Town of Basalt and Basalt High School developed a striped bike crossing to access one station.

More indoor facilities for the winter months are identified as a need.

Some parents, youth and recreational providers expressed interest in developing an indoor facility that could house sports and other activities during colder months — especially for those who don't ski. Officials at Crown Mountain Park, located in the region's largest school district (Roaring Fork), said they plan to start a capital campaign to raise about \$3.5 million for a 16,000-square-foot indoor facility. If a facility gets built, it could be used for turf sports like soccer and lacrosse, plus gymnastics and indoor ski conditioning, said Becky Wagner, Crown Mountain Park and Recreation District executive director. The idea of an indoor facility has been controversial for many years. Voters in the district's boundaries, located in western Eagle County along Highway 82, voted 79%-21% in 2013 against building an indoor recreation facility at Crown Mountain Park.¹³ In 2018, voters narrowly approved a property tax hike for the recreation district to improve the infrastructure of the outdoor park. "In 2013 we didn't have enough money to manage our existing infrastructure," Wagner said. "Now we're financially stable to finally get traction on this building that has been talked about for 25 years." The private sector could build indoor facilities too, with interest expressed by Sheldon Wolitski, founder of the Colorado Extreme hockey organization.





Robots are here to efficiently line sports fields.

As soccer and lacrosse organizations rapidly increased their requests to host tournaments at Crown Mountain Park in El Jebel, park officials felt overwhelmed. How would they efficiently line all these fields? Wagner decided to spend \$7,000 over five years to buy field-painting robots from TinyMobileRobots, which use GPS satellites to mark fields, rather than hire people to do it as she has in the past. Wagner said the parks departments at Aspen and Glenwood Springs have also since inquired about possibly using robots. All an employee needs to do is open an iPad, link the robot to the right location and field lines, and press start. “Previously, it would take me a week to set up lacrosse fields with two to three people,” Wagner said. “Now I was able to do nine lacrosse fields in eight hours by myself. It was incredible — and perfect lines. I’ve probably saved 75% on labor and 50% on paint. I’ll make our money back on this within a couple years.” Wagner said the robot has not yet taken away jobs and allows staff to focus on other maintenance.

Battlement Mesa could operationalize a valuable park if it can access water.

Given transportation challenges in this region, revitalizing parks near where people live is

vital to increase sports access. A good example is the skate and dog parks in Battlement Mesa, an unincorporated, 3,200-acre planned unit development with a mix of retirees and employed residents. The parks are in disrepair, but they’re accessible to roughly 65% of Battlement Mesa residents and located near Bea Underwood Elementary School. The Parachute/Battlement Mesa Park & Recreation District owns the 27 acres that include a skate park and two dog parks, located in an area that used to house ball fields. The park district wants to explore rebuilding the area with fields, especially for soccer, but it lacks access to non-potable water to maintain the grass, said Steve Matzl, director of Grand Valley Recreation Center. Matzl said the district spends almost \$7,000 per month on water to maintain seven acres of grass at the rec center and can’t afford those costs for 27 additional acres. Matzl said conversations have begun with the Battlement Mesa Service Association, a self-governing homeowners’ association that manages and directs the community’s governmental affairs, about how to obtain a pump station and shared water rights near the skate and dog parks. “These parks would be so much closer to where kids live,” Matzl said. “Water is the low-hanging fruit to get this done.”

6

Challenge: Too much, too soon

The Play: Design for Development

From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

Age 6 is not 16. Offer programming that is age and developmentally appropriate while tailored to the population served and needs of the individual child.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

More collaboration and resources are needed to accommodate youth with disabilities.

“Disability programming has not been thought through enough to most effectively serve the community,” said Lindsay Cagley, executive director of Challenge Aspen, whose programming includes adaptive biking, rafting, horseback riding, archery, skiing and snowboarding. For instance, Cagley said Unified Sports programming — which pairs people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team — could be expanded into the region by Special Olympics. In July 2023, the Western Region Caravan for Special Olympics came to Glenwood Springs to register athletes, build leadership skills of adult volunteers and bring awareness about the Summer Special Olympics. Eight athletes showed up. “I would have hoped for a lot more,” said Nick Adams, City of Glenwood Springs athletics supervisor. “We’re reaching adults with special needs; we’re not reaching youth. Many parents aren’t seeking out sports programming because they don’t know about it.” Glenwood Springs Parks and Recreation, which has a 20-member Unified soccer team, shares its programming information with Garfield County schools, but officials aren’t sure how the schools distribute it to families. Garfield County provided the City of Glenwood Springs with a \$7,000 grant to offer free programming. Cagley said school districts need to identify better resources

and partnerships and require adaptive inclusivity for students with disabilities. What’s missing, Cagley said, are programs working together on equipment, training and transportation, as well as empowering every organization to own some regional programming. Doing so could increase opportunities to support schools.

Parents of children with disabilities often lack a collective voice to be heard.

All children crave being part of activities with their peers. “I think the difficulty is we’re such a tiny minority in our town that we don’t have much pull,” said an Aspen mom with a special-needs child. “If we went to Denver, there is a much bigger community to put activities together. Here, there’s just a few of us, and it takes time to organize. Honestly, parents’ focus is more on school than sports. There’s growing awareness of the need for more sports and recreational offerings, but we’re not sure how to address it.”

“**There’s growing awareness of the need for more sports and recreational offerings (for children with disabilities), but we’re not sure how to address it.”**

Another parent described frustration that the closest adaptive playground is far away in Grand Junction. Several parents said schools face a major shortage of paraprofessionals, who help students with disabilities in the classroom with modified instruction. One mom worked as a para for \$1,000 per month. “No one can survive on that,” she said. Parents expressed concerns over how much to trust unqualified paras and whether parents should be at school more often.



With fewer teams in rural communities, programs are challenged to balance different kids' needs.

Metropolitan areas can clearly define their programming lanes between rec and travel sports. That's much harder in smaller, isolated communities within the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys, where an eighth grader can play a sport for the first time and be paired with teammates who have far more experience. “You don't have 150 kids at each age group trying out so you can break the kids out into appropriate levels,” said a football, hockey and lacrosse coach. “You have the Division I-aspiring kid on the same team as the kid who would much rather play video games.” Several coaches said they must be hyperaware to provide instruction that meets skill levels of kids in the middle. “Part of the struggle is remembering they're in fourth grade, when I remember just playing and having fun,” said a basketball and lacrosse coach. “Should we be doing all of this strategy at this age? Then you see parents are looking, and they seem to want to see me teaching their child a certain skill. Do they care about that, or am I overthinking?” The administrator of one sports provider wishes its organization did not include “club” in its name. “We're a rec program, but everybody is looking at us to be the next club-level team,” the person said. “That's not really what we are, but it's the only way kids can play our sport, so we sometimes struggle with that balance.”

Some teens quit sports due to body shaming.

Children who get discouraged by idealized athletic bodies presented on social media may drop out of sports. “A lot of my friends say, ‘I could never see myself in a swimsuit every day or wearing spandex and these super tight tank tops in cross country,’” said a female swimmer and runner from Glenwood Springs.



“Lining up at the starting line (in cross country), it’s crazy hearing a few girls who are quite fast with all the negative talk: ‘Yeah, I need to lose 25 pounds by the end of the season so I can look like this.’ I’m upset it’s happening in high school sports.” Sports should be inclusive of all body sizes and shapes. One small national study found that children often quit sports due to poor body image, issues with coaches and competitive pressure.¹⁴ Among children who quit because they thought they “didn’t look right,” about two-thirds said they often compared themselves with images in the media and on social media. Close to half of girls in the study said they “looked worse than the ideal.” The Glenwood Springs athlete said it’s hard subconsciously to wear tight-fitting gear given societal pressures to look feminine, and it’s even harder when adults perpetuate the angst. “When I used to play volleyball, my coach called me thunder thighs,” she said. “That should not be something you’re saying.”

Buddy Program provides recreational opportunities to youth with mentors.

One of the more innovative local initiatives is the Buddy Program, which uses one-on-one

mentoring experiences to empower youth, including free physical activities, outdoor leadership courses and summer camps. The program serves about 500 youth annually by partnering with 16 schools across the Aspen, Roaring Fork and Garfield Re-2 districts. Activities include skiing, snowshoeing, rafting, climbing, horseback riding, backcountry trips and attending the X Games in Aspen. Buddy Program staffers said that since COVID-19, more youth face challenging experiences with mental and behavioral health, such as apathy, anxiety, depression and impulse control. Buddy Program staffers expressed a need for more restorative practices training to manage conflict, noting that some families hesitate to enroll youth because they are worried their children will be around other youth with behavioral challenges. Bilingual and bicultural staff encourage Latino/a parents to enroll their children in the program to support mental health, as often in the Latino/a community “there is a stigma in going to therapy,” said a staffer. “Parents are scared kids will be given antidepressants and pills. I encourage them that it’s not therapy, but if you’re out there with mentors and buddies, your mental health will get better.”





Kiah Eklund, 13

Kiah exudes passion for sports, whether it's soccer, skiing, horseback riding or tennis. But without question, the sport Kiah most wants to try is gymnastics. She imagines one day completing roundoff front and back handsprings like she watches other gymnasts do online.

"It's just so much fun," she says. "I want to do that, but I'm just a Level 1 gymnast right now."

Kiah, a seventh grader at Aspen Middle School, was registered for a gymnastics class through Aspen Gymnastics, a private program that operates in an Aspen Recreation facility, until her parents pulled her out during the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid crowded spaces. Kiah is at higher risk to become sick because she has Down syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes developmental delays.

The difference between Kiah's development level and her age group causes challenges to register her for a team sport. "She was delayed from infancy," says Jodie Eklund, Kiah's mom. "When other kids were learning to walk and run, she was still just working on being alive. Some kids start playing sports at 3, and Kiah was still starting to walk at 3."

A family friend, whose daughter also has a disability, started inclusive soccer outings in Glenwood Springs. "It was sort of initiated as a school project by a high schooler and then it continued because there was a need," Jodie says.

Every Sunday, kids of all ages and ability levels (including some in wheelchairs) meet to play. These aren't structured games. They're a chance to learn some skills, kick the ball and have fun. Soccer has become Kiah's favorite sport.

"My No. 1 rule is, make a team with your friends and have fun," she says. "We don't care if we win or lose. It's how we play the game."

Kiah learns tennis through her occupational therapist at school. Again, there are no matches, just developing understanding of the sport.

Kiah used to regularly ski with Challenge Aspen, which supports inclusive participation for individuals living with physical and cognitive disabilities. She took a break during COVID-19 and planned to begin skiing lessons again in the winter of 2024. She probably won't take a group lesson with kids her age given the social gap. Jodie wants Kiah to ski with an individual instructor, so she gets coaching from people other than her parents.

Kiah is currently working on learning how to ride a bicycle independently. She has easy access to outdoor activities like snowboarding, hiking, camping, swimming and paddleboarding because of the interests of her parents, both of whom are snowboarding coaches.

Jodie isn't sure Kiah will ever be able to play team sports. The most realistic hope might be participating through Special Olympics, which has some programming in Glenwood Springs. But driving from Aspen to Glenwood Springs — much less to perhaps one day play against a Special Olympics soccer team in Grand Junction — is challenging for Jodie.

"If I wasn't a working mom, sure, I could take her to everything she wants to do," she says. "But there's only so much time."

As for gymnastics, "it was unfortunate we lost our spot," Jodie says. "We'd love to get back in, but from what I hear, we'd have to be pretty lucky because it's such a long waitlist."

Young athletes appreciate coaches who see them as individuals.

A coach can make or break a child’s sports experience. Many youth described wonderful coaches they played for over many years. These coaches care about them first as a person and challenge them to improve. Yet in several focus groups, most teens agreed that they have been coached at some point by yellors and demeaning adults. A female high school athlete said her former volleyball coach called players derogatory names. Another girl described having coaches who would only talk to players when they were having a good day athletically. “It’s so hard because you feel like they resent you because you do bad,” she said. “You feel your whole world is based on someone else. Everyone has off days. You should still feel dedicated to me whether I’m performing good or bad.” In our youth survey, 57% of respondents said their coach “frequently” or “almost always” facilitates friendships and team building, with boys (63%) more likely to agree this is true than girls (50%).

Latino/a children report feeling similar positive coach interactions as White youth.

This is not normally the case. In many previous Aspen Institute State of Play reports from communities across the country, Latino/a children viewed coaches far more unfavorably. By making all children feel welcome, communities have a better chance to retain them on sports teams and develop the physical, social, emotional and academic benefits that can come from participation. In our survey of youth in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys, children’s perception of coaches was nearly identical across ethnicities. For instance, 64% of Latino/a youth and 61% of White youth said their coaches “almost always” or “frequently” made them feel good when they improved a skill. In other communities, the gap is often 10 to 20 percentage points in favor of White children. Locally, a slightly higher

rate of Latino/a children (63%) than White youth (59%) said their coaches tell players they’re all important to the team’s success. Latino/a and White youth had an identical response rate (60%) for coaches telling them that trying their best was most important. Many people in this region value a shared cultural life experience and prioritize positive coach-player relationships.

YOUTH PERCEPTION OF COACHES

Percentage of youth who responded “frequently” or “almost always”

| | Boys | Girls |
|--|------|-------|
| Coach encouraged me to learn new skills | 68% | 69% |
| Coach made me feel good when I improved a skill | 65% | 65% |
| Coach told us to help each other get better | 68% | 60% |
| Coach told us trying our best was most important | 63% | 62% |
| Coach said all of us were important to the group’s success | 66% | 57% |
| Coach facilitated friendship and team building | 63% | 50% |

Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.



Finding coaches is a major challenge.

Kelly McCormick, principal of Grand Valley High School in Parachute, believes hiring and retaining quality coaches is the biggest challenge preventing more children from playing sports. “Kids do sports and activities with people they build a relationship with,” McCormick said. “When there’s a coaching opening, it’s hard to fill it with a qualified coach who wants to do it for a while and then support that coach. ... You make more as a referee over the course of a season than being paid as a coach.” Grand Valley’s school district, Garfield District 16, pays high school head coaches between \$3,550 and \$4,550 in stipends and between \$1,500 and \$1,950 for middle school head coaches per season.¹⁶ At Glenwood Springs High School, first-year head coaches with no experience receive \$5,500 per season, and a first-year teaching salary is around \$55,000. Finding coaches to move into the valley is nearly impossible given housing costs. Frequently, more school coaches are not school staff members. Many teachers feel burned out and lack the time or motivation to coach.

The best coaches communicate well with parents.

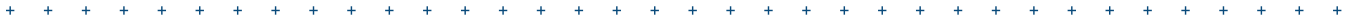
The relationship between parents and coaches can be fraught with pitfalls. Parents want their

children to play and succeed, and some go too far — another reason some people don’t want to coach. “At first they were the helicopter parents because they hovered,” said Craig Denney, Glenwood Springs High School athletic director. “We call them bulldozer parents now because they don’t come in thinking about specific situations. They come in with bulldozers to plow the road and say, ‘This is how it’s going to be for my kid’ — and the kids learn that and expect Mom and Dad to fix it.” This can be so difficult in hockey that at least one program, Aspen Junior Hockey, requires parents wait 24 hours after a game before addressing any concerns about the coach. “Twenty-four hours gives everybody a chance to cool down and gather your thoughts rationally,” said a hockey coach. “But honestly, I haven’t figured it out. Hockey parents are tough.” A lacrosse coach said he tries to overcommunicate with parents, such as daily emails with positive updates about the energy and enthusiasm of the team. As long as parent concerns aren’t related to the physical or emotional health of the child, several high school coaches and athletic directors said they encourage parents to let their child advocate for themselves by talking to a coach on their own.

8

Challenge: Safety concerns among kids, parents

The Play: Emphasize Prevention



From the "Sport for All, Play for Life" report:

Children deserve environments that limit injuries and offer protections against emotional, physical and other forms of abuse. And today, many parents demand as much.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM ASPEN TO PARACHUTE

Tackle football is still played more than flag, but warning signs exist for tackle.

Thirteen percent of surveyed elementary school children in the region said they regularly play tackle (versus 7% who play flag). That's reversed from national averages: flag surpassed tackle in 2017 as the most commonly played form of the game for ages 6-12. In the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys, the elementary-age participation rates for tackle increase the further west one travels as communities identify as more politically conservative. A 2023 survey by The Washington Post found that 75% of Americans who identified as conservatives said they would recommend football to kids, but just 44% of liberals did. The gap was only seven percentage points in a 2012 survey.¹⁷ Basalt's youth football team canceled its 2023 season due to a shortage of registered players, said Jacob Ashworth, Basalt High School athletic director. "It was alarming to me because I love football and don't want to see that affect the high school level," he said. Roaring Fork High School had only 18 football players to field a JV team in 2023, compared to 44 boys soccer players — many of whom are Latino and love fútbol, not football. Roaring Fork sent a few football players to Glenwood Springs High School, which has seen participation decline from 70-75 to about 55 in recent years.

At Grand Valley High School in Parachute, participation declined to 30-35 players in 2023, meaning no freshman team and some cancelled JV games.

Flag football offers a safer option for younger children – and a new sport for girls.

Flag, recently added to the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, is one of the nation's fastest-growing sports and offers growth potential locally. In our youth survey, boys were twice as likely as girls to regularly play flag, which will soon become a sanctioned high school sport for girls in Colorado. In 2022, the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA) launched a two-year pilot program with the Denver Broncos for girls flag at more than 50 high schools in the Denver area.¹⁸ Recently, NFL Flag began serving younger children in the Roaring Fork Valley, and two parks and recreation directors credit NFL Flag with saving their flag programs. Glenwood Springs Parks and Recreation jumped from about eight participants taking a class to 150 kids in a league within two years, although only 20% of the current players are girls. "I want to see more girls playing and get the sport into our high school," said Nick Adams, City of Glenwood Springs athletics supervisor.

TACKLE VS. FLAG FOOTBALL PARTICIPATION

Percentage of youth by school district who regularly play each sport

| | Tackle | Flag |
|---------------|--------|------|
| Garfield 16 | 16% | 3% |
| Garfield Re-2 | 16% | 7% |
| Roaring Fork | 12% | 2% |
| Aspen | 7% | 7% |

Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.

Aspen Parks and Recreation considered folding its flag program due to lack of interest before partnering in 2023 with Glenwood Springs on NFL Flag. Aspen had 15 players, although only one girl. “Any time kids see new equipment and jerseys from the NFL, that gets them fired up,” said Travis Buckner, Aspen’s athletic coordinator. “Families are being more conscious of the long-term risks to their child’s health. We just want to offer a much safer option with flag.”

Children fear injuries differently based on their gender and age.

Among surveyed local youth who don’t play sports often, girls were three times more likely than boys to say it’s because they don’t want to get hurt. “I’ve gotten hurt before, so it makes me wonder if I should still play, but I do love sports,” said a girl in middle school. Girls were more likely to say they don’t play sports due to injury concerns than because they believe sports are too serious. Injury worries among girls were around the same rate as girls who cited sports costs as a reason that they don’t play. Elementary school children were twice as likely as high school students to say they don’t play sports due to injury concerns. If children don’t feel safe in sports, they are less likely to participate.

Some schools partner with medical providers to have athletic trainers.

Having athletic trainers (ATs) on site can help save lives from cardiac arrest — the No. 1 cause of death among high school athletes. ATs can also prevent heat stroke, manage concussions and treat other injuries. Nationally, only 56% of high schools have access to an athletic trainer, down 10% since 2017.¹⁹ Rural and inner-city schools have far less access than those in the suburbs. The Roaring Fork School District uses a common model applied in some rural communities by partnering with a local service provider, Vally View Hospital/Valley Ortho, to care for athletes at Glenwood Springs, Roaring Fork and Basalt high schools. “We had an incident in another district where a player fainted, and it was really frustrating that no administrator or AT was available,” said Roaring Fork High School Athletic Director Crista Barlow. Certified ATs are not required to be at high school sports events in Colorado.²⁰ Schools are required by CHSAA to have a venue-specific emergency action plan for every venue that hosts practices or athletic events. The emergency action plan must include where an automatic external defibrillator is located and who is in charge of the situation.

LGBTQ+ youth feel less welcome and safe in sports.

“We have found that many LGBTQ+ youth have not been involved in organized sports and play, and have felt unsafe to engage more broadly in their communities,” said Kyle Crawley, executive director of Stepping Stones of the Roaring Fork Valley, a youth mentoring organization that operates an LGBTQ+ support group. Nationally, more than two-thirds of LGBTQ+ youth have never taken part in any school or community sports, in part due to discrimination or fear of being discriminated against.²¹ CHSAA recognizes the right of transgender students in Colorado to participate

in school sports based on sexual orientation and gender identification. Students must inform their school in writing that their gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth, and CHSAA requires the school to perform a confidential evaluation. In 2020 and 2023, Republicans in the state legislature introduced legislation that would have banned transgender girls from participating in female sports. The 2023 proposal attempted to cover all college, interscholastic, intramural and club sports if sponsored or sanctioned by a public school, school district, activities association or university that receives public funding.²² Both the 2023 and 2020 efforts failed to get out of committee.





Gabriel Mendoza, 17

From an early age, Gabriel loved the feeling of hitting in football. “It just creates more of a spark in me,” he says. “I find it more fun to go out and thump somebody.”

Gabriel, a high school junior at Grand Valley High School in Parachute, started tackle in the third grade. In the seventh grade, he volunteered to play back-to-back games each week because the eighth-grade team was short on players. Gabriel isn’t surprised to learn that more elementary-school-age children locally play tackle than flag football — the opposite of national statistics.

“We’re all country kids,” he explains. “Before I was able to play (organized) football, I was playing tackle football in the field with my friends, no helmets, no nothing. It’s just the culture. Flag makes sense maybe for kids 6 and under.”

Gabriel thinks most kids are scared of football’s violence because they’ve never tried the sport before. He sells them on the skills they could use at certain positions and the social bonding from being on a team.

“I try to encourage them that you’re not really going to get hurt,” he says. “You’re all padded up and it’s not as bad as it looks, except this season I bloodied up my nose, so it was a little harder to tell them that.”

Gabriel is a three-sport athlete. In the spring, he’s on the track and field team (100-meter dash, 300-meter hurdles and discus) to train for football.

During the winter, he wrestles at the 144-pound class.

“It’s a love-hate relationship with cutting weight because I love food, but I love the hard work that gets put into it,” he says. “You go into a wrestling room and fog up the entire room, and you might be hating it during practice, but when you’re done, you think back, ‘I put in the work.’ I enjoy wrestling for the hard work and the feeling of dominating someone at the mat.”

Work drives Gabriel. He works as a ranch hand on the outskirts of Parachute, maybe once a week during the school year and regular 9-to-5 days in the summer.

Gabriel loves the outdoors and participates in 4-H, a community of young people learning leadership, citizenship and life skills. Through 4-H, he shows sheep and participates in archery, a useful skill he hopes to use later in life when hunting.

Gabriel dreams of playing college football but recognizes how difficult that will be. As for the potential risk of long-term brain injury due to repetitive hits to the head, “I think about it a little bit, but I’ve never really taken too many hard hits to the head,” he says. “With all the new technology in the helmets, you trust the helmets more and learn to fall correctly to protect yourself.”

Mostly, Gabriel is proud that the Grand Valley football team is getting more serious about its program.

“We were getting those kids who wanted to be lazy and it kind of infected our team,” he says. “Now the coaches are being a lot tougher on us, and on top of that, we’ll play a game after practice and do a fun thing. The coaches will encourage us and that gives our kids hope. The hope for success is the biggest thing. That’s what every little kid wants to have: the hope to play in the NFL or be a wrestling champion — and the coaches pushing them to their limits, and then after practice telling you in a calm voice, ‘You’ve got this, you can do this, keep going.’”

State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Game Changer

Use the power of soccer to grow educational opportunities for Latino/a youth

The Problem

The Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys provide many opportunities for children to recreate. Yet only 15% of surveyed Latino/a youth in the region get 60 minutes of physical activity daily, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's nearly half the percentage of White children (27%) who meet the recommendation.

Research shows that physical activity not only helps with physical, mental, social and emotional health, but it also provides academic benefits. Physically active children score up to 40% higher on test scores, and they are 15% more likely to attend college.²³ In addition, the sense of purpose and belonging from participation in sports, particularly on a team, can make young people feel safe and prepares them for learning under the right conditions.

Local school districts made major progress in increasing high school graduation rates among Latino/a students between 2010 and 2020. Then COVID-19 hit, causing Latino/a students to lose significant ground academically compared to their peers. Only 17% of Latino/a students in the Roaring Fork School District met or exceeded expectations in 2022 on English language achievement tests, below the Latino/a state average of 26%.²⁴ White students in Roaring Fork schools (55%) stayed on pace with their state average.



The Opportunity

Very few activities, if any, provide the level of enthusiasm and ability to bring the Latino/a community together in this region like soccer. Local Latino/a youth (42%) said they regularly play soccer far more than any other sport — and much more frequently than White children (19%). We saw a similar trend nationally, with our [Reimagining School Sports initiative](#) identifying that 58% of rural Latino/a high school students have played soccer (a much higher rate than Latino/a students in urban and suburban communities).

What if local community leaders used soccer as a tool for social change? What if soccer could more intentionally be applied to create belonging for youth and educational advancement? The Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys could create a national model for a more coherent soccer system that drives positive educational, mental health and other benefits for young people and the region.

Here are opportunities to make this happen.

Offer more affordable soccer at younger ages – and target Latinas.

More work is needed to identify and enter Latino/a youth into the region’s formal soccer pipeline. It’s not known precisely how many Latino/a youth in the region who want to play soccer through traditional pipelines are formally able to do so. But the supply doesn’t appear to be meeting the demand. Even though 42% of surveyed Latino/a youth told us that they regularly play soccer, 16% also said they would like to try soccer (the No. 3 sport they most want to try).

Latino leagues for youth and adults are very popular. But many local parks and rec departments don’t offer soccer into later elementary-school-age years. Carbondale Parks and Rec ended soccer entirely because many kids joined club teams. Glenwood Springs saw the same trend and doesn’t offer rec soccer after age 6. Aspen and Rifle rec soccer go through fourth grade. New Castle and Battlement Mesa stop soccer after age 7.

Roaring Fork United, the most prominent local club, offers different levels of competition and commitment to the sport with many paid coaches. Still, the costs add up. Introductory-level fees for 5U/6U kids are \$175 (one season) and \$310 (two seasons) and keep increasing: 7U/8U (\$190 and \$340), 9U/10U (\$325 and \$550), and 12U (\$395 and \$690), plus a one-time \$100 fee for uniforms. Advanced league fees begin at \$1,195 for 11U if families elect the more competitive path. The club offers volunteer work and scholarship applications to reduce the fees. Colorado Mountain United (serving New Castle and Silt) and Rifle United (Rifle, Meeker, Battlement Mesa and Parachute) are smaller clubs that are more affordable due to volunteer coaches and cheaper fields.

“Another key reason that rec programs don’t have soccer is we do not have enough fields to grow the program in the Aspen to Glenwood region,” said Kevin Jardine, executive director of Roaring Fork United.

“Land costs are incredibly high, and none of the three clubs own land or have their own fields. We’re maxed out on field use with what we rent from Aspen, Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood town parks. Growth is impossible without more facilities and places for them to play.”

The City of Glenwood Springs is transitioning its \$75 soccer offering to **MLS GO**, a recreation program from Major League Soccer and RCX Sports designed to increase participation and access for youth ages 4-14 who exist outside the soccer ecosystem. Players wear MLS-branded uniforms while playing in their local community. The MOJO app provides curated educational programs to help coaches execute fun practices that develop skills.

Other communities could explore the thoughtful effort by Glenwood Springs. Nick Adams, the city’s athletics supervisor, says more affordable soccer after age 7 could be added if there’s demand and more available field space while not hurting Roaring Fork United’s efforts. Roaring Fork United uses Glenwood Springs’ spaces, and Adams stressed that a joint-use agreement with the school district would be imperative if rec soccer programming grows.

Adams wonders about the quality of an expanded Glenwood Springs rec soccer program. Could he find quality coaches? Would the game experience be good? Would there be enough referees? “Conversely, the ability to not travel and play could strengthen the family unit, provide a less stressful experience and overall enhance the quality,” he said.

Local middle schools don’t offer soccer. The PEG League, comprising Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield counties, offers middle school games for football, volleyball, basketball, wrestling and track and field (not every school sponsors all sports).

Yet the most popular sport among the growing population of Latino/a children gets formally played at that age only through clubs, which typically create more financial and transportation challenges than school-based teams. Even intramural soccer could offer a more affordable option to grow participation.

Intentionally targeting Latinas and their parents through productive methods is also critical to grow opportunities. Given that parents and recreational providers say many Latinas view sports and vigorous activity as exclusively for males, gender roles may be a barrier to any kind of physical activity participation by Latinas, including soccer. It's important to educate first-generation Latino/a parents on the value of sports for their daughters and help them sign up for programs. Community clinics can be created with trusted Spanish-language speakers and materials in Spanish.

We recognize that recreation departments and public schools have financial and staffing limitations, and budgets already struggle to pay for staff salaries and subsidized housing. Still, clubs can't be the only option for elementary- to middle-school-age children. Those are pivotal ages that can make or break whether a child continues playing sports.

Use soccer to chart pathways toward college.

There are models from which to draw inspiration. The Urban Soccer Leadership Academy (USLA) provides mentorship and financial assistance to low-income players across San Antonio, Texas, nearly all of them Hispanic immigrants whose parents did not attend college. At one high school USLA works with, the percentage of players on the boys soccer team who advanced to college went from zero to nearly 100% in just three years.²⁵

Ed Garza, the founder of USLA and a former San Antonio mayor, believes the concept is scalable in other communities with large Hispanic populations.²⁶ USLA began in 2010 with two big and interconnected ideas: create accessible, affordable soccer teams for underserved kids to compete with suburban clubs, and use soccer to chart academic pathways toward college.

USLA's volunteer mentors provide tutoring and college-prep services, help players create vision and



purpose statements, and inspire them to align their daily actions with what they want for themselves and their families. Because immigration status is a concern for many USLA families to register, USLA provides legal counsel to some players whose green-card cases go before a judge.

The academy is financed with government grants and financial assistance from local businesses and nonprofits. Garza understood it would be hard to find sponsorships just for soccer. By focusing also on breaking the poverty cycle through educational attainment, he discovered a wider audience.

Through subsidies, Roaring Fork United, Colorado Mountain United and/or Rifle United could pilot a similar program by establishing measurable educational objectives, tracking data to demonstrate the value of the program, and working with community partners to fill students' social and academic gaps with in-kind support or financial assistance.

This approach could also be a way to engage Aspen-based philanthropists looking to support upward economic mobility for the region's most marginalized communities.

Bring organized soccer back to Colorado Mountain College.

Colorado Mountain College (CMC), the regional higher-education system with 11 campuses, used to offer soccer at its Spring Valley campus (near Glenwood Springs), first in the early 1990s as a club sport and then as a sanctioned intercollegiate team from 2004-09. CMC administration cited costs as the reason it discontinued soccer. The university president at the time said CMC would save up to \$80,000 annually and pledged to create a sustainable plan to bring soccer back.²⁷ No plan materialized.

“The community was really disappointed when the program was dropped,” said Steve White, CMC’s head soccer coach in the 1990s and early 2000s.

It’s worth exploring how to bring back soccer. Intramural soccer, with minimal academic eligibility requirements, could be a more affordable option for CMC students to play each other if restarting a varsity team is not viable. Given the popularity of the game among Latino/a high school students, offering a local college soccer option could incentivize them to maintain academic eligibility, a problem some athletic directors cited, in order to play at CMC.

Throughout all of Colorado, Latino/a students are less likely than White students to go to college and nearly twice as likely as White students to require remedial classes in college.²⁸ Nationally, a Gallup poll found that 52% of Latino/a college students considered leaving college in 2022, a 10-percentage-point increase from 2020 and higher than the number of Black (43%), White (36%) and Asian (30%) students.²⁹

Researchers found that the primary reasons Latino/a students struggle to remain enrolled are similar to those of all students: costs of attendance, stress, mental health challenges and difficulty of educational materials.³⁰

CMC is a Hispanic-Serving Institution — the first in Colorado’s rural, high-cost mountain resort region — with Hispanics making up 29% of its student body. That’s up from 13% in 2013.³¹ The HSI designation from the federal government means CMC is eligible for additional grant funding that benefits all students. About one-third of Colorado’s public colleges have HSI status while just 10% of the roughly 5,000 colleges and universities nationwide carry the designation.

CMC’s Spring Valley campus has five soccer fields, but they are rarely used by its 486 students (32% of whom are Hispanic). Instead, fields get rented to youth and men’s leagues. Employees and community members sometimes ask CMC when soccer will return. Club soccer could help CMC create a reputable fundraising program among donors seeking to support affordable access to post-secondary education for rural minorities.

The key is finding champions locally and nationally, so the program doesn’t rely solely on CMC’s student services budget as it previously did. Resource support could potentially come from one of U.S. Soccer’s [Innovate to Grow grants](#). To reduce coaching costs and promote soccer throughout the region, CMC’s club coaches could come from the Roaring Fork United and/or Colorado Mountain United soccer clubs. Importantly, the CMC coaches could provide more than coaching soccer; they would mentor their players.

Soccer, while not the only answer to help improve educational outcomes, is too important in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys to view as only a sport. The “beautiful game” can help lift up young people, carrying them on pathways they might have never imagined were possible.

Call for Leadership

The State of Play report is intended as a body of research designed to better understand the local landscape, but nothing sparks positive change like a community of coordinated leaders committed to working together. We invite readers to use our recommendations as a starting point to help identify alignment, ownership and accountability for strategic next steps. Here are four additional recommendations of systems-level interventions that can support committed leaders to grow access to quality sport options for children.

Improve transportation to and from sports and rec programming.

When David Johnson, Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA) director of planning and communications, visited Helsinki, Finland recently, he was blown away by the city’s public transportation system. Seemingly every sidewalk was wide enough for walking or waiting for buses. Every transportation connection was thoughtfully designed. Every dangerous street crossing had a light that caused traffic to stop. Every aspect of the transportation system was intentionally built for walking or taking the train or bus.

Something else stood out, too: Young children moved around without parents, carrying tennis bags, hockey sticks, soccer balls and other sports equipment. “I was super impressed,” Johnson said. “We have a ways to go to be as intentional here, unfortunately.”

Transportation is one of the most significant barriers preventing more children in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys from accessing sports and other forms of physical activity. RFTA recently began offering a \$1 fare for youth 18 and under on all regional routes. As of March 2022, children under age 16 comprised less than 2% of all RFTA bus ridership, and youth ages 16-18 made up 5%. In our survey, 11% of youth from Roaring Fork School District and 9% from Aspen School District said they usually travel to their sports or

organized athletic activities via RFTA — far higher than youth ridership from Garfield School District Re-2 (4%) and Garfield School District 16 (1%).

Safety is one factor influencing low youth ridership. “A parent or child may be a little more reluctant to use the bus today than 10 years ago due to safety concerns,” Johnson said. “It used to feel more like a small town.”

The regional growth of WE-cycle offers short, transit-oriented trips for anyone, including teens, at no cost to help address gaps by bus routes. Here are some other ways to help better transport youth:

- **Build better walking infrastructure between bus stops and parks/youth facilities.** Children need physically safe walking and bike paths to and from bus stops to their destination. In many cases, consistent lighting and a paved walking surface that can be plowed for snow can make a difference.

“RFTA is successful because of our geography being very land-constrained, and all we do is go up and down the Highway 82 corridor,” Johnson said. “But the infrastructure between that is not that great. There are plenty of places where the sidewalk ends and it’s clear it’s just an afterthought.”

- **Create more bus stops closer to schools, rec centers and parks for after-school activities, and add more cross-town shuttles.** This is true in many communities served by RFTA. Some parents and coaches complained that RFTA doesn't stop at any Carbondale schools, although it does serve Carbondale Recreation Center. Johnson acknowledged that RFTA could particularly improve its access to the Glenwood Springs recreation center.

"Glenwood Springs is so congested, and if we ran all of our buses through there, that's about a three-mile increase in distance and we estimate a 50% increase in operating costs to get through there," Johnson said. "We don't serve well downtown Glenwood Springs or West Glenwood where the rec center is."

- **Find more bus drivers.** Any conversation about adjusting bus schedules must acknowledge that there's a shortage of drivers. RFTA cut back service on four routes, including its most popular Roaring Fork Valley commuter route, for winter 2023-24 due to a lack of drivers.³²

For RFTA to have maintained the frequency of the routes that winter, it needed around 200 drivers. RFTA had about 160. That's due to a combination of low unemployment rates and skyrocketing housing costs, Johnson said. RFTA recently raised its wages to start at \$30 per hour or \$62,000 a year to attract more drivers.

- **If politically viable, expand bus service in western Garfield County.** RFTA officials say it's vital to increase transit between Glenwood Springs and Parachute due to two recent traffic studies.³³ One shows roughly 50% of morning rush-hour traffic passing through Glenwood Springs to points south comes from western Garfield County. Another study concluded that regional population growth over the next 20 years will be most acute

between Glenwood Springs and Parachute to the west, with Glenwood Springs bearing the most benefits and impacts of this growth.

The Garfield County municipalities of New Castle, Glenwood Springs and Carbondale are members of RFTA and collect sales tax revenues for transit. Sales tax ballot measures for RFTA service failed in Silt and Garfield County in 2004 and again in Silt in 2008. The voters may not have reflected the potential ridership of community residents who could benefit from bus service the most. Rifle voters rejected a sales tax in 2006. "We want them to learn from our experience and we want to be part of the solution," Johnson said. "Whether or not RFTA does the service, if transit improves in one area of the corridor, the whole system gets better."

Create a scholarship portal for underserved children to access sports and recreational opportunities more affordably.

The wealth gap is massive in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys. Opportunities for children to play sports or engage in outdoor recreation often come down to costs. Many sports and recreational organizations generously provide scholarships for children to play.

However, many sports and rec providers and some parents — especially those who are Latino/a — described trying to navigate a confusing flood of scholarship applications. And that's if they even know that a scholarship or program exists or can afford the application. For instance, Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club scholarships are available by need, but a deposit is required to apply, starting at \$100. That deposit amount alone could deter some families from applying.



“There are a lot of opportunities for scholarships here because it’s a generous area, but a lot of families aren’t aware of the information or they’re intimidated,” said a staff coordinator of a recreational program.

Community leaders within the region could collaborate to build one process that manages scholarship applications for sports and rec providers, along with other after-school activities if desired. Think of this like the Common Application, which is accepted by more than 1,000 colleges to help streamline an essential part of the admissions process for students. Imagine a hub in which families fill out only one scholarship form with standardized questions to become eligible for money from various organizations tied to youth sports, recreation, arts, music and other activities. This could cut down on duplicative requirements asked of families to access scholarship money. This may also help families learn of certain programming for the first time.

One inspiring model is in Boulder, Colorado. The PLAY Boulder Foundation’s PLAYpass program awards eligible families with non-cash vouchers of \$250 to register at approved service providers’ sports and recreation programs throughout the city.³⁴ Low-income families who live in Boulder with kids ages 17 or under are eligible. Donors support PLAYpass with gifts ranging from \$10 to \$1,000.

Research shows that the odds of a child participating in organized recreational and extracurricular activities more than doubles by using a voucher program.³⁵

Locally, cooperation between sports and rec providers to serve the greater good would be vital. Providers currently operate in silos with their own processes and criteria for selecting scholarship recipients. There would need to be a level of transparency among organizations disclosing their criteria for scholarships. Those who opt in would have to agree upon the qualifications to receive financial aid and the distribution mechanism to provide the funding. Incentives to organizations could help them opt in, such as:

- Become eligible for additional funding from sponsors/donors supporting the scholarship hub.
- Receive greater access to parks, fields and sports facilities owned by local municipalities.
- Gain access to school activity fairs that help promote the scholarship hub and the provider’s program, potentially increasing the number of participants.

Creating a joint scholarship portal in the region could entice more sponsors and philanthropic donors than the current practice of individual fundraising efforts by a single sport or recreational provider. A rising tide lifts all boats.

Provide coaching education on positive youth development.

Roaring Fork United is one of the largest sports providers in the Roaring Fork Valley. The soccer club has 122 coaches — and yet only 12 showed up for an offered three-night training, according to Kevin Jardine, the club’s executive director. “Those are the ones who probably don’t need the information,” he said. “Some coaches just wing it and do the best they can.”

Roaring Fork United is not alone. At all age and competitive levels throughout both valleys, we heard a strong desire from coaches and administrators for more education and professional development. Alternatively, there are children who feel unwelcome in sports, so they turn to other physical activities such as theater and dance. Some sports coaches need a better understanding of skill development related to their sport or activity. An even greater need: Coaches must understand how to make youth sports and recreation safe places physically and emotionally for children while using these activities as tools for developing children's social, emotional and cognitive skills. In schools, fewer teachers serve as coaches given the pressures and expectations on their classrooms, meaning schools now rely more on community members to coach.

“While school districts and the Colorado High School Activities Association do provide paid and volunteer coaches with some training, it often doesn't go deep enough into trauma-informed practices or scaffolding the skills and techniques in a sport,” said Jennifer Baugh, superintendent of Garfield County School District 16. “Coaches can become frustrated when they don't have the comfort and expertise in working with youth.”



Coaches can become frustrated when they don't have the comfort and expertise in working with youth.”

The region could hold a local symposium for coaching positive youth development that becomes the expectation for best practices. School districts could create incentives and/or certification requirements around attending. Coaches throughout the region could be invited to an annual symposium or, better yet, take coaching workshops to different communities to make the sessions more accessible.

One option to lead the training could be [Positive Coaching Alliance \(PCA\)](#), which has worked with the Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club. PCA offers partnerships that include live workshops for school districts, parks and recreation departments, leagues and youth sports consortiums in all 50 states. Interactive workshops range from 30-120 minutes each, either in-person or by Zoom. PCA also offers six online courses.

The Aspen Institute could identify support from organizations in the Million Coaches Challenge, a national initiative aiming to train one million coaches in youth development practices by 2025. Less than one-third of the country's six million coaches have been trained in this area. The Aspen Institute also offers a free resource, [Calls for Coaches](#). Working with the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, the Aspen Institute identified the research base for the value of coaching for social and emotional skills. The findings from that [white paper](#) were translated into an [easy-to-follow checklist for coaches](#).

Another resource is [HowToCoachKids.org](#), co-created by the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee and Nike and inspired by the Aspen Institute. The platform offers simple courses to help kids enjoy sports and play.

Coaches are often volunteers and asked to do a lot, so extra training can be viewed as a hassle. But continued education is vital. It can inspire coaches to stay on a pathway that develops young people off the field as much as (if not more than) on it.

Pilot a regional adventure club to grow social interactions among children.

The Roaring Fork and Colorado River valleys are filled with wonderful opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

Yet these opportunities often exist in silos based on geography, socioeconomics and culture. Community leaders could pilot a summer adventure club that samples various outdoor activities from all corners of the region. The idea surfaced through our advisory group brainstorming sessions with officials at the Aspen Valley Ski & Snowboard Club (AVSC) and Garfield County Outdoors (GCO).

Miah Wheeler, AVSC director of development, said there is a need to “break the mold” of youth programming. “Bringing kids together from different communities and financial backgrounds in the outdoors is paramount to creating an equitable greater community,” Wheeler said. “Learning new ways to recreate and appreciate others gives kids a common ground they can relate to no matter their circumstances or location.”

A gap in many communities is the lack of programming during summer months when youth may need it most, said Scott Partan, program director for GCO, which provides outdoor education opportunities in local schools and communities. “Not only would the adventure club be a great opportunity to address that and for youth to experience the amazing outdoor recreation opportunities in our area, but it would also enable youth to connect with those outside their normal circle,” he said.

That last point isn’t lost on many children and parents involved in travel sports, who say they appreciate that friendships are built throughout the region thanks to sports. “It’s nice to broaden my daughter’s horizons because there are different characteristics in the region,” said a travel soccer mom. “Her childhood would be so limited if she was playing with the same set of local girls all the way through her sporting career in the valley.” Those connections are less available in outdoor activities that tend to concentrate efforts within local communities.

Finding common ground within our communities is vital as society becomes more polarized. Launching a youth adventure club, of course, doesn’t solve major problems. Think of it as a bridge for young people to connect with people who differ from them — a valuable skill to learn in life. Imagine taking children to different communities to engage in skiing, snowshoeing, fishing, climbing, archery, hiking, kayaking, paddleboarding, biking and more. One week the club could meet in Aspen or Carbondale; another week it could visit Parachute or Rifle.

Children won’t master any single recreational skill through the club. They will dabble in various activities hosted by recreational providers with the underlying goal of guiding youth interaction outside their cultural boundaries. Start with a pilot program — maybe 20 to 60 children depending on capacity — and build wins to potentially scale up in the future. Transportation methods would need to be identified to take children to and from activities. Perhaps school buses could be utilized with classes out during the summer.

Costs for the adventure club would need to be affordable. The club could be funded by corporate sponsors or other donors who appreciate the beauty of the Colorado outdoors and human connectedness, or possibly Great Outdoors Colorado, a state fund that invests a portion of lottery proceeds into outdoor programs and opportunities. Corporate sponsors would have the opportunity to engage their next generation of consumers on products and build a narrative around the value of healthy, resilient young people enjoying the outdoors. Surveys of attendees could measure progress and inform future efforts, such as what activities children want to try and the benefits of new interactions.

Learning about and interacting with different people helps children realize that we’re all human, despite differences in how we look or dress, or what we eat or celebrate, or even how we recreate. Imagine if recreation more intentionally taught children the beauty of similarities and differences.

REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION-REGIONAL

TOTAL POPULATION
85,463

TOTAL HOUSEHOLDS
33,756



Hispanic or Latino/a (of any race)



Not a U.S. Citizen



People Who Speak a Language Other Than English at Home



Foreign Born



Adults with a High School Diploma or Less



Without Health Care Coverage



People in Poverty

CHILDREN AND YOUTH-REGIONAL

CHILD POPULATION
21,197
(19 & Under)

YOUNG CHILDREN
5,135

MIDDLE SCHOOL
5,635

ELEMENTARY
5,152

HIGH SCHOOL
5,275



Children as % of Regional Population



Population of White Children as % of Total Child Population



Population of Latino/a Children as % of Total Child Population



Children Under 6 with All Parents in the Workforce

POPULATION BY COUNTY

| | PITKIN | GARFIELD | RFV EAGLE |
|---|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Total Population | 17,358 | 61,685 | 6,420 |
| Hispanic or Latino (of any race) | 1,892 | 19,564 | 2,352 |
| Total Households | 8,114 | 23,390 | 2,252 |
| Foreign Born | 10.7% | 14.3% | 15.1% |
| Not a U.S. Citizen | 36% | 62.7% | ND |
| Adults with a High School Diploma or Less | 14% | 24.2% | ND |
| Median Household Income | \$96,123 | \$82,772 | \$117,791 |
| Self-Sufficiency Standard (2 adults, 1 preschooler, 1 school age) | \$116,064 | \$96,234 | \$118,088 |
| Families Living Below the Self-Sufficiency Standard | 17.7% | 31.2% | ND |
| People Who Speak a Language Other Than English at Home | 14.9% | 26.0% | ND |
| Without Health Care Coverage | 4.4% | 17.5% | ND |
| People in Poverty | 6.7% | 8.1% | 8.0% |
| Child Population (19 & Under) | 3,060 | 16,799 | 1,338 |
| Young Child Population (Under 5) | 807 | 3,975 | 353 |
| Elementary School Population (Ages 5-9) | 459 | 4,247 | 446 |
| Middle School Population (Ages 10-14) | 879 | 4,438 | 318 |
| High School Population (Ages 15-19) | 915 | 4,139 | 221 |
| Children as % of Total Population | 15.8% | 24.6% | 21.4% |
| School Enrolled Child Population | 69.3% | 73.3% | 72.7% |

Region = Garfield, Pitkin and Western Eagle counties

ND = No Data

Sources: Aspen Community Foundation, CECE Coalition, Colorado Center on Law and Policy, Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (Region 12: Pitkin, Garfield, Eagle, Summit & Grand counties), Kids Count in Colorado 2022, U.S. Census

APPENDIX B | WHAT YOUTH LIKE MOST ABOUT PLAYING SPORTS

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Playing with friends | 52% |
| Having fun | 51% |
| Improving my skills | 27% |
| Exercising | 27% |
| Challenging myself | 16% |
| Winning | 15% |
| Supporting teammates/friends | 12% |
| Competing | 12% |
| I like being in nature/outdoors | 12% |
| Making my family proud | 10% |

APPENDIX C | WHY SOME YOUTH DON'T PLAY ORGANIZED SPORTS

| White | |
|--|-----|
| I'm not interested in sports | 37% |
| I don't have time due to schoolwork | 28% |
| I'm not good enough to play | 18% |
| I don't feel welcome on teams | 17% |
| I don't have time due to family responsibilities | 16% |
| Sports are too expensive | 14% |

| Latino/a | |
|--|-----|
| I don't have time due to schoolwork | 42% |
| I'm not good enough to play | 29% |
| I don't have time due to family responsibilities | 24% |
| I'm not interested in sports | 17% |
| Sports are too expensive | 16% |
| My friends don't play sports | 12% |

APPENDIX D | WHERE YOUTH PLAY SPORTS

| | White | Latino/a |
|----------------------|-------|----------|
| School | 77% | 75% |
| Home | 75% | 67% |
| Park | 57% | 64% |
| Rec center | 52% | 38% |
| Playground | 45% | 38% |
| After-school program | 35% | 18% |
| Local trails | 37% | 16% |
| Ski area/resort | 45% | 15% |
| River | 32% | 12% |
| Backcountry | 24% | 4% |

Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.

APPENDIX E | YOUTH WHO DON'T PLAY SPORTS DUE TO FEAR OF INJURY

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Girls | 14% |
| Boys | 4% |
| <hr/> | |
| Elementary School | 20% |
| Middle School | 12% |
| High School | 8% |

APPENDIX F | WHY YOUTH DON'T GO TO PARKS AS OFTEN AS THEY WOULD LIKE

More than half (54%) say they're satisfied how often they visit

| | |
|---|-----|
| I don't have time | 44% |
| I have no one to go with | 28% |
| There is not enough to do there | 20% |
| Weather makes fields/surrounding area hard to play on | 14% |
| I don't have a way to get there | 13% |
| Walking to the park is not safe | 11% |

APPENDIX G | FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH ENJOYMENT OF SPORTS

| Made me enjoy sports more | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Teammates | 76% |
| Coach | 67% |
| Family | 67% |
| Winning rate | 61% |
| Practice rate | 56% |

| Made me enjoy sports less | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Losing rate | 29% |
| Coach | 13% |
| Travel to games | 11% |
| Teammates | 10% |
| Practice rate | 9% |

Note: Survey responses largely came from children in the following school districts: Garfield Re-2 (526 responses), Roaring Fork (268), Garfield District 16 (227) and Aspen (95).

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Colorado: Aspen to Parachute Youth Survey.



APPENDIX H | ROARING FORK TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY BUS USAGE BY YOUTH

Percentage of riders by age who use the region's commuter bus service

| | Under Age 16 | Ages 16-18 |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------|
| All boardings | <2% | 6% |
| Distinct riders | <2% | 5% |
| Route | | |
| Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) | <2% | <2% |
| Valley Local | 7% | 11% |
| Snowmass-Valley | 12% | Not listed |
| Hogback | <2% | 9% |
| Aspen-Snowmass | <2% | <2% |
| Aspen City routes | <2% | 7% |
| Ride Glenwood | 11% | 39% |
| Home/Lodging | | |
| Aspen | <2% | 6% |
| Snowmass | <2% | <2% |
| Basalt | <2% | <2% |
| Willits | 8% | Not listed |
| El Jebel | 9% | 8% |
| Carbondale | <2% | 8% |
| Glenwood Springs | 7% | Not listed |
| New Castle | <2% | 7% |
| Silt or Rifle | Not listed | 8% |
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic/Latino | <2% | 8% |
| Not Hispanic/Latino | <2% | 6% |

Note: RFTA provides commuter bus service from Aspen to Glenwood Springs and Glenwood to Rifle, intracity service in Aspen and Glenwood Springs, ski shuttle service to the four Aspen Skiing Company ski areas, the Maroon Bells shuttles and a variety of other seasonal services.

Source: Roaring Fork Transportation Authority, March 2022 data.

APPENDIX I | SCHOOL DISTRICT SPORTS PARTICIPATION FEES

| | High School | Middle School | Maximum Annual Gap |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|---|
| Garfield 16 | \$75 per sport | \$25 per season | \$150/student, high school \$300/family, high school \$50/student, middle school \$100/family, middle school |
| Garfield Re-2 | \$75 per sport | \$50 per sport | \$225/student, high school \$150/student, middle school |
| Roaring Fork | \$125 per sport | \$50 per sport | \$400/family, high school |
| Aspen | \$150 per sport | \$25 per student | \$450/family, high school |

Note: Aspen includes an additional \$100 team gear/supplemental fee. In addition, families are responsible for paying for their child's hotels (excluding state playoffs), meals and other expenses on any overnight stays for games.

Source: School district athletics handbooks and websites.

PHOTOS

Photos were provided by Aspen Lacrosse Club, Basalt High School, Challenge Aspen, Colorado Extreme, Crystal River Elementary School, Garfield County Outdoors, Garfield County School District 16, Glenwood Springs High School, Glenwood Springs Parks and Recreation (photographer Joe Van Wyk), Glenwood Springs Youth Hockey Association, Roaring Fork High School (photographer Sue Rollyson), Roaring Fork Lacrosse Club, and WE-cycle (photographer Daniel Bayer).

CREDITS

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ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States.

www.AspenInstitute.org

ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops, mobilizes and shares knowledge that helps stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

www.ProjectPlay.org

REPORT METHODOLOGY

Throughout the report, “sports” refers to all forms of physical activity that, through organized or casual play, aims to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. The term “youth” refers to 6- to 18-year-olds. The term “parent” is used to refer to the caregivers with whom youth reside. The term “coach” is used broadly to include those who instruct youth in both sports and other physical-activity programming.

Youth survey results identified in the report came from our State of Play youth survey, administered online from March to October 2023 through the Resonant Education platform. The survey was completed by 1,125 youth in grades 3-12 who live in the Roaring Fork or Colorado River valleys. Surveys were distributed primarily through school districts, and responses came from Garfield School District Re-2 (47%), Roaring Fork School District (24%), Garfield County School District 16 (20%) and Aspen School District (8%).

The demographics of survey respondents were: 49% female, 49% male, 2% nonbinary; 48% White, 32% Latino/a, 12% not listed or prefer not to answer, 4% two or more races/ethnicities, 2% Black, 1% American Indian or Native American, less than 1% Asian; and 51% high school students, 32% middle school students, 16% elementary school students.

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