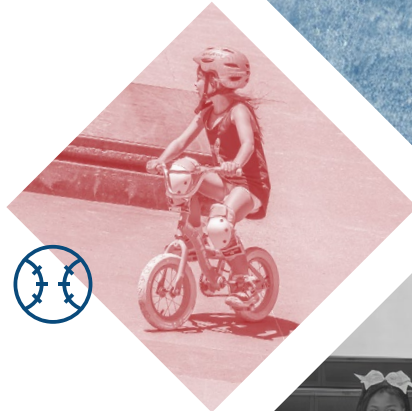




STATE OF PLAY

Baton Rouge

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program analyzed the landscape of youth sports and physical activity in East Baton Rouge Parish. “State of Play Baton Rouge” offers insights and recommendations to grow quality sports access for more children. “Sports” refers to all forms of physical activity that, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being.

Findings for this report came 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 with more than 400 youth in Baton Rouge; predictive models based on national parent survey results; local media accounts; and existing reports and public data collected by the Aspen Institute. Research occurred from August 2023 to August 2024.

What we found is a youth sports ecosystem that, like many communities we have studied around the U.S., has been transformed in recent decades, with a shift toward costly travel-team sports at ever-earlier ages. This comes at the expense of community leagues that previously engaged kids at scale. That has created gaps in the supply of quality sport activities into adolescence, sharpened by challenges in the city maintaining its many aging recreation centers and a growing desire to use youth sports as an economic tourism engine for Baton Rouge. Venues to develop shared solutions across public, private and school bodies are lacking.



Other key findings in the report:

- **Not enough youth are physically active, especially girls.** Only 20% of surveyed youth in Baton Rouge receive at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to the Aspen Institute youth survey. Boys (25%) are more physically active than girls (14%), who also play sports at lower rates.
- **Who plays sports varies by community in Baton Rouge.** Baton Rouge has a slightly lower youth sports participation rate than the U.S. average, according to a predictive analysis by Kineticia. Aside from football and basketball, sports participation rates in North Baton Rouge lag those in South Baton Rouge. North Baton Rouge has a significantly lower household income and larger Black population.
- **Youth here are motivated by joy and friendships to play sports.** The No. 1 reason kids said they play sports is to have fun (53%), followed closely by playing with friends (46%). Winning games ranked fourth, and pursuing college athletic scholarships ranked 10th.
- **Climate change impacts access to sports.** Many children rarely play outside from late June through August due to extreme heat. By the 2050s, East Baton Rouge Parish can expect 34 to 70 fewer days each year suitable for football, [according to a study by the Climate Impact Lab](#). How sports and physical activity are offered to children is evolving. Flexibility will be vital in the years and decades to come.
- **Transportation challenges keep youth from joining teams.** Sports participation is impacted by limited school bus service and parents who can't drive their child to activities. In our survey, 12% of children said they usually walk to play spaces, practices or games, with Black youth twice as likely as White children to do so.
- **Basketball is the sport boys most want to try; girls prefer gymnastics and cheer.** Our youth survey also showed tackle football, powerlifting, shooting sports and boxing as activities that boys want to try. Dance, volleyball and swimming were other activities girls expressed interest in trying.

Sports has the capacity to not only build healthy lives but also social trust across Baton Rouge's diverse communities. "State of Play Baton Rouge" explores that opportunity with the help of the Aspen Institute's Social Trust Index, which measures the strength of specific neighborhoods based on trusting behavior, trusting intentions and trusting spaces (page 44). Social trust can show up in youth sports by building connections that motivate communities to help more children play and develop as human beings no matter what differences exist.

To grow social trust across the local sport ecosystem, "State of Play Baton Rouge" recommends the creation of a Baton Rouge athletic council to help local leaders regularly communicate and coordinate actions that create more quality sports opportunities for all children (see page 13). Baton Rouge needs a way for leaders from schools, parks and rec departments, travel teams, local governments and others to align goals around what a healthy sports experience should look like for kids.

"State of Play Baton Rouge" is the Aspen Institute's 15th 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 Kansas City, Aspen to Parachute, Colorado, 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: <https://projectplay.org/communities/overview>.



The roles of the athletic council over time could include:

- Creating an online directory of sports programming in Baton Rouge so children and families know what's available.
- Coordinating transportation opportunities so that more children have options to get to and from games and practices.
- Setting standardized climate regulations in youth and school sports as extreme heat and flooding continues to impact safe opportunities to play.
- Prioritizing more equitable access to private play spaces, especially those indoors.
- Establishing coach-training requirements that ensure youth coaches are developmentally appropriate and helping — not hurting — a child's mental health.

In addition, "State of Play Baton Rouge" offers ideas to help sports and recreation providers adapt their programs due to climate change so children can safely play; solutions for local transportation challenges that impact sports access; inspired actions by local parents to provide mental health training to coaches; recommendations on ways to expand free play through safe play spaces; and opportunities to grow sports participation for girls.

Most importantly, this report features the voices of young people, including 14-year-old Daniel Watson (page 15). Daniel was frustrated that East Baton Rouge Public Schools did not offer middle school baseball like other school districts. For a year, he made requests with school district leaders and single-handedly brought middle school baseball to Baton Rouge, showing the power that young people possess to make a difference.

