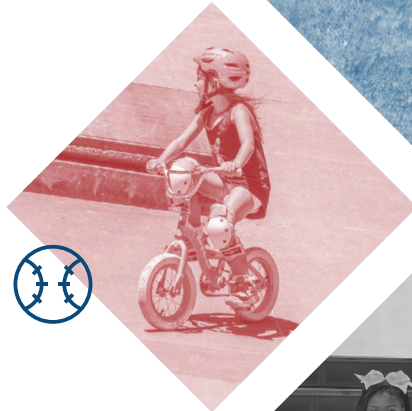




# STATE OF PLAY

## Baton Rouge

ANALYSIS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS





# WELCOME

Baton Rouge residents live passionately through their sports traditions. If it's not Friday Night Lights at local high schools, it's Saturday Night in Death Valley — or some other sport to cheer on or play. Whether the games happen at LSU or Southern University, occur within recreational, travel or school sports environments, or exist largely to benefit the local economy, Baton Rouge plays to win on and off the field.

Just since 2019, LSU has won national championships in baseball, women's basketball, football and men's outdoor track and field. Southern has won Historically Black Colleges and Universities national championships in baseball and women's basketball over the same period. Meanwhile, Louisiana's state capital hosted over 180 sporting events that attracted 107,700 attendees from 2020 to 2024, according to Visit Baton Rouge.

People here love their sports and helping one another, as shown by [one study](#) that ranks East Baton Rouge Parish as the third-most generous parish for charitable giving in Louisiana. There's room to do both by improving the quality and quantity of available sports experiences for those who will shape the future of Baton Rouge — today's children. Not enough local children can access sports and enjoy the associated benefits to help them develop as young people.

The Aspen Institute aims to support Baton Rouge in identifying opportunities to build healthier children and communities through sports and physical activity. In partnership with the Pennington Family Foundation, this "State of Play Baton Rouge" report assesses the current state of play for kids in East Baton Rouge Parish. It's shaped by the youth sports frameworks of the Aspen Institute's Project Play initiative and what local children, sports providers and community leaders told us about their experiences.

Our work is anchored in the notion that all community stakeholders will benefit if all youth can enjoy a quality sports experience. We know this from the body of research establishing the myriad benefits of physical activity. It's associated with greater mental well-being, physical health, social connections and educational outcomes. A virtuous cycle gets unleashed, especially if children engage in regular sports and physical activity before age 12.

Playing sports does not in and of itself guarantee these benefits. Sports can help or hurt a child. It's all in the delivery, beginning with asking kids what they want out of playing sports and then giving them that experience. "State of Play Baton Rouge" does that by speaking directly to young people through surveys and focus groups, and then offering community-sourced ideas for Baton Rouge to act.

We hope this report informs short- and long-term community strategies and serves as a tool for organizations to develop new partnerships and programs. Baton Rouge's passion for sports is one of its greatest strengths and can be leveraged to help children develop healthy, lifelong benefits through sports. Working collectively, Baton Rouge can create safe, equitable and quality sports opportunities for all children in the parish.



**Jon Solomon**

Community Impact Director, Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program

## THE VISION

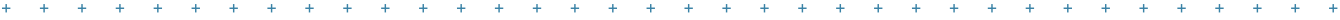
We aspire for every child in East Baton Rouge Parish to have the opportunity to be active through sports, play and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability.

# 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 Kinetica. 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>.**



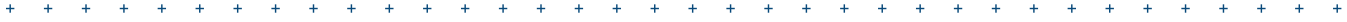
### The roles of the athletic council over time could include:

- 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.

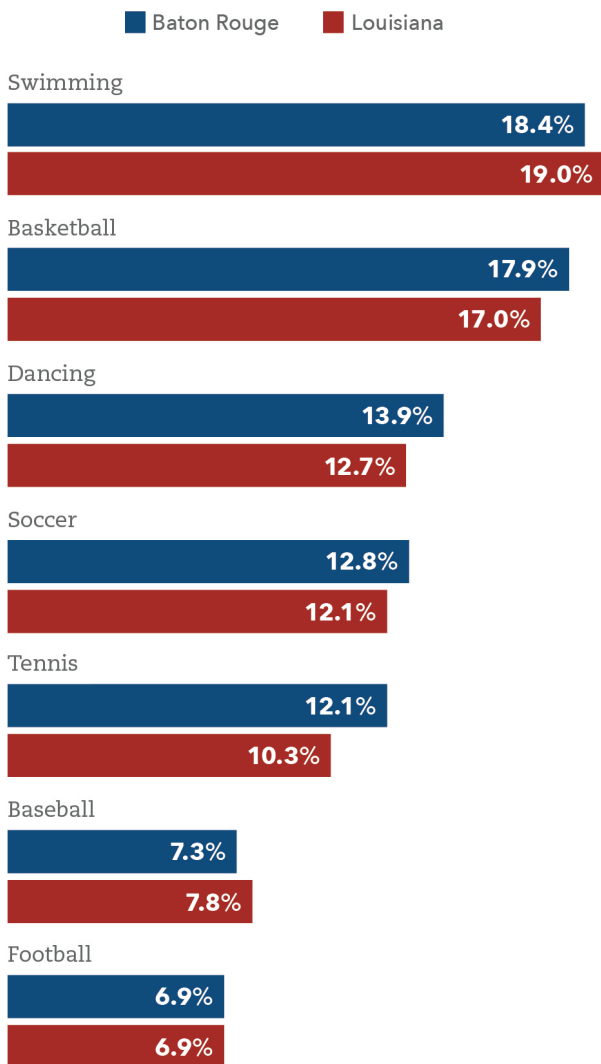
Most importantly, this report features the voices of young people, including 14-year-old Daniel Watson (page 15). Daniel was frustrated that East Baton Rouge Public Schools did not offer middle school baseball like other school districts. For a year, he made requests with school district leaders and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

# KEY DATA IN BATON ROUGE

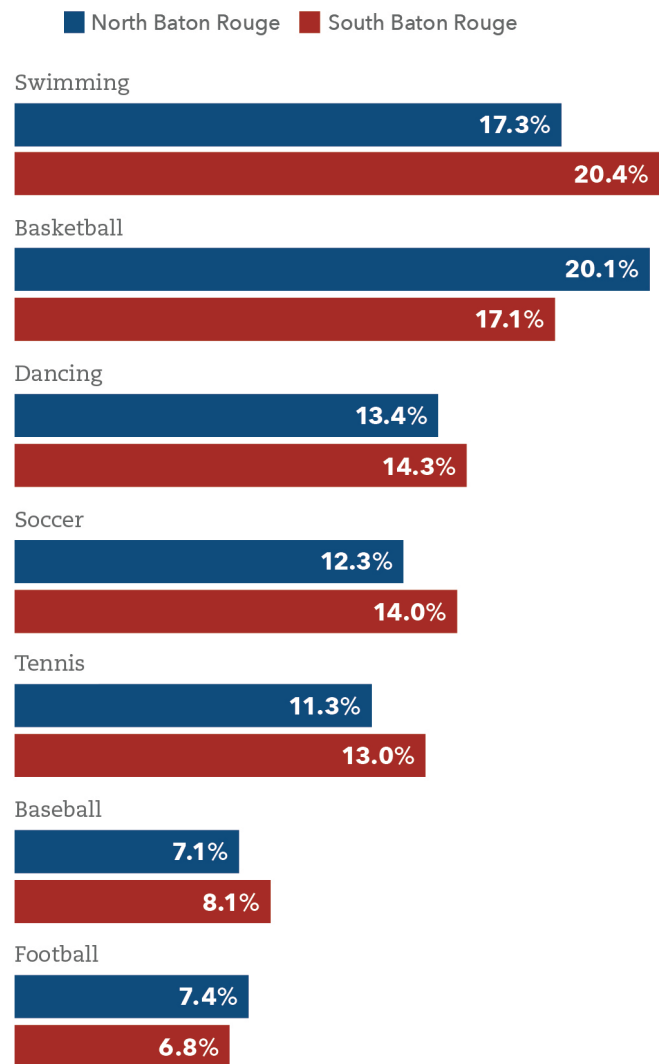


The Aspen Institute's partner Kinetica is a company that utilizes primary research and predictive analysis to generate localized sports, recreation and well-being data for every community across the U.S. Kinetica's data was used to assess youth sports participation in Baton Rouge compared to Louisiana and the U.S. (see methodology on page 47).

## BATON ROUGE YOUTH SPORTS PARTICIPATION TENDS TO BE HIGHER THAN LOUISIANA'S, ESPECIALLY IN BASKETBALL, DANCING AND TENNIS



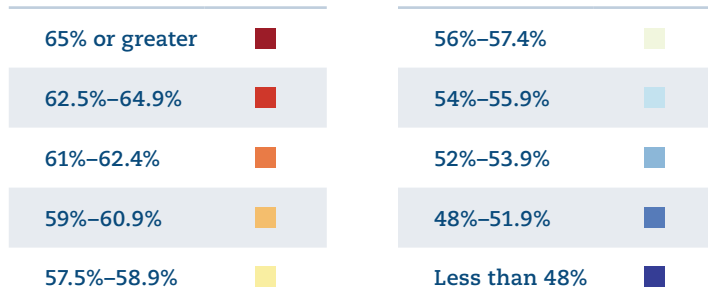
## NORTH BATON ROUGE HAS LOWER PARTICIPATION THAN SOUTH BATON ROUGE IN MOST YOUTH SPORTS



Source: Kinetica Localized Sport, Recreation and Well-Being Dataset – 2023

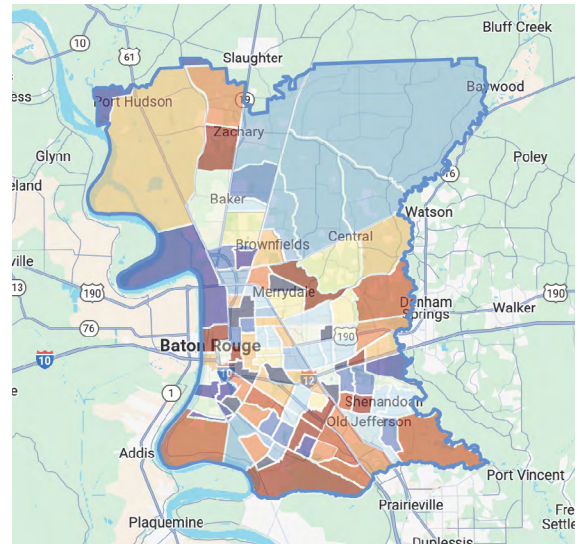
## SPORTS PARTICIPATION VARIES BY INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITIES IN BATON ROUGE

% of kids who played any sport at least once in past 12 months.



**Note:** Warm colors show higher youth sports participation in communities while blue shades reflect lower participation.

**Source:** Kinetica Localized Sport, Recreation and Well-Being Dataset – 2023



## BATON ROUGE'S AMERICAN FITNESS INDEX RESULTS

Each year, the American College of Sports Medicine ranks America's 100 largest cities on a composite of health behaviors, health outcomes, community infrastructure and local policies that support a physically active lifestyle. Here's how Baton Rouge fared in the 2021 rankings, which was the last year when the city qualified for the list. Baton Rouge ranked 81st overall out of 100 cities; New Orleans was 56th.

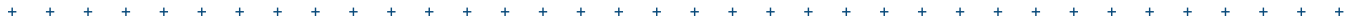
	Baton Rouge	New Orleans	100-City Average
Bike score	46.7	66.4	54.1
Parks/10,000 residents	3.6	6.2	4.0
% within 10-minute walk to park	54.0	80.0	70.8
Walk score	40.8	58.9	48.0
Park expenditure/resident	\$45	\$180	\$102
Ball diamonds/10,000 residents	2.3	0.4	1.7
Basketball hoops/10,000 residents	7.9	1.7	3.4
Playgrounds/10,000 residents	2.6	2.5	2.4
Rec centers/20,000 residents	2.9	0.7	0.9
Swimming pools/100,000 residents	1.7	4.4	2.3
Tennis courts/10,000 residents	2.5	1.6	1.8

**Note:** Higher numbers reflect better health results than lower numbers in the categories of "Bike score" and "Walk score."

**Source:** American Fitness Index, 2021

# PROJECT PLAY FRAMEWORKS

Three frameworks guide Project Play’s work to increase sports participation and physical activity among young people.



## YOUTH SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Released in 2015, the report is a unifying model for action to increase youth sports participation and is anchored in the values of health, equity and inclusion. Project Play offers eight strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children, aggregating the most promising ideas that emerged from two years of roundtables with more than 250 thought leaders.

- [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 full report at [projectplay.org/youth-sports/playbook](http://projectplay.org/youth-sports/playbook).







## SCHOOL SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Developed in 2022, [this report](#) recognizes that students need more options for physical activity, whether through community partnerships, intramurals, student-led clubs or other innovations that supplement the standard menu of interscholastic teams. The playbook is a product of two years of research with input from more than 60 experts. Project Play offers eight strategies to help principals and school leaders update the traditional high school sports model.

- [Align School Sports with School Mission](#)
- [Understand Your Student Population](#)
- [Create Personal Activity Plans](#)
- [Introduce Other Forms of Play](#)
- [Develop Community Partnerships](#)
- [Bolster Coaching Education](#)
- [Prioritize Health and Safety](#)
- [Measure and Evaluate Programs](#)

For more on the framework of each play, see the full report at [as.pn/playbook](https://as.pn/playbook).

## CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS IN SPORTS

Built in 2021, the [Children's Bill of Rights in Sports](#) creates a shared cultural understanding that all youth should have the opportunity to develop as people through sports. Every child has the right to play sports, and when in the care of adults, the human rights they are born with need to be respected. Developed by Project Play, with a working group of human rights and sports policy experts, the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports identifies eight rights.

- To play sports
- To safe and healthy environments
- To qualified program leaders
- To developmentally appropriate play
- To share in the planning and delivery of their activities
- To an equal opportunity for personal growth
- To be treated with dignity
- To enjoy themselves

Learn more at [as.pn/childrensrights](https://as.pn/childrensrights).





## CHALLENGE 1

### Distrust in government has contributed to the privatization of sports, leaving behind children who lack access

+ + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + +


Many youth sports providers in the public and private sectors don't communicate much with each other, in part due to distrust of each other. There is a belief by some that no intersection exists between people who strive to use sports as an economic engine and people who focus on providing affordable, quality access for all children. The divide between the haves and have-nots in youth sports within East Baton Rouge Parish resembles that in the educational environment. Baton Rouge students attend private schools at much higher rates (27%) than comparable urban counties in the U.S. (11%–22%), according to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation.

“Pay-for-play sports is the new private school for parents here,” said Chris Meyer, Baton Rouge Area Foundation CEO. “Families will do whatever they can to give their child the best experience, and they’re willing to pay lots of money for it. If you’re super talented from a low-income background, you’re typically found and supported. But for the average kid, if you’re not in the right cohort early, you better be super talented or super wealthy to be brought into that team or league, or your options are very limited.”

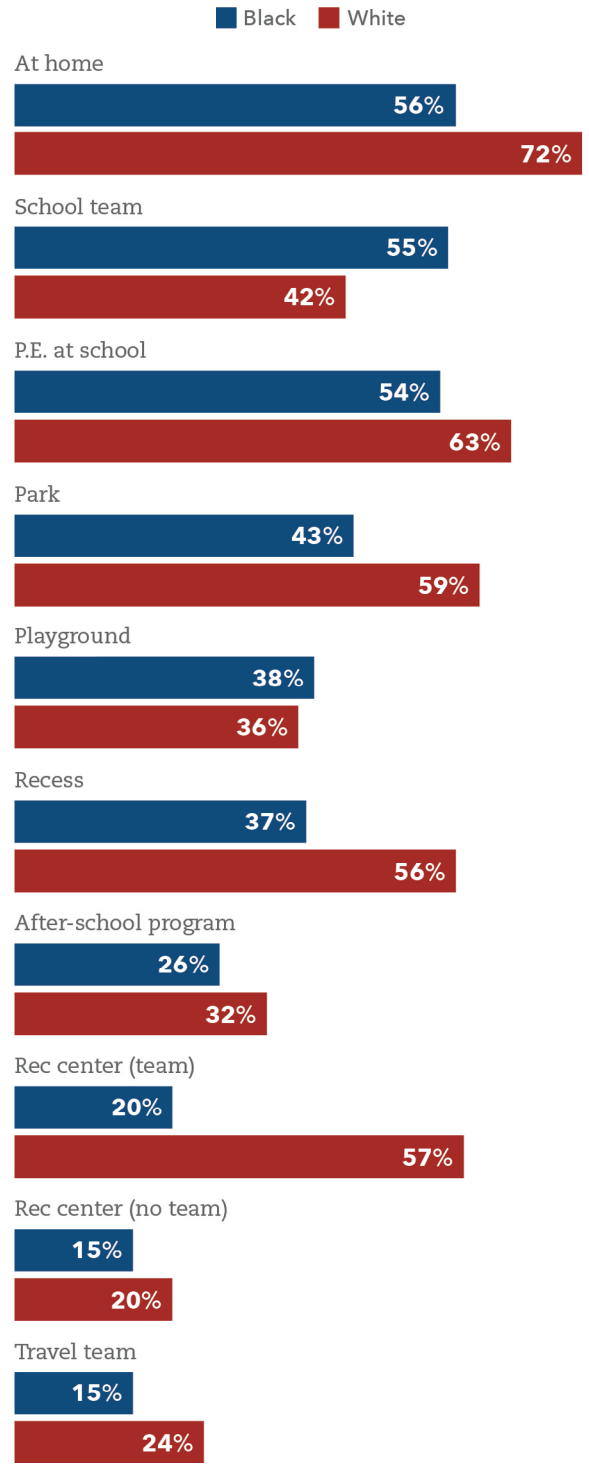
**Black youth reported being more reliant on school teams than White youth.**



**White youth were almost three times more likely to say they play sports on a rec center team than Black children.**



## WHERE YOUTH PLAY SPORTS BY RACE



Source: State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey



Several private sports-complex owners said they branched out on their own because the Recreation and Park Commission for East Baton Rouge Parish, commonly known as BREC, lacks organized structure for children to play sports. In focus group conversations with travel-sports parents from several sports, we heard a common theme: there is a need for Baton Rouge to have rec leagues so all children can play sports. But the travel-sports parents said their child didn't have fun in BREC's rec leagues or they heard BREC lacked structure around sports, so they turned to private teams before trying BREC. More children moving to travel teams leaves significant gaps in resources, volunteers and advocacy to maintain quality, affordable rec leagues.

"People are taking it in their own hands to provide sports for communities with their own money," said a travel sports program director. "Government is so disappointing. Every successful rec league is privately run in this organization — soccer, basketball, baseball. Our organization wouldn't exist if the city did a great job providing sports. I wish the government would decide to work with the people who do have good programming instead of trying to fund their own things that won't be structured or organized."

Created in 1946 by a state legislative act, BREC is a political subdivision of the State of Louisiana and does not operate under the Baton Rouge city-parish government. In November 2024, residents approved two BREC tax renewals: a 20-year tax that funds BREC's strategic plan and a 10-year tax that covers operations and capital improvements. The taxes account for the continued funding of 65% of BREC's operating budget.

BREC, one of the few agencies in the U.S. to be honored twice by the National Recreation and Park Association with the prestigious Gold Medal

Award (1975 and 1991), largely outsources youth sports programming to local partners who operate on BREC fields. A rare sport BREC independently runs for children is basketball, which had 864 participants in 2023, up from 732 in 2019.

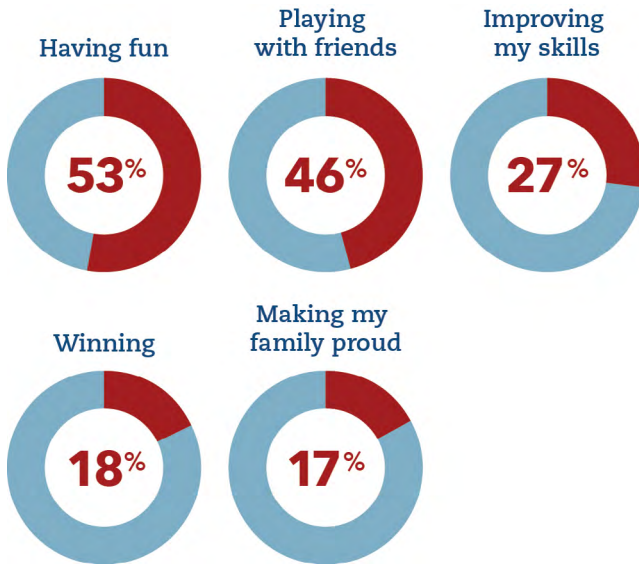
BREC programming is improving after its quality suffered for many years, said Brandon Smith, who departed in 2024 as BREC assistant superintendent for recreation programs and facilities. As an example, Smith said BREC's baseball program started in 2021 with eight teams and approximately tripled that number in three years, thanks in part to replacing grass fields with turf to avoid muddy infields and rained-out activities. The total number of children who used BREC fields for baseball offered by any provider increased from 1,224 in 2019 to 1,440 in 2023.

There are still challenges at BREC, largely due to staff shortages. Before leaving, Smith estimated that staff capacity in the rec department was about 70% of what's needed. BREC staffs its basketball program and smaller portions of its baseball, softball and football leagues. "In order for us to grow, we have to find partners we're comfortable with and who meet our mission," Smith said. "It's becoming harder and harder to organize these with staff shortages. The biggest way to have quality programming is to be consistent."

Many years ago, rec leagues fielded all-star teams at the end of the season — one community's all-star team played the other's. Parents figured out their child could develop better skills if these all-star teams played each other all the time. Now, in many sports, age 8 or 9 is about when a Baton Rouge child with resources transitions to travel ball. "There's a stigma with rec ball," said a high-level soccer coach. "For parents, it's keeping up with the Joneses."

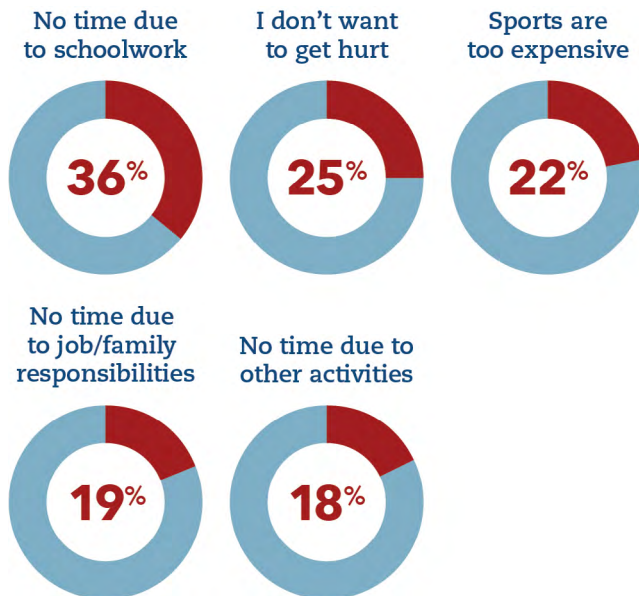


## WHAT BATON ROUGE YOUTH LIKE MOST ABOUT PLAYING SPORTS



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey

## WHY SOME YOUTH DON'T PLAY SPORTS



Earning a college scholarship ranked 10th. Black youth were two times more likely than their White peers to cite scholarships.



Boys cited improving skills and winning more than girls. Girls identified getting away from problems and feeling supported by friends at twice the rate of boys.



## Knee Injury Prevention

Knees are the levers of life, the joints that unlock physical activity habits into adulthood. The trend in high school sports is not good: ACL injuries among high school athletes have grown 26% over 15 years, according to research developed by leading organizations in the National ACL Injury Coalition. Check out resources to help prevent knee injuries: <https://projectplay.org/resources>.

Girls were two times more likely than boys to say sports are too serious. Boys reported that family responsibilities and jobs prevent them from playing more so than girls.





In a focus group with travel-sports parents, some estimated spending \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year on their child's activities. Why invest so much money? They expressed a desire for sports to help their child learn how to treat people well when success doesn't happen, build relationships and self-confidence, and develop discipline and time-management skills.

"It's necessary to have our kids be put in that adversity-failure environment," said a dad. "You have to put them against the best, so they understand they're not the best and how to beat the best. If you don't play the best, it's false hope. Our kids are so good at their schools, they're the all-stars. Without this humbling experience (through travel sports) every once in a while, where they realize their place in life, how would they learn?"

Some children told us that they enjoy the amount of time and energy spent in travel sports, especially to build friendships. In some cases, travel-sports children said they have more friends in Shreveport and Houston than they have in Baton Rouge. Yet several young people described tremendous pressure they feel in travel sports and unhealthy behavior from their coaches or

parents. Several female soccer players said their parents "bribe" them with money and gifts to succeed and punish them for athletic failures.

"If I do bad, after a game my dad has me run one mile," said one girl. "He'll yell at me and say, 'You all suck,' and I run until I puke. My dad doesn't know exactly what I did wrong, but he'll yell at me because he knows I did something wrong. ... I feel like I have to do well to make him happy."

In lower-resourced neighborhoods, many children who lack exposure to sports, transportation to games and practices, or the financial means to join teams too often quit sports or simply never start. Our youth survey showed that Black children play sports "very often" (45%) at a lower rate than White youth do (64%). Aside from football and basketball, sports participation rates in North Baton Rouge lag those in South Baton Rouge, according to analysis by Kinetica for this report. North Baton Rouge has a significantly lower household income and larger Black population than South Baton Rouge.

"In urban communities, kids are looking for success, and if it's a sport we don't have that much success in, we stop playing," said Leroy Hollins II, director of the Louisiana Youth Sports Network, which programs several sports in Baton Rouge. "It's not that kids don't like the sport. It's that they don't want to be ridiculed when they're doing something wrong. They want to avoid being bullied because they're not successful at sports."





### **Solution: Create a Baton Rouge athletic council to develop shared solutions**

To be clear, there is no one magic bullet to increase sports access. Every sector that touches the lives of children can and should play a role in helping get more kids into the game, given sports' power as a crime-prevention tool and the physical, social, emotional and academic benefits that come from positive sports experiences. It's very clear that Baton Rouge deeply loves sports, which are an important mechanism to build community within neighborhoods and across the parish.

Increasingly, many Baton Rouge leaders view sports as an economic tourism engine for the city — building new facilities and attracting youth tournaments generate revenue through sales and hospitality taxes. Youth tournaments in 2024 will provide an indirect economic impact of \$37 million for Baton Rouge, according to an estimate by Visit Baton Rouge.

Given these efforts, we are calling for coordinated investment and strategies that not only benefit Baton Rouge through revenue generated by sporting events but also increase sports access and improve the quality of sports experiences.

"We haven't aligned on what our goals are for youth sports and what a healthy experience looks like for children," said Catherine O'Neal, chief medical officer of Our Lady of the Lake, which in 2023 bought a 40% stake in Traction Sports Performance, a Baton Rouge-based athletic training company that stages travel tournaments.

## **Athletic Council Model FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA**

In Virginia, the Fairfax County Athletic Council serves in an advisory capacity to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, the school district board and county agencies on matters relating to sports. The 23-member council meets monthly, advises on policy and establishes priorities for making sports programs accessible. Representatives come from the following:

- Nine from each of the county's magisterial districts (civil divisions)
- Three from towns not included in the magisterial districts
- Eight from sport-specific councils (baseball, soccer, basketball, slow-pitch softball, fast-pitch softball, football, volleyball, lacrosse), who are selected by their own sport council
- Three at-large representatives, to speak up for women, diversity concerns and general issues
- Three members from county government: directors of Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services and the parks authority, and a Fairfax County School Board member (all non-voting)



Baton Rouge could use youth sports tourism revenue as one mechanism to invest in underserved children locally so they can access quality experiences and develop as people. “There needs to be more discussion or a council so that we can all have better appreciation for both sports tourism and local sports equity,” said BREC Superintendent Corey Wilson. “Anything that can further promote the importance of youth sports, whether that’s locally or tourism, is a benefit to all of us.”

Local parties need a way to regularly communicate and coordinate mutually reinforcing activities. Starting a Baton Rouge athletic council could assist on other recommendations made in this report. The role 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 (see page 35).
- Coordinating transportation opportunities so that more children have options to get to and from games and practices (see page 25).
- Setting standardized climate regulations in youth and school sports as extreme heat and flooding continues to impact safe opportunities to play (see page 18).
- Prioritizing more equitable access to private play spaces, especially those indoors (see page 21).
- Establishing coach-training requirements that ensure youth coaches are developmentally appropriate and helping — not hurting — a child’s mental health (see page 28).

Across the country, [some cities and counties are now paying closer attention to youth sports](#) and how the activities are made available to children. There’s not a one-size, fits-all way to establish an athletic council. Government agencies or local nonprofits can take the lead to coordinate and rationalize the way sports are offered to children.

The strength of the athletic council, if it has the right people, is that it forces all members to see beyond the narrow interests of the groups they represent. The council connects representatives who are close to the ground with those who are from essential governing bodies (BREC, schools, local government, etc.). Council members’ knowledge of their residents, programs, facilities and systems can provide legitimacy to the public. If there’s a manageable membership size on the council, it also provides flexibility to act.

New public sports facilities may be built in future years, including at the potential redevelopment of the Memorial Sports Complex in a distressed part of North Baton Rouge. It’s a joint project between BREC and developers that is still seeking funding. Plans could include transforming the aging football stadium into a multiuse facility for football and soccer; creating a STEM facility and charter school focused on sports performance; renovating the existing baseball stadium; building a hockey arena for Baton Rouge’s minor league team; and creating a community track for walkers and joggers.

If the project gets built, questions will arise on how the facilities will get used and by whom.

That’s already happening with existing public facilities, as private entities look for more field and gym space to stage their tournaments. The community will need to determine the right balance so local citizens consistently benefit.

Efforts can begin by bringing key parties to the table and starting to align around two simple questions: How can we collectively help more children play sports? And why do we want them to play sports?



## YOUTH PROFILE

### Daniel Watson, 14

Daniel couldn't understand why East Baton Rouge Public Schools had no middle school baseball like other school districts. Sure, Daniel played travel baseball, but his friends did not, and he wanted to play with them.

So as a seventh grader at CSAL Charter Middle School in November 2022, Daniel sent an email to EBR Schools board members requesting they add baseball in middle schools.

"Several of my friends across the district have told me of their interest in playing," Daniel wrote. "Neighboring school districts (private and public) have middle school baseball, but when I asked why this wasn't true for EBR Schools, I was informed that there wasn't enough interest in baseball for the district to implement at the middle school level. I honestly don't believe this is true. This past summer, BREC offered 10U, 12U and 14U summer baseball. ... The parks were filled every game night with players and their families."

Nothing changed. Daniel wrote again in February 2023 after new school board members were elected.

"Having the option to play for their school would allow for students to play the game without the burden of paying hundreds of dollars," he wrote. "Playing travel baseball with a team in a neighboring city has been fun but I would love to have the experience of playing baseball with my friends at my school and those in EBR."

Still nothing. With his middle school years almost over, Daniel tried with greater urgency one last time in November 2023.

"Last school year I reached out to board members requesting middle school baseball. That request wasn't granted, and I will be honest, I was a little upset and gave up trying," Daniel wrote.



"Even though this is my last year of middle school, I still believe that our district would benefit from having middle school baseball. So once again on behalf of my peers and myself, please allow middle school baseball for the Spring of 2024."

This email struck a chord and went viral on social media. A school board member asked the superintendent at a meeting if he would commit to add baseball. He agreed.

Christina Anderson, then the athletic director at EBR Schools, met with Daniel to plan the season on short notice. Daniel came with a one-page plan on how to organize it. Anderson had to push schools to add a new sport, which was a challenge because of their limited staffing capacity. The goal was simply to find a way to do it, generate momentum and grow the expectations later.

Ten EBR middle schools played an abbreviated three-week baseball season in spring 2024 that included playoffs. At Daniel's school, cuts were made because so many students tried out. Skill levels ran the spectrum. But middle school baseball is here to stay, even as Daniel moved to high school at Madison Prep Academy.

"It's nothing short of amazing what that kid did," said Kirk Pelichet, Daniel's middle school coach. "That kid was determined."

## CHALLENGE 2

### Climate change is impacting how children play sports

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Nothing moves the needle in Baton Rouge like football, whether it's Friday Night Lights, Saturday morning youth football games or Saturday Night in Death Valley. Football creates community, fuels the economy, and stirs passion.

Now imagine Baton Rouge with fewer football game days. It's expected. Changes in the climate increasingly expose football players (and all athletes in outdoor sports) to higher temperatures and dangerous levels of humidity that surpass recommended safety thresholds. The average temperature in Baton Rouge in 2023

(72.6 degrees) was warmer than in any other year in the city's history.

Continuing on the current trajectory of climate change means a shrinking football season for the next generation of players. 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](#). Nationally, [one study](#) found that high school football players are 11 times more likely to suffer heat illnesses than all other sports combined.

Not only football is being affected, of course. How, or if, children play sports and recreate outdoors continues to be impacted by climate change, and the challenges are not going away.

### WHERE FOOTBALL IS MOST AT RISK IN THE U.S.

*Average number of days per year where games/practices will need to be canceled due to heat.*

| Location                    | 1990 Days | 2020 Days | 2050 Days |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Lafayette Parish, LA        | 0         | 0         | 61        |
| Beauregard Parish, LA       | 1         | 16        | 60        |
| East Baton Rouge Parish, LA | 1         | 15        | 58        |
| Calcasieu Parish, LA        | 1         | 12        | 57        |
| Aransas County, TX          | 11        | 26        | 55        |
| Saint Martin Parish, LA     | 0         | 0         | 54        |
| Pointe Coupee Parish, LA    | 0         | 1         | 51        |
| Saint James Parish, LA      | 0         | 7         | 49        |
| Jefferson Davis Parish, LA  | 0         | 0         | 48        |
| Orange County, TX           | 0         | 0         | 47        |

**Note:** Data for canceled games/practices were collected through climate-model projections of historic and future annual counts of days with a high wet-bulb globe temperature of greater than 82 degrees, when the body's cooling mechanism can become significantly impaired.

**Source:** Climate Impact Lab, 2019

For instance, children growing up in New Orleans today are [subject to nine more heat waves every summer](#) than those who grew up there in the 1960s. In Baton Rouge, children and families told us they factor in heat and rain when deciding whether a child will play sports at all, which sports to play if they do, and when and where to play them. In our youth survey, almost 3 in 10 children said they don't go to parks and green spaces as often as they like because it's too hot.

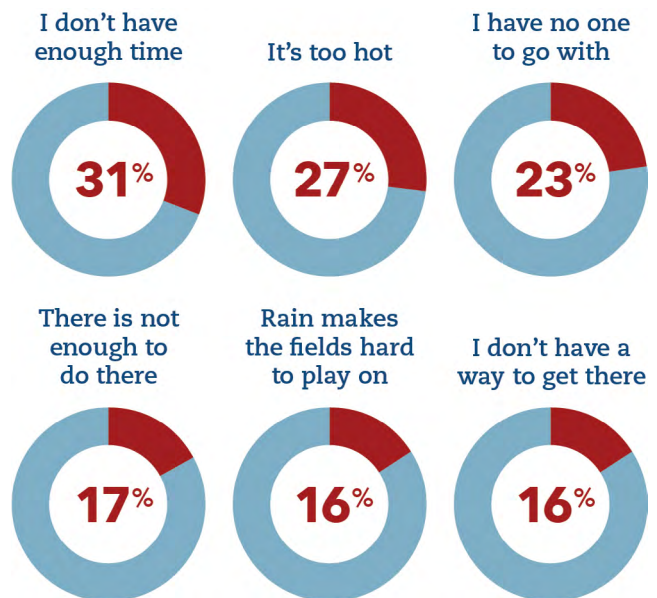
Lots of work must happen to preserve playing opportunities for children in the future, said University of Toronto professor Madeleine Orr, author of "Warming Up: How Climate Change Is Changing Sports." "The good news is almost all of these playing opportunities can be preserved, but we've got to divorce ourselves from the traditional sports systems where we're married to schedules; we're obsessed with keeping certain play traditions," [Orr told The Real News Network](#). "The amount of time, for example, in a half or quarter of a game might have to shift. There might need to be more breaks to accommodate heat, to accommodate rain or whatever it is. And I think we're just going to have to get more comfortable being flexible."

Jessica Murfree, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina who studies sports and climate change, worries that youth and high school sports providers lack the resources and preparation to adapt to climate change the way pro and college sports will.

"We've lived in a world for so long that puts sports first," Murfree said. "Now more people are putting people first. Still, to a massive degree, sports are very reactive. How much suffering will it take to really convince organizers and those in charge to make better decisions? Because the climate will continue to change. What does that mean for participating in sports as a basic function of well-being to move our bodies?"



## WHY SOME YOUTH DON'T GO TO PARKS AS OFTEN AS THEY WANT



White youth (73%) rated the quality of the park where they play sports more favorably than Black children (55%).



Source: State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey

This section explores how climate change is impacting Baton Rouge, how some sports and recreation providers are currently adapting, and what changes can be made so that children can play sports in a safe manner for decades to come.

### Changes in Baton Rouge Climate

- **Increased heat exposure:** Baton Rouge had 140 days when temperatures reached over 90 degrees in 2023. The number of days deemed too hot for outdoor activities (when the heat index reaches 103 degrees) is expected to rise dramatically, from 5 to 10 days per year to 50 by century's end. Heat indices are rising due to climate change, affecting the scheduling and safety of outdoor youth sports.
- **More fierce storms:** The warming of the Gulf of Mexico due to climate change leads to hurricanes that are generally more intense, with heavier rainfall and higher storm surges. These changes present significant challenges for south Louisiana and Baton Rouge. Stronger hurricanes don't weaken much when they strike the shore and move inland, causing damages that include lengthy power outages and drenching rainfall — two elements that disrupt summer play well into late summer and early fall.
- **Drought:** Baton Rouge used to have predictable rainfalls. Daily afternoon thunderstorms were the norm, providing water for plants and breaking the thick heat. But in recent years, warming has caused wild swings in the weather, including extreme heat coupled with a drought in 2023. Drought destroyed playing fields and even caused fires in the Baton Rouge region. The water table lowered within the underground soil, resulting in sinkholes, including at game fields, that needed temporary sand patches to be playable.

“We're going to have to be ready for what's coming our way, and it can be a positive thing,” said Charles Sutcliffe, National Wildlife Federation senior advisor for resilience and former chief resilience officer for the Louisiana governor's office. “We can make it safer, more comfortable, more fun and provide community benefits in addition to recreation. That's all available to us if we are just smart about it.”

### How Youth Sports and Recreation in Baton Rouge are Adapting

#### **Outdoor rec equipment is not used as much.**

Many children told us they rarely play outside from late June through August. Baton Rouge residents often look for indoor opportunities for exercise in the hottest months, demonstrating a need for more indoor facilities that promote physical activity. The North Sherwood Family Center is one of BREC's highest-attended facilities because of its popular indoor, air-conditioned walking track.

“The equipment (outside) is too hot to be able to enjoy,” said Brandon Smith, the former BREC assistant superintendent for recreation programming and facilities. “We're trying to incorporate more shade sail structures, especially at large community parks. A lot of our smaller parks are trying to incorporate this too, or strategically placing trees to increase shade opportunities. Even some walking paths need better tree coverage. We know it's miserable.”

Shade sails that can withstand winds from hurricanes or be unhooked during major weather events are very expensive, costing up to \$100,000, Smith said.

#### **Some sports get moved to different times of the day and utilize more water breaks.**

Many teams move games and practices to cooler (relatively speaking) morning or evening hours. Some schools shift P.E. to first period.



The Baton Rouge Soccer Club (BRSC) has seen increased interest to play at night in the summer, prompting more scheduling challenges. BRSC avoided playing tournament games from noon to 4 p.m. during the 2023 summer extreme heat wave. Games were moved to the evening, but that shortened the turnaround time for teams who played the following morning. Ice baths were situated at two field locations, and several players and referees got dunked to avoid heat-related illnesses.

BREC generally avoids the 11 a.m.–3 p.m. hours for camps and sports programming, opting for the evening instead. However, that poses problems because rain cancellations increase later in the day. Schools are providing more scheduled water breaks during games — a positive development so players and referees can properly hydrate.

Athletic trainers say that switching practice and game times make sense, but they warn that this adjustment means they are being stretched thin by longer hours. Fewer athletic trainers may be available to treat injuries and care for the health of young athletes.

**Children and parents are choosing which sports to play based on heat.** BREC officials believe basketball and volleyball are their most popular recreational sports because they occur inside. “The heat has impacted the mindset of how parents are allowing their kids to play certain sports,” Smith said. “I hear from parents who say, ‘I want my daughter playing volleyball because I can sit in the AC to watch rather than sit outside during a soccer match.’”

Added Leroy Hollins II, director of the Louisiana Youth Sports Network, which programs leagues in several sports: “It used to be you could go outside and get acclimated, and now it’s hard to get acclimated to this. In the upcoming years, I really think to not deter kids from participating

because it’s so hot, indoor sports are going to continue to be more popular.”

**More turf fields are being built.** This means fewer rainouts from heavy storms and less maintenance needed than on grass fields. “Based on the rain we get, turf fields are a must to sustain programming through climate change,” Hollins said. “It can rain in the morning, and you can still play later on the turf fields. We used to have to cancel so many games.”

Sports providers have to weigh the benefits of fewer rainouts with the elevated risk of heat injury on artificial turf. [Studies](#) find that artificial turf surfaces can get up to 60 degrees hotter than natural grass, radiating temperatures above 160 degrees on summer days. The Mount Sinai Children’s Environmental Health Center at the Institute for Climate Change [recommends not installing artificial turf](#) due in part to the potential for dangerous heat and chemical exposures. Children are less able to regulate their body temperature than adults.



**Schools have adopted new policies.** [The Korey Stringer Institute](#) ranks Louisiana as the fourth-best state in the U.S. for high school sports safety policies, behind only Florida, New Jersey and Georgia. Louisiana uses the [wet bulb globe temperature](#) — a measure of the heat stress in direct sunlight — to guide schools’ practice- and game-related decisions. It takes into account temperature, humidity, wind speed, sun angle and cloud cover. Levels are color-coded and range from green (safe to do normal activities) to black (no outdoor workouts allowed).



In 2020, Louisiana passed a law requiring schools to establish a comprehensive emergency action plan (EAP) for each sport located on the school's campus. The Remy Hidalgo Act states that the EAP should follow best practices from the American College of Sports Medicine and the National Athletic Trainers' Association, and it should be reviewed annually before each sport season with all appropriate personnel designated by the athletic director. Plans should identify who calls 911, who is certified on site to perform CPR, and where the nearest AED defibrillator is located. The law is named after Remy Hidalgo, a 16-year-old football player at Denham Springs High School who died in 2020 after suffering exertional heat stroke at a mid-September practice.

### **Solutions for Youth Sports and Recreation Providers**

**Educate more athletes, parents and coaches about heat risk.** This needs to be a high priority to keep children healthy and interested in playing outdoor sports. Children can't always advocate for themselves. Some don't notice early symptoms of heat stress. Some notice but keep pushing and can be coerced to do so when sports cultures become toxic.

Leaders could promote community awareness campaigns about the risks of heat and the importance of proper hydration and cooling strategies during sports activities. Education needs to go hand in hand with policies and tools.

### **Coordinate heat action plans across the parish.**

Encourage local governments, schools, recreation departments and sports leagues to collaborate on developing policies and strategies that prioritize athlete safety given climate change. The creation of a Baton Rouge athletic council could support this effort (see page 13).

Most states are not doing enough to protect children — a problem exacerbated by the lack of federal mandated heat policies for high school sports, only guidance. Heat policies are sometimes set by state high school athletic associations or by state or local governments. Baton Rouge could become a national leader in how sports leaders and public health officials work together on heat policies.

Louisiana has [several state laws](#) addressing heat illness and heat acclimatization in sports, although they only apply to school sports, not community-based leagues, travel sports or other recreational activities. The laws don't include an enforcement mechanism, so it's unclear how well schools follow the guidelines.

BREC's 10-year strategic plan calls for developing a dedicated Heat Team and creating a High Heat Day Action Matrix to guide responses for recreational professionals during heat waves. The plan would provide protocols for mitigating the impacts of high temperatures. By 2027–28, BREC also proposes installing new cooling features and water fountains at five parks, developing a heat illness training program and providing it to staff who run outdoor programs, and continuing to increase tree planting and shade at parks.

But that's just one plan by BREC. Individual teams and leagues across the parish often make their own decisions on how to handle heat based on their resources, interests and sometimes conflicting information. In that sense, Baton Rouge is no different than many communities.

“There are so many inconsistencies across the youth and high school level that makes policies and holistic recommendations very challenging,” said Murfree, the University of North Carolina sport ecologist.

**Improve infrastructure for outdoor shade and indoor recreational facilities.** Far fewer trees provide shaded recreation in North Baton Rouge than in the rest of the city, according to an analysis by Center for Planning Excellence, a Louisiana nonprofit that champions good planning to build livable, resilient communities in the state. “There is a correlation between low-income neighborhoods, smaller tree canopies and less well-maintained parks and facilities with opportunities for kids to play,” said Center for Planning Excellence CEO Camille Manning-Broome.

Manning-Broome recommends that Baton Rouge replace concrete and asphalt in many areas with more natural landscapes, green spaces and water features. Baton Rouge needs more misting stations and equipment that does not absorb and retain heat.

“Europe is at least 15 years ahead of (the U.S.) in planning,” she said. “They’re starting to integrate cooling and misting stations into their urban fabric and public spaces. ... The humidity factor is going to make it so dangerous to live (in Baton Rouge) at certain times of the year.”

More air-conditioned indoor recreational facilities are needed. Community leaders could invest in solar-powered cooling stations at sports venues to reduce energy costs and increase resilience against power outages. The Inflation Reduction Act offers financial support covering 40% of the cost of solar installations for nonprofits.

BREC is being creative with [plans to build “safe rooms,”](#) buildings to house first responders during natural disasters that will serve the majority of the time as state-of-the-art rec centers for the public. Two future safe rooms will become

BREC’s largest rec centers. A safe room is a building constructed to provide near-absolute protection of life by withstanding wind speeds of 250 mph.

The area’s first safe room opened in 2024 on Harding Boulevard, with FEMA providing most of the costs and Baton Rouge Emergency Medical Services adding 25% in matching funds. The two safe rooms to be used as BREC rec centers are planned at BREC Memorial Stadium and at Airline Highway Park. They will be funded through FEMA and a federal Community Development Block grant.

**Shift the sports calendar to align with milder weather seasons.** In addition to restricting outdoor sports during the hottest hours in summer months, some climate experts and medical officials stress that moving traditional sports seasons to cooler months will have to eventually happen. “I’m a big believer that in 20 years, high school football will be a spring sport and not a fall sport,” [Korey Stringer Institute CEO Douglas Casa told USA Today.](#)

Adjusting sport seasons is “a great point and definitely an aspirational goal,” said Catherine O’Neal, who in addition to being chief medical officer of Our Lady of the Lake is also chief medical advisor for the Southeastern Conference. “To do that, it would have to come from the top down, starting at least at the collegiate level. People like their schedules when it comes to sports.”

Shifting some sport seasons would be complicated, controversial and a significant cultural shift. It could create unintended consequences for sports participation and college recruiting opportunities. It would not be easy. But as the Earth continues to warm and impact playing conditions in sports, adjustments around the margins will eventually not be enough.

## TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES BATON ROUGE YOUTH REGULARLY PLAY

(Played at least 20 times in the past year on team or with friends)

| Boys            |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Basketball      | 43% |
| Tackle football | 34% |
| Soccer          | 31% |
| Baseball        | 21% |
| Golf            | 21% |

| Girls      |     |
|------------|-----|
| Dance/step | 32% |
| Cheer      | 24% |
| Soccer     | 22% |
| Swimming   | 22% |
| Volleyball | 16% |
| Basketball | 16% |

| White      |     |
|------------|-----|
| Golf       | 45% |
| Soccer     | 40% |
| Swimming   | 26% |
| Basketball | 26% |
| Biking     | 22% |

| Black           |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Basketball      | 38% |
| Tackle football | 30% |
| Dance/step      | 21% |
| Track and field | 18% |
| Cheer           | 18% |

**Note:** The participation rate for golf may have been impacted by oversampling of a Baton Rouge golf program. Golf generally ranks lower in other communities.

**Source:** Aspen Institute State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey

## TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES YOUTH WANT TO TRY

| Boys            |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Basketball      | 25% |
| Tackle football | 19% |
| Powerlifting    | 18% |
| Shooting sports | 18% |
| Boxing          | 17% |

| Girls      |     |
|------------|-----|
| Gymnastics | 22% |
| Cheer      | 22% |
| Dance/step | 21% |
| Volleyball | 20% |
| Swimming   | 17% |

| White           |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Archery         | 22% |
| Tennis          | 19% |
| Bowling         | 18% |
| Shooting sports | 16% |
| Golf            | 15% |

| Black           |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Basketball      | 22% |
| Track and field | 19% |
| Tackle football | 15% |
| Volleyball      | 14% |
| Swimming        | 14% |
| Gymnastics      | 14% |
| Cheer           | 14% |

**Note:** Interest in trying golf may have been impacted by oversampling of a Baton Rouge golf program. Golf generally ranks lower in other communities.

**Source:** Aspen Institute State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey



The Louisiana High School Athletic Association sponsors four sports in the fall: cross country, football, swimming and volleyball. In the winter, the sports are basketball, indoor track and field, powerlifting, soccer and wrestling. Spring has the most sports with baseball, bowling, golf, gymnastics, outdoor track and field, softball and tennis.

Smith, the former assistant superintendent at BREC, said shifting sports seasons at the rec, club and school levels would create healthier conditions. “I’m speaking as a father who has a 17-year-old soccer player who battles some breathing issues when the humidity is way up,” he said. “It’s certainly a lot better for her when the humidity and temperatures are lower to play soccer. But I think there’s probably more disadvantages to changing (sport seasons). We’re a college town and people get geared up to play their sports at the same time as the colleges do.”

Sutcliffe, the former chief resilience officer for the Louisiana governor’s office, said swapping some seasons will need to be considered in the future. “Football is the hardest one to change,” he said. “I would not start with football. Maybe start with other sports to set an example.”

**Diversify sports offerings.** Expand the range of sports activities to include more indoor options and water-based sports during peak heat periods. Local leaders can support the development of nontraditional sports as alternatives during extreme weather conditions.

For example, flag football for boys and girls may carry less safety risks in extreme heat with less equipment. Pickleball is a sport for all ages, indoors or outdoors. Powerlifting is a unique sport offered by East Baton Rouge Parish Schools that is done indoors. In our youth survey, some sports or activities that children most want to try occur mostly inside (basketball, powerlifting, boxing, gymnastics, cheer, dance and volleyball)

or outside in cool water (swimming). Swimming lessons for youth through BREC decreased by 23% from 2019 to 2023. That was due to the 2019 closing of BREC’s most popular pool (at Howell Community Park), leaving just two for public use (at Anna T. Jordan and City-Brooks community parks). BREC plans to reopen Howell in 2025.

Children want to try different sports. But if they’re not exposed to them or can’t access facilities, it’s harder for the sports to gain traction within a community. Schools can offer more nontraditional sports through clubs, intramurals and P.E. so children have options to enjoy physical activity during extreme weather periods.

In recent years, EBR Schools began offering sports (flag football, basketball, soccer, track and field and volleyball) at some elementary schools to improve kids’ skill levels by high school. Participation at elementary schools tripled in growth since it started. Elementary school coaches receive a \$500 stipend per sport. One challenge for greater investment in school sports is that two-thirds of East Baton Rouge Parish public schools lost students since before the pandemic, [according to the Baton Rouge Advocate](#). Enrollment declined by almost 5% over that period and has fallen under 40,000 for the first time in decades.

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## Bottom line

Adjusting to climate change has not been easy, but many coaches, administrators and parents are evolving in smart ways. Flexibility will be vital in the years and decades to come. The alternative is that fewer children may want to play outdoor sports in Baton Rouge, and with limited indoor spaces accessible to all children, that may mean fewer kids playing sports at all.

## CHALLENGE 3

### Transportation is limited for children to access sports

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East Baton Rouge Parish Schools offers magnet programs to retain students, but that has consequences for extracurricular activities: Thousands of students don't attend schools near their homes and are transported right after school back to their homes. For many children, their only way home is the school bus, which can be a long ride across the parish.

In addition to school bus challenges, parents often cannot take their children to nonschool

sports and play activities, due to having no vehicle or because of work responsibilities. Other mobility services, such as Uber, are expensive or do not allow children to use the service. In our youth survey, 12% of children said they usually walk to play spaces, practices or games. Black youth are twice as likely as White youth to usually walk in order to play, meaning many Black children have longer walks or don't go at all to higher-quality parks given BREC's focus on regional parks. Almost 1 in 3 Baton Rouge residents walk as a regular means of transit and indicated they need better bike and pedestrian pathways, according to a survey by BREC.

## YOUTH SPORTS USAGE AT BREC ATHLETIC VENUES

Usage of BREC athletic venues saw major drops from 2020 to 2022 during COVID-19, but most of them have rebounded to exceed pre-pandemic numbers from 2019.

| Facility Attendance                          | Activity   | 2023 Attendance | % Increase/Decrease Since 2019 |
|--|--|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Olympia Stadium                              | Youth/high school tackle football  | 37,890          | +20%                           |
| Memorial Stadium                             | Youth/high school tackle football  | 65,584          | 0%                             |
| Lester Roberts Sports Academy                | BREC basketball  | 27,688          | +46%                           |
| Facility Visitation (Estimation)             | Activity   | 2023 Visitation | % Increase/Decrease Since 2019 |
| Central Sports Complex                       | BREC baseball and softball leagues, partner youth baseball leagues, tournament hosting | 244,002         | +18%                           |
| Hartley Vey Sports Complex at Oak Villa Park | BREC baseball and softball leagues, partner youth baseball leagues, tournament hosting | 338,627         | +96%                           |
| Burbank Soccer Complex                       | Baton Rouge Soccer Club programming  | 759,684         | -32%                           |

**Note:** "Attendance" activities take place at staffed facilities (such as playing basketball at a gym) or at a program that a person registers through BREC, and "Attendance" involves humans counting humans. "Visitation" is pooled data from Placer.ai and estimations based on the number of teams, practices, games and spectators at each venue. BREC considers "Attendance" data more accurate than "Visitation" data.

Source: BREC

Compounding the problems are unreliable bus systems in Baton Rouge through the Capital Area Transit System and EBR Schools. In August 2023, EBR Schools began the academic year with a severe shortage of drivers and working buses, causing many children to be stranded or delayed in getting to and from school.

[According to the Baton Rouge Advocate](#), an internal review by the school district found that hundreds of the system's buses are inoperable and its current fleet of buses is too large, the district doesn't employ enough auto mechanics and the pay for bus drivers is not aligned with other school districts. All EBR Schools buses that are assigned to a route have new GPS systems installed to keep parents updated on the arrival time of their child's bus through the [WheresTheBus](#) app.

With limited reliable, inexpensive ways to move around the parish, some children have fewer options to play school sports or participate at local affordable facilities like the YMCA or BREC rec centers and fields.

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## Solutions

**1. Integrate municipal and school bus transportation.** Baton Rouge could merge inefficient transportation systems and optimize a merged bus system that caters to students' needs and expands transportation options for the wider community. "Why are we funding two bus systems with empty city buses?" questioned John Spain, Baton Rouge Area Foundation senior advisor. "Many service workers ride the bus to get to work. It's critical for that population. But metro bus systems bring kids to schools across the country all the time. The time is right to look at this. We would put cameras on the buses to assist with safety for children."

**2. Partner with a safe and reliable rideshare company.** For example, [HopSkipDrive](#) works with

many school districts across the country to take children to and from activities. Drivers have at least five years of experience and undergo various screenings and exams to ensure passengers are safe. Once a ride has been booked, HopSkipDrive texts the parent who organized the pick-up with ride details. Riders and drivers verify each other using a multifactor verification system. Parents receive live text updates when a driver is on the way and when they arrive, depart and safely reach the destination. Parents can also track rides in real time through the app.

**3. Set aside activity buses for after school.**

Schools could utilize buses to make special drives after practices and games end. Schedules could be coordinated among teams so practices can end around the same time. More bus drivers would need to be identified and compensated.

**4. Organize carpools within teams.** Carpooling tools and apps make it easier for parents and coaches to set up carpools to practices and games. A challenge is that some parents don't have a built-in network to easily connect with other parents. How do you find a parent whom you're comfortable with driving your child around? Coaches are already asked to do a lot, and many serve as drivers. They may need to increasingly view their role as carpool organizer for their athletes. Centralized pickups could be identified to reduce the number of stops needed.

**5. Identify corporate sponsors to fund transportation needs.** Systemic efforts to better transport children won't come without financial investment. Explain to potential funders through data and personal stories why it's important to transport children to sports activities. Children who are physically active perform better academically, report higher levels of self-esteem and lower rates of depression, and set more goals for their lives through safe activities that can serve as violence-prevention programs.

## CHALLENGE 4

### Too few quality indoor play spaces exist, especially for children in low-income areas

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Baton Rouge leads the U.S. with 1.6 recreation or senior centers for every 10,000 residents, according to the Trust for Public Land. But the quality of many rec centers is lacking. In a 10-year strategic plan released in 2024, BREC determined that its existing model of 56 rec centers is too large to maintain and does not meet community needs. Thirty percent of the rec centers lack air conditioning and another 20% are rated in poor condition.

The volume of rec centers requires significant staffing for BREC to operate and maintain the facilities. Many rec centers are open for limited hours because of staffing levels. BREC struggles to recruit and retain qualified staff, many of whom are part-time employees and only stay three to five years, impacting the quality of programming at rec centers.

In addition, privately owned indoor facilities often are far more accessible to higher-income families with reliable transportation options. For example, the Team Automotive Group Sportsplex at BREC’s Perkins Road Community Park calls itself the largest indoor basketball facility in Baton Rouge and the largest indoor volleyball facility in Louisiana. It’s home to premier club teams and tournaments — contrary to the intended purpose when it opened in 2012 as part of a cooperative agreement with BREC.

“It was originally built as a place to bring a cross-section of Baton Rouge together,” said Baton Rouge Community College Athletic Director Brock Kantrow, who helped build the complex and led programming on site. “It’s not subsidized, so it’s turned into a very expensive place to play. It’s become a country club arena, which was not the intent.”

## QUALITY OF PLAY AND SPORTS FACILITIES

Baton Rouge youth who rated the spaces where they play sports as “great” or “good.”

|               |     |
|---------------|-----|
| Sports fields | 58% |
| Playgrounds   | 55% |
| Courts        | 50% |
| Pools         | 48% |

White children (56%) rated the quality of their pool higher than Black youth (43%).



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey







## Solutions

**Consolidate rec centers.** In a 2024 BREC survey, 72% of Baton Rouge residents supported fewer but higher quality rec centers. BREC’s goal is to eliminate one-quarter of its rec centers (at least 14 total) over the next 10 years that are underutilized and redundant. BREC’s initial recommendations for cuts, in future consultation with communities, include Drusilla Lane Community Center, Farr Park Recreation Center, Blueberry Community Center, Flannery Road Recreation Center, Belfair Community Center and Red Oaks Recreation Center. BREC projects savings of \$981,000 in annual operations and maintenance costs by cutting 14 rec centers.

**Create a tiered recreation center model.** BREC recommends transitioning to a tiered model to improve quality and support sustainable staffing and maintenance. Tier 1 rec centers would serve a broader area by acting as a destination for the district or beyond. (BREC organizes park services and maintenance by eight districts in East Baton Rouge Parish.) These would be larger facilities with a greater range of recreation opportunities (such as gyms, indoor courts, indoor walking tracks, fitness areas, pools and other indoor rec spaces) and a higher level of BREC programming. Tier 2 rec centers would serve as a destination for the local neighborhood. They would be compact facilities that focus on spaces for smaller groups

and events with limited BREC programming, requiring self-guided recreation opportunities and partnership programs.

**Build more “airnasiums” at outdoor recreation hubs.** An airnasium is a versatile, open-air gym for a variety of activities, including sports, with a roof that provides shade. While airnasiums are not a fool-proof solution to the growing challenge of extreme heat, they offer some relief at lower cost than indoor gyms, which require spending on air conditioning. BREC converted Tickie Saia’s recreation center to an airnasium by removing the walls to create better airflow while still providing a shaded place to play. Imagine more pick-up basketball games or small-sided soccer games on airnasium courts in Baton Rouge.

**Develop private investment for indoor complexes equitably distributed across Baton Rouge.** “The true model would be if there were sportsplexes built around the city — North Baton Rouge, South Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge and West Baton Rouge,” Kantrow said. “You need corporate dollars, transportation and the right people to fully integrate that. It has to be a private entity to take this on. It’s not BREC. BREC is spread too thin on things other than athletics.” In its 10-year strategic plan released in 2024, BREC seemed to acknowledge as much by recommending that it must define its role in the athletics community in order to focus its impact on more consistent, high-quality work.

## CHALLENGE 5

### Local youth are socially isolated and struggling with mental health

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The 2023 suicide by Owen Tabor, a 15-year-old high school football player in Baton Rouge, opened eyes in the sports community about the silent epidemic of suicide. In Louisiana, suicide is the third-leading cause of death for young people ages 10-24. Our Baton Rouge youth survey found that 20% felt depressed or hopeless at least half of the days in the previous two weeks.

Certainly, these challenges are not confined to Baton Rouge. National research shows young Americans have increasing levels of anxiety about their own lives and are depressed about the future of the country. From 2003 to 2022, American teenagers reduced their average hours of face-to-face socializing by about 45%, or more than three hours per week, [according to The Atlantic](#). There is no statistical record of any other period in U.S. history when people spent more time on their own.

Increased teen depression coincides with the proliferation of smartphones and social media — so much so that U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called for warning labels on social media platforms because they can harm teenagers' mental health. The Harvard Study of Adult Development, the longest longitudinal study on happiness and well-being ever conducted, concluded that relationships are the key to happiness and that humans should care for their social fitness like they care for their physical fitness.

At their core, sports should help children's mental health. But it's all in the delivery of the programs. Sports can be good experiences, or they can be bad experiences. If sports are not youth-centered experiences, they can damage a child's mental health.

[Research shows](#) that adults who continuously played organized sports through their childhood



have fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression than those who never played or dropped out, but those who quit sports had poorer mental health than those who never played at all. Most children don't stick with sports for various reasons.

We heard positive and negative sports experiences from Baton Rouge youth. Many talked about the joy and freedom they feel when they play, describing how sports are an escape from problems in life. In addition, too many young people told us they feel anxious and pressured by adults in sports. In one focus group with a dozen teenage club soccer players, two-thirds said they receive unnecessary pressure from their parents.

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### Solutions

**Train coaches, rec leaders, athletes and parents to promote mental health.** Owen Tabor's parents launched the Rain Will Bring Flowers Foundation and partnered with LSU, Joe Burrow Foundation, Our Lady of the Lake and Raising Cane's for a free mental health event that packed LSU's basketball arena. In 2024, the Rain Will Bring Flowers Foundation and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention began attempting to train every school system across Louisiana in suicide prevention, including coaches.

“Coaches spend so much time with our kids and our kids look up to them,” said Jordan Tabor, Owen’s father. “They’re in a great position to pick up on warning signs and get a struggling kid the help they need. We’re training them to say, ‘Listen, trust your gut, be in the moment with the child, and don’t try to fix the child. Listen and empathize.’”

As of November 2024, the Tabors’ foundation had helped train or scheduled trainings that cover 60,500 students, faculty, coaches and parents across 18 parishes in Louisiana. Jay Johnson, LSU’s national championship baseball coach, [recorded a PSA about mental health](#) that was distributed across the Louisiana High School Athletic Association’s network of 13,000 coaches.

“I truly believe we need to figure out a way to leverage premier athletes and coaches with ties to Louisiana to share this message,” Tabor said. “Before I lost my son, if I was invited to attend an event on mental health or suicide, it fell on deaf

ears. I thought no way that will happen to us. Now, I wish I would have had more training and education. Maybe our son would still be with us.”

**Pass state law requiring mental health training for coaches.** Louisiana could build on templates from [Ohio](#) and [Maryland](#), which require that public high school coaches are trained to recognize mental illness and behavioral distress in students. That includes recognizing signs of depression, trauma, violence, youth suicide and substance abuse. Maryland went a step further and requires all public colleges to also provide this training to coaches.

In Ohio, the State Board of Education recommends coaches take the training through [Coaches’ Tool Chest](#), which offers multiple certifications and partners with Cincinnati Children’s, the Ohio High School Athletic Association, and the Ohio Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association. Ten training options are available for coaches to choose from. Most are virtual and some are in-person.

Louisiana state law may go the opposite direction. In 2024, [a state legislator proposed a bill](#) that would repeal required teacher training in many areas, including suicide prevention. The bill would authorize the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to promote rules requiring the inclusion of topics that it deems important for teacher training. “Repealing all legislation related to student mental health and teacher training in suicide prevention would amount to an abdication of the legislature’s duty of oversight,” Tabor said.

**In a 2022 national survey of coaches**, the Aspen Institute and Ohio State found that only 18% of youth coaches feel highly confident in their ability to link athletes to mental health resources. But 67% of the coaches want more education on the subject, so there is a receptive audience waiting to be educated.

## Mental Health Resources for Coaches

- [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#): Three-digit dialing code that will route callers to the Lifeline for free 24/7, confidential support for people in distress
- [On Our Sleeves](#): Expert-informed mental health tools specifically designed for youth sports
- [Doc Wayne](#): Sport-based group therapy interventions for at-risk youth
- [Center for Healing and Justice through Sport](#): Toolkit helps coaches center athletes and help them through adversity





**Develop ParkRx program to prescribe park visits and outdoor activities.** In a BREC survey of Baton Rouge residents, 83% agreed or strongly agreed that BREC facilities improve mental health and reduce stress. Nearly one-third of respondents identified this attribute as one of the three most important benefits of BREC. In 2024, BREC’s 10-year strategic plan recommended exploring a ParkRx program with local health care agencies and insurance companies.

**ParkRx** is a national nonprofit organization aiming to decrease chronic diseases by encouraging health care providers to prescribe nature time as part of routine health care visits. Utah and Tennessee have state ParkRx programs that started at the park district or county level and grew over time through state, private and grant funds. Tennessee’s program uses a mobile app for state residents to track outdoor activities and earn awards, including gifts from Nike, which helps to underwrite the program.

Metro Parks Tacoma in Washington has also explored ParkRx pilot programs and whether

children could receive prescriptions for play. One challenge identified in Tacoma is that reimbursement for park prescriptions is not supported by the current insurance system, since there are no billing codes or other payment models. Insurance providers won’t reimburse unless the Washington State Legislature requires them.

**Adopt strategies associated with the [Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports](#).** Developed by Project Play through a working group of human rights and sports policy experts, the Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports recognizes that every child has the right to play sports and have their human rights respected by adults. The Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports identifies eight rights:

- **To play sports:** Providers should develop policies, practices and partnerships to include youth from underrepresented populations and create programs that both meet and stimulate youth interest in sports.
- **To safe and healthy environments:** Children should play in settings free from all forms of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), hazing, violence and neglect.
- **To qualified program leaders:** Children should play under the care of coaches and other adults who pass background checks. Coaches should be trained in general concepts in coaching youth, sport-specific coaching, the emotional needs of children, injury prevention, CPR and first aid, and abuse prevention.
- **To developmentally appropriate play:** Children should play at a level commensurate with their physical, mental and emotional maturity and their emerging athletic ability. Roster sizes, rules and equipment should be adapted to those levels.
- **To share in the planning and delivery of their activities:** Children should be able to share their viewpoints with coaches and program administrators, and their insights should be incorporated into activities.

- **To an equal opportunity for personal growth:** Programs should invest equally in children, free of discrimination based on any personal or family characteristic. Policies on minimum playing time in games should be established in recognition of the evolving capacities of youth, with a bias toward roughly equal playing time over the course of a season.
- **To be treated with dignity:** Children have the right to make mistakes and fail without fear. Policies should be established and enforced to prevent bullying behavior by coaches, parents, spectators and teammates.
- **To enjoy themselves:** Children have the right to participate in activities they consider fun and which foster the development of friendships, the prime motivation for many to participate.

Mayors in Houston, Baltimore, Kansas City, Boston and other cities have endorsed this bill of rights, recognizing its value in creating a shared understanding about the conditions under which children should be engaged through sport programs. The mayor and/or Metropolitan Council in Baton Rouge could join them, and the parks and recreation department, as well as local sport providers, can assess their alignment through a free, [editable template](#) on Project Play’s website.





## YOUTH PROFILE

### Faye Buco, 14

Faye held up her fingers to show their wear and tear. They're her craft — critical body parts that determine if her afternoon as a soccer goalie with the Baton Rouge Soccer Club is successful. She has broken her pinky too many times to count and expects to feel the residual effects when she gets older.

"My fingers are just done," Faye said, laughing. "My pinky gets the worst of it. I already know I'm going to have bad arthritis. I crack my fingers a lot, too."

She started soccer at age 3 when coached by her dad. Later, she also participated in softball and dance before deciding to focus on competitive soccer.

Soccer can be stressful, especially the buildup to games the day before. "Not to the point that I can't do it, but it just puts me on edge," she said. "I don't want to screw up. I'm the keeper."

Winning is important to Faye. If her team loses, she feels sad and doesn't like people talking to her for the rest of the day. But on-field success isn't the main reason she plays. She's not aiming to play in college after she's done at University Laboratory School, because she doesn't want the stress of juggling sports and everything else in college life.

Faye likes being active. She enjoys hanging out with friends from her team. That's in part why she joined a new club soccer team in 2024 — more of her friends play on the team. Faye said she is grateful to have supportive parents. If she has a bad game, they tell her it's OK and at least she tried.

"Last year we had games with some parents who were very vocal to the children on the sideline.



It was rowdy," Faye said. "Sometimes it would be the other teams' parents, and we would laugh a little. When it was our parents, we're like, 'Eh, OK, you can quiet down. We don't really need this right now.'"

Faye's coach once suggested the team should play a weekend tournament in which no parents are allowed. "I think there would be value," Faye said.

In Faye's mind, the best coaches are very engaged with their athletes — they challenge players appropriately, instruct them on how to improve, and become invested in their success. "A bad coach can't get a word across and can't have a message understood," she said. "I had a coach once who decided we should decide what we're doing wrong in games, but he never really spoke, so when we were getting beaten badly, he wouldn't say what we need to improve."

Improving skills is important to Faye, who basically lives soccer almost every day. Goalie practices are twice a week for one hour, followed by the team practice for 90 minutes. Fridays are often travel days and weekends are games.

"My only free day is Tuesday," she said, "and I don't want to do anything on Tuesday."



## CHALLENGE 6

### Free play has all but disappeared in Baton Rouge

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Very few children or parents we spoke with said children play outside on their own. That’s a shame. The loss of free play costs children opportunities to exercise creativity, set and achieve goals, learn interpersonal skills and develop a love of physical activity for its own sake. Baton Rouge is not unique. There are many reasons for this shift in recent decades, starting in some cases with legitimate safety concerns. Other reasons include overscheduled children, family responsibilities, extreme weather, cell phone and social media use, and other factors.

East Baton Rouge Parish residents identified park vandalism and inappropriate use of park facilities as a deterrent to visiting BREC facilities, according to a BREC survey. Media have reported on criminal behavior, including murders and sexual misconduct, at BREC parks. BREC recommends creating a safe parks design pilot program that includes guidelines on improved lighting, clear sightlines, well-maintained landscaping, and the presence of security personnel or park ambassadors.

In a focus group, Baton Rouge parents from middle- to upper-class households told us they want their children participating in structured activities so they can feel comfortable that they are safe. That means playing outside only through organized sports teams or within their neighborhood with families they know.

“It’s a necessary evil,” said one father. “When we were growing up, you knew where to go and not to go, and as long as you stayed away from where not to go, you were going to be safe. Society has changed. Those lines are blurred a lot. It’s like the only place as parents that you feel comfortable is in this kind of structured environment like organized sports.”



Said another parent: “In 2024, you hear of every kid abducted and it’s to the point where parents need to know where kids are at all times. I don’t know if in reality there’s more crime than there was when we were kids. I think fear was much higher in 2024 than in 1994. You hear about everything now.”

The murder rate in Louisiana has declined significantly since 1994, when the [state had 856](#). But [Louisiana’s murder rate in 2023](#) was almost three times higher than the nation’s. Baton Rouge had almost six times more murders and four times more burglaries than the national average. One Baton Rouge teenager died and a woman was injured during a 2023 shooting at a Port Allen High School football game. Police planned to employ a larger law enforcement presence at 2024 football games.

Police presence alone isn’t enough to make people feel safe to play outside. Hollins, the Louisiana Youth Sports Network director, said he is proud that his organization safely offers sports programs without police.

“I don’t like having police there because I don’t want kids involved in our program to believe the only way we can behave is if there’s a police officer standing around,” Hollins said. “Yes, we need safety. But I fear we inadvertently are teaching a generation involved in sports that there’s no good behavior unless a guy with a gun is standing over you and making sure you behave.”

## **Solution: Build safe places designed for free play**

Organized sports programs obviously are valuable to communities. Research shows that sport-based approaches may offer an effective way of engaging youth that reduces risk factors linked to crime and violence. When high schools have strong interscholastic sports participation rates, they report lower levels of major crime and fewer suspensions, [according to a University of Michigan study](#). In 2019, the United Nations recognized the value of [integrating sports into youth crime prevention and criminal justice strategies](#).

Children need to feel both safe and excited to play sports on their own terms. There are emerging models to draw upon. In Port Huron, Michigan, city leaders, with the help of private and public funding, are designing what they



say is the first free-play park anywhere to engage children outside of organized sports. The park will include a Wiffle ball court, renovated basketball court, small football field, soccer field, bike trail and 40-yard dash track. The small-sided fields and courts are not intended for organized teams to use. They are for the six in 10 children who don't make their school team and just want to play. Given the excessive heat in Baton Rouge, local leaders could apply this idea to a rec center or another indoor facility.

Much of the free play park funding in Michigan came from a \$500,000 state grant. In Louisiana, BREC identified exploring new funding sources as a goal for the next 10 years, with a focus on increasing access to parks where there are equity gaps. BREC said it pursues a range of federal funding, from sources such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, HUD Community Development Block grants, and the National Park Service Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership grants program.

In addition, Baton Rouge could adopt a free equipment-sharing program for children to use at parks. Project Play Southeast Michigan created [Sport Port](#), which allows children and parents/guardians to borrow sports equipment just like borrowing books from the library. Equipment can be found at certain libraries, community centers and rec departments in Michigan.

Police could also be used to hand out equipment to children. That's what the Colorado Springs (Colorado) Police Department does through its [Play COS program](#), which tries to create more opportunities for positive interactions between officers and community members. Through donations, each of the police department's patrol divisions is supplied with sports balls for officers to keep in their cars to give to children during their shifts. Every free ball or pickup game between an officer and child is a positive interaction they otherwise would not share.

## CHALLENGE 7

### Families lack information about available sports programming

Sports offerings are only as good as the ability to market them. Families need to know how and when to register, costs to play, scholarship opportunities, locations of practices and games, and much more. We heard from parents who say they don't have enough information about available sports programs, including costs.

Hollins believes lack of parental support is the biggest barrier preventing more children in Baton Rouge from playing sports.

"The generation of parents we have now are younger, and they're still trying to find their way in life," Hollins said. "Youth sports, it's a commitment, and those commitments are really hard for some younger parents out there."

Sports providers need to make it easier for parents to become engaged and sign up their children to play. Make the process as simple as possible.

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### Solution: Create a youth sports online directory of programs

The infrastructure already exists. In 2023, Baton Rouge Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome announced the launch of the [MyBR app](#), making city-parish services and information more readily available to residents. This includes road closures, crime statistics, property information, child care and elderly services, online bill payments and more. [The app was honored by Bloomberg](#) for advancing open government.

MyBR is a one-stop-shop to streamline everyday tasks, so residents have a more seamless experience to stay informed about their community. The app includes a sports section, anchored by Visit Baton Rouge to entice sports



tourism, with content about recreational opportunities that includes how to join BREC adult and youth sports leagues. It's a good start. The next step is making it a searchable database and including leagues beyond BREC.

A great example is the City of Boston, which launched the [Boston Youth Sports Directory](#) in 2024 to help families locate nearby sports facilities and organizations. Families can search for the sports organizations that make sense to them, using filters by sport, age, neighborhood, season, gender, competitive level of the activity, language and cost.

Clicking on organization names reveals additional information about the entities. Do they conduct safety training for coaches? Do they offer transportation support? Do they carry insurance? Do they provide equipment for athletes? Do they conduct background checks on coaches? Do they make accommodations for differently abled youth? Organizations can also describe who they are, their costs, registration timeline and process, extra enrichment opportunities provided (such as academic tutoring), and who to contact.

If Baton Rouge follows our recommendation to create an athletic council, one of the council's first tasks could be building the online youth sports directory. Not only would a directory help families know what programming exists, it would offer a positive way for sports providers on the council to share knowledge and build trust.



## CHALLENGE 8

### Girls play sports and move their bodies less than boys

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Louisiana ranks second to last in the U.S. in sports participation rates for girls (39%), behind only Mississippi, according to the National Survey of Children's Health. Far more Louisiana boys (55%) participate in sports. A similar gender gap exists in Baton Rouge.

High school sports participation opportunities at East Baton Rouge Parish Schools are dominated by boys (63% of roster spots) compared to girls (37%), according to 2021-22 data, the most recent available. That year, 11 of the 15 EBR Schools high schools offered sports (86 girls teams vs. 84 boys teams).

But five high schools had at least two times more male participants than female (Broadmoor Senior High School, Glen Oaks Senior High School, Istrouma High School, McKinley Senior High School and Tara High School). This is partly due to large football rosters, but significant gender gaps existed in sports played by both boys and girls, such as basketball and soccer.

Girls are four times more likely than boys to indicate they do not regularly play sports, according to our youth survey. That gap impacts physical activity rates. Barriers we heard that girls face to play sports and be physically active include:

- Concern about appearance and body image
- Social stereotyping and harassment
- Limited role models
- Perceived lack of skills
- Study and work pressures
- Family commitments
- Sport programs are too focused on winning
- Costs to play

### FEW YOUTH ARE ACTIVE ENOUGH

Only 20% of surveyed youth in Baton Rouge meet the CDC's recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity daily. That's below the U.S. youth physical activity rate (24%).

|           |     |
|-----------|-----|
| All Youth | 20% |
| Boys      | 25% |
| Girls     | 14% |
| White     | 24% |
| Black     | 18% |

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey



In our youth survey, girls were about two times more likely than boys to say they don't play because sports programs are too serious. Girls also more frequently reported fears of injury, a belief they are not good enough to play, and financial barriers to participate.

Some middle schools and high schools within East Baton Rouge Parish Schools charge fees for children to play. The amounts vary depending on the schools. "Even the schools who do charge, they know if there's a kid who can't afford it, there's a donor who will pay what they need for required items," said Christina Anderson, former EBR Schools athletic director.

Girls were also more likely than boys to have waivers allowing them to avoid P.E. class in school. "Interest in girls sports is declining because interest is not nurtured in health and P.E. classes," said Clarissa Johnson, EBR Schools supervisor of health, physical education and athletics. "No one wants to get dressed or look silly in front of the boys. Girls will say, 'I don't want to do this,' or 'I have a headache,' and teachers let them sit down. We have to make it fun for girls."

## Solutions

**Hold separate boys and girls P.E. classes.** Johnson is trying to change P.E. classes at EBR Schools from coed to single-sex after success with girls-only classes while working in other Louisiana school districts. Johnson said she too often sees students in P.E. classes being taught physical activity on Chromebooks instead of participating. "I think we would get more out of the girls if they were in their own class, and they would learn more," she said. "You can focus on those girls and what their interests are. Get off the Chromebooks. Show them physical activity. Don't just write about physical activity. I used to create lesson plans only for girls. You lean into what they're interested in. That's much harder with coed classes."

## WHERE YOUTH PLAY SPORTS BY GENDER

|                      | Boys | Girls |
|----------------------|------|-------|
| At home              | 68%  | 61%   |
| P.E. at school       | 59%  | 44%   |
| Park                 | 57%  | 37%   |
| School team          | 49%  | 45%   |
| Recess               | 49%  | 34%   |
| Playground           | 41%  | 29%   |
| Rec center (team)    | 32%  | 23%   |
| After-school program | 24%  | 27%   |
| Travel team          | 20%  | 11%   |
| Rec center (no team) | 14%  | 13%   |

After-school programs were the only setting where girls said they play more frequently than boys.



Source: State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey

## FREQUENCY OF P.E. CLASSES FOR BATON ROUGE ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

Number of days per week

|        |     |
|--------|-----|
| 0 days | 3%  |
| 1 day  | 41% |
| 2 days | 12% |
| 3 days | 20% |
| 4 days | 3%  |
| 5 days | 19% |

**Note:** EBR Schools requires elementary school students to receive at least 150 minutes of P.E. each week. A school system official said many schools do not meet this minimum.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Baton Rouge youth survey

## EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS PARTICIPATION

Participants by sport, 2021–22

| Sport                   | Male Participants | Female Participants |
|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Baseball                | 104               | 0                   |
| Basketball              | 193               | 128                 |
| Bowling                 | 47                | 16                  |
| Cross Country           | 71                | 57                  |
| Football                | 487               | 5                   |
| Golf                    | 7                 | 10                  |
| Gymnastics              | 11                | 34                  |
| Indoor track and field  | 111               | 68                  |
| Outdoor track and field | 255               | 167                 |
| Powerlifting            | 81                | 27                  |
| Softball                | 0                 | 104                 |
| Soccer                  | 153               | 94                  |
| Swimming                | 33                | 19                  |
| Tennis                  | 27                | 27                  |
| Volleyball              | 0                 | 195                 |
| Wrestling               | 106               | 20                  |

Source: East Baton Rouge Parish Schools

**Provide sports bras to female athletes.** Boys wouldn't play tackle football without a helmet. Teenage girls shouldn't play any sport without a sports bra. As girls experience puberty, one reason they turn away from sports is they lack access to a sports bra — an essential piece of athletic equipment, but one you're not likely to receive if you can't afford it or don't know where to look. Identify funders who will sponsor sports bras for school and community-based teams. Teach girls about the value of sports bras and acquire them through The Sports Bra Project at [www.thesportsbraproject.org](http://www.thesportsbraproject.org).



**More regularly track sports participation rates for girls and ask questions.** Schools and parks and rec officials should review annual participation data so it's possible to ask pertinent questions of coaches, school administrators and girls. Why are so few girls playing? What opportunities could be created to change that? What sports would they like to play? Who in the community could coach or organize these opportunities? Without data, even asking these questions on behalf of girls becomes out of sight, out of mind.

**Invest more broadly in female sports, such as flag football.** To be clear, success does exist for some Baton Rouge girls in sports. For instance, the rise of Kim Mulkey and the LSU women's basketball team is [elevating the competitive level of high school girls basketball in Baton Rouge](#), where Southern Lab and Parkview Baptist won state titles in 2024 while University High, Woodlawn, Madison Prep and Denham Springs were all runners-up. In 2024–25, [Louisiana becomes the 45th state to host girls high school wrestling championships](#). Soccer and volleyball are popular sports for Baton Rouge girls who can access them. But too many are still left behind. Given football's popularity in Louisiana, adding girls flag football as a high school sport in Baton Rouge makes a lot of sense. Flag is currently being piloted by the New Orleans Saints in 10 schools across Orleans and Jefferson parishes with the hope of sanctioning the sport in the future across the state. Twelve states have sanctioned girls high school flag football, and the sport will be part of the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.



## YOUTH PROFILE

### Jeremy Mitchell, 16

It's so often repeated inaccurately that it's taken as gospel: If a child wants to play sports at a high level, they must focus on one sport, clock in 10,000 hours of practice and join club leagues. But Jeremy, a junior at Episcopal High School, seems to live on a different frequency — one where the noise of these youth sports dictums barely reaches him. He seems unbothered by the notion that his success depends on following a rigid blueprint.

Instead, Jeremy floats across seasons, playing football, basketball and track — learning skills from one sport that make him better at the others. He also harbors a love for science and architecture. He wants to play college basketball but would be as delighted blending his passions into a future in construction engineering.

Tall and quick, Jeremy only started playing football in spring 2024, and while others might feel pressure to catch up, he's realistic. "I'm second string," he said. "I'm fine with it. I'm having fun."

Joy — that's what drives him. Jeremy loves to move, whether it's jumping and running on the football field or playing piano.

His father, Harry Mitchell, was the first to teach him basketball. A former high school player himself, Harry didn't have the same support growing up, and he made sure to be there for his son so he felt supported.

When he was younger, Jeremy practiced on a small court across the street from the family's house, putting in time by himself nearly every day. He dreamed of becoming a shooting guard, the same position he now plays for Episcopal. He was fortunate to have a court close by. Not every child in Baton Rouge has access to parks within walking distance.

Unlike many of his peers, Jeremy never joined a club team. There wasn't time. He has always



played multiple sports, such as track and field, which became part of his routine in eighth grade. At 6 foot 1, Jeremy discovered he had a knack for the high jump. Now he is branching out to new sports.

Episcopal's football coaches encouraged him to give it a try, and though he didn't expect to start right away, he's now playing his first full season as a wide receiver.

Basketball remains his main focus, but it hasn't always been easy. Jeremy said his freshman-year coach criticized the players and their skills, and Jeremy's confidence took a hit. The coach was replaced.

"I lost faith in myself," Jeremy said, reflecting on that time. "But sophomore year, the new coach was way more encouraging. That made me work harder, made me unafraid to take shots. Now, I'm playing varsity."

Jeremy hopes more kids get a chance to play sports. He believes many children are too afraid to try, thinking they're not good enough. He also thinks schools could do a better job of showing kids the opportunities available to them.

"Some kids might need something else first — something to build their confidence — before they feel ready to play sports," he said.

## Social Trust and Youth Sports

Sports create fellowship and can increase social trust, including the ability to show empathy for others. There is no more valuable way to create social trust in sports than through community-based sports participation because of the social, emotional, physical and academic benefits that come from physically active children.

In this section, we share two examples of exceptional sports and recreation leaders in Baton Rouge. They symbolize what the Aspen Institute calls Weavers, people across America who act on behalf of their communities as the country goes through a crisis of connection. In ways big and small, people are showing up for each other and building connections and trust. The underpinning for the Weavers project is the Social Trust Index, a new way to measure social trust all the way down to neighborhoods. We analyzed 42 neighborhoods across East Baton Rouge Parish using the Social Trust Index.

### How Gardere Youth Alliance Builds Social Trust

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as waters receded from New Orleans, another tide began to rise — this one composed of lives displaced. Baton Rouge, with its inland safety, became a

point of arrival for some evacuees. It wasn't home, but it was close enough.

Darin Fontenette witnessed a steady stream of arrivals from his home in the Gardere neighborhood.

Among his new neighbors were children who needed something to hold on to — something as familiar as play, which transcended the boundaries of the unfamiliar place they now called home. A single dad then, Fontenette saw a chance to do work that mattered. Here were kids who needed a bit of direction, and he had some to give.

Fontenette arranged to get the children involved in sports. He loaded them into his car and work trailer and took them to a nearby BREC park, a rough patch of grass then.

Something deeper began to take root. An informal program named the Gardere Youth Alliance was born.

“The neighborhood got a lot of evacuees from New Orleans and that raised a lot of conflict in an already high-crime place,” said Danielle Thomas, who leads the Alliance now. “The sports program became a form of peacemaking.”



Fontenette's vision grew, and with it, so did the number of participants. Within two years, there were enough children to form a football team. The girls formed cheer and dance squads. The boys, once football season ended, took up basketball.

Fontenette funded much of this effort through his lawn-care business. He found supporters to cover the cost of the Alliance's growth.

Thomas, then a graduate student at LSU, crossed paths with the Alliance in 2012. What had begun as research — an academic study of the football program — quickly became her volunteer work.

In time, the demographic landscape of Gardere shifted once again. This time, the change came from an influx of Hispanic workers who had come to Baton Rouge to rebuild other people's homes after the Great Flood of 2016. Gardere, with its affordable housing, became their new home.

Fontenette adapted. Soccer — fútbol — became the new language. He reached out to the local Hispanic church, arranging a meeting for soccer parents. Thomas, who had grown used to Fontenette's spontaneity, was nonetheless surprised when, moments before the meeting, he said to her, "Come on, walk with me. You have a soccer background, right?"

"I do," she replied.

"You speak Spanish, right?"

"No, I don't. What are we doing?"

"We're having a soccer parent meeting."

That day, they signed up 60 children, enough to field five teams.

When Fontenette moved on to start a new family, it was Thomas who took over. Now, she transports children to soccer practices at BREC's Burbank Park, two miles from Gardere, the home of the Baton Rouge Soccer Club (BRSC).



BRSC, recognizing the financial barriers that many of these families faced, offered discounted fees for their recreational league so all of the Alliance children can play with BRSC. For those who still struggled, Thomas raised money, often paying out of pocket. As a result, many of these children moved up to the competitive leagues, some supported by scholarships. Teammates' families stepped in, providing rides to practices and games, weaving together a network of support.

In time, the program grew not just in numbers but in depth. Thomas recruited volunteers, among them Ana Alvarez, a coach whose daughter Anna Quinones-Alvarez began as a player and transitioned recently into coaching with the Alliance. Anna, who wants to study business and sports management in college, reflected on the lessons she learned. "It's taught me patience, for sure," she said. "And how to deal with different types of kids and learn how to calm them down when their parents yell from the sidelines. I just tell them that their parents are doing this out of love."

The Alliance is facing a pivotal moment, with Thomas suggesting it could strengthen its collaboration with BRSC while also transitioning into a nonprofit, allowing it to pursue additional grant funding and broaden its reach across other parts of the parish.

"Anna is going to take over, she just doesn't know it yet," Thomas quipped.



## How Front Yard Bikes Builds Social Trust

Kids can't keep a secret for long. Fifteen years ago, Dustin LaFont was working in his yard when a neighborhood boy approached him, asking for help to fix a bike. LaFont, a public school teacher who had learned from his mother the value of getting things done, lent a hand — and, true to form, shared some life lessons in the process.

Word of the boy's new ride spread quickly, and soon, other children were knocking on LaFont's door, eager to repair their own bikes. What began as a simple favor grew into Front Yard Bikes (FYB), a grassroots effort that has transformed into a full-fledged nonprofit and community hub focused on youth empowerment, skill-building and civic engagement.

Before long, LaFont left his teaching job to run FYB full time. He opened a bike retail shop and developed a range of programs designed to keep kids engaged, active and confident. Children learn valuable skills and gain a sense of belonging.

To stay active, they cycle to FYB locations and gather for rides. They have formed groups to work on tricks, including riding long distances doing wheelies, front tires removed altogether. Many children at FYB said they aren't interested in sports, but they love riding bikes.

With two after-school sites and a full-service bike shop in Mid City, FYB has become the largest community bike shop in the state. At the heart of the nonprofit is a clever system LaFont created to give kids a sense of purpose: Children earn credits by learning bike repair and other skills, which they can then trade for services and products, like bike upgrades. The model fosters not only technical know-how but also responsibility and self-reliance.

Through initiatives like its Earn-a-Bike program, community garden projects,

internships and weekly rides, FYB has already improved thousands of young lives. In 2022 alone, the organization served 359 kids, with 275 bikes earned. LaFont estimates that well over 10,000 bikes have rolled out of FYB since the program's inception.

But it's about more than just bikes. FYB teaches children about healthy living through its community gardens on Terrace Street. It offers paid internships and the opportunity to become certified bike mechanics through elective courses.

With a rise in bike riding in Baton Rouge and around the country, the children can use their skills to get jobs, or as a foundation for learning more skills to work in other fields, such as repairing heavy equipment.

Now, FYB is poised for yet another expansion. LaFont's organization has teamed up with three other local nonprofits (Big Buddy, Humanities Amped and Line4Line) to start Youth City Lab. A seed grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation kickstarted the project, which has since drawn over \$1 million in funding from the city and private philanthropists.

The plan? To convert a former church and rug shop into a multipurpose hub where children can gather, study, acquire job skills and advocate for themselves in the broader community.

FYB has already set up its retail shop at the Government Street site in Mid City, and the partnering nonprofits are providing services at the location in Mid City, where FYB is partnering with nonprofits to build out Youth City Lab. Renovations on the building are set to begin in early 2025 and will shift the Youth City Lab effort into a higher gear.



“

It's about more than just bikes. FYB teaches children about healthy living through its community gardens on Terrace Street. It offers paid internships and the opportunity to become certified bike mechanics through elective courses.”



## Social Trust Index

Weave’s [Social Trust Index](#) shows the strength of certain neighborhood traits that are correlated with social trust by measuring three crucial components:

1. **Trusting behavior** — whether people act to support their community
2. **Trusting intentions** — whether people feel good about their community
3. **Trusting spaces** — whether people have places to connect in their communities

### TRUSTING BEHAVIOR Top Neighborhoods

Four of the five highest-rated neighborhoods in this category are well-established with middle-income and middle-upper-income households. They are family neighborhoods. Tara, for example, is a static neighborhood with bigger, relatively affordable homes and a community pool, and it is near parks and the main library.

1. Woodgate ..... 99
2. Tara..... 99
3. Kenilworth ..... 99
4. Pollard Estates ..... 97
5. Country Club of Louisiana ..... 96

### Bottom Neighborhoods

Gardere and South Baton Rouge are disadvantaged communities. East Sherwood Forest is a neighborhood in transition after the 2016 floods. Walden, College Town and Plantation Trace are isolated from the street grid.

1. Gardere ..... 7
2. Walden ..... 24
3. Old South Baton Rouge ..... 26
4. East Sherwood Forest..... 26
5. College Town and Plantation Trace ..... 32



### TRUSTING INTENTIONS Top Neighborhoods

Except for University Lakes, the highest-rated neighborhoods for trusting intentions are along or near Perkins Road between College Drive and Siegen Lane. The neighborhoods are populated by professionals and are a mix of middle- to upper-income households.

1. Walden ..... 96
2. Wimbledon..... 93
3. Burden Estates and Concord..... 92
4. University Lakes ..... 92
5. Kenilworth and Highland Park ..... 91

### Bottom Neighborhoods

A variety of neighborhoods exist in this list, with some isolated and others that don’t change over decades and have stagnant housing prices.

1. East Sherwood Forest..... 7
2. College Hills North (Lee, Boone)..... 23
3. Roseland ..... 30
4. Broadmoor Plaza..... 32
5. University Plaza ..... 32



## TRUSTING SPACES

### Top Neighborhoods

The areas with the most trusting spaces share one characteristic in common — they are populated by middle- and upper-middle-income residents, with some wealthy areas as well. As examples, Tara is near a regional park, has its own neighborhood pool and is down the street from the main library. Wealthy Burden Place and middle-income Concord are down the street from Perkins Road Community Park and surrounded by social places, such as restaurants, coffee shops and soon a new library branch.

1. Tara..... 98
2. Burden & Concord ..... 98
3. University Lakes ..... 95
4. Walden ..... 94
5. Wimbledon..... 93

### Bottom Neighborhoods

The places with the lowest ratings for trusting spaces are a mix. Some of them are separate from the rest of EBR, such as Riverbend, an upper-income neighborhood that is near LSU but tucked miles away from shared spaces, except for a small park that is an afterthought. At the bottom, Gardere Place is a community of Hispanic immigrants and disadvantaged households. The area does have a BREC park and some nonprofits who take care of children of working parents. Oak Hills, meanwhile, is an affluent neighborhood but self-contained.

1. Gardere Place ..... 5
2. Oak Hills..... 9
3. Tigerland ..... 19
4. Riverbend ..... 26
5. College Hills (Lee Drive, Boone) ..... 31

## Social Trust Index Methodology

Annual surveys and census data ask if people are involved in local groups and clubs, from religious to civic to social. A neighborhood's score includes whether people volunteer or donate to local causes, attend community events, and vote in local elections. The index also accounts for spaces near neighborhoods where people can gather, such as parks, places of worship and coffee shops.

Scores are rated from 0 (lowest social trust) to 100 (highest). There may be an inclination to combine the three scores for neighborhoods to rank places within a parish or county. But creators of the Social Trust Index say that adding the scores distorts the findings. The three measures — trusting behaviors, trusting intentions and trusted spaces — are to be thought about separately, but they influence and complement each other.

For this report, we selected 42 neighborhoods from across East Baton Rouge Parish to analyze. Neighborhoods that are familiar to East Baton Rouge Parish residents may not match up exactly with the map at [trust.weavers.org](http://trust.weavers.org) because the site uses U.S. Census blocks to define neighborhoods.

## CREDITS

The “State of Play Baton Rouge” project was managed by Jennifer Brown Lerner, deputy director of the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, and the report was written by Jon Solomon, the program’s community impact director. Mukul Verma served as the project’s local consultant and assisted in conducting interviews, collecting existing research and writing the report. The report was proofread by Catherine Lutz and designed by The Hatcher Group. Tom Farrey, executive director of the Sports & Society Program, provided editorial guidance. The report was generously funded by the Pennington Family Foundation.

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**Clerc Bertrand**, LSU Athletics

**Brent Boyd**, Traction Sports and Perfect Game

**Pam Cowart**, Pennington Family Foundation

**Donnell Hyde**, East Baton Rouge Parish School System

**Brock Kantrow**, Baton Rouge Community College

**Josh Landry**, YMCA of the Capital Area

**Adam MacDowell**, Louisiana High School Athletic Association

**Paula Pennington de la Bretonne**,  
Pennington Family Foundation

**Ronnie Rantz**, Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame

**Kathleen Sarsfield**, formerly at Foundation for East Baton Rouge School System

**Louie Smothermon**, Baton Rouge Soccer Club

**John Spain**, Baton Rouge Area Foundation

**Tiffany Stewart**, Pennington Biomedical Research Center

**Jason Suitt**, Visit Baton Rouge

**Kenya Warren-Hollins**, Athletes for Hope

**Corey Wilson**, BREC

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## PHOTOS

Photos in this report were provided by Baton Rouge Soccer Club, BREC, Daniel Watson, East Baton Rouge Parish Schools, Faye Bucu, First Tee, Front Yard Bikes, Gardere Youth Alliance, Jeremy Mitchell, Jordan Tabor, Josh Landry, Mukul Verma, and Traction Sports.



## ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization whose purpose is to ignite human potential to build understanding and create new possibilities for a better world. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership and action to help solve society's greatest challenges.

[www.AspenInstitute.org](http://www.AspenInstitute.org)

## ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops insights, ideas and opportunities to help stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

[www.ProjectPlay.org](http://www.ProjectPlay.org)

## ABOUT PENNINGTON FAMILY FOUNDATION

In 1982, Irene W. and C. B. "Doc" Pennington created a foundation to enrich the lives of others and give back to the community. Their namesake foundation awarded more than \$300 million in gifts and grants across South Louisiana and the world, including a \$125 million gift to start LSU's Pennington Biomedical Research Center. Their grantmaking continues with the Pennington Family Foundation, which was established in 2023 and focuses on the arts, health and chronic diseases, social and emotional learning, and accessibility and inclusion for all.

[www.penningtonfamilyfoundation.org](http://www.penningtonfamilyfoundation.org)

## REPORT METHODOLOGY

Throughout the report, "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. 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.

## ASPEN INSTITUTE YOUTH SURVEY

Youth survey results identified in the report came from the Aspen Institute's State of Play Baton Rouge Youth Survey, administered online from February 2024 to September 2024 through the Resonant Education platform. The survey was completed by 441 youth in grades 3-12 who live in East Baton Rouge Parish. Surveys were distributed primarily through the East Baton Rouge Parish School System and local sports providers.

The demographics of survey respondents were:

**Gender:** 53% male, 45% female, 2% prefer not to answer, 1% nonbinary

**Race/ethnicity:** 49% Black, 22% White, 12% Hispanic Latino/a, 5% Asian, 4% prefer not to answer, 3% not listed, 3% two or more races/ethnicities, 2% American Indian or Native American

**School grade:** 25% 3rd-5th grade, 66% 6th-8th grade, 4% 9th-12th grade, 4% prefer not to say

## KINETICA PREDICTIVE ANALYSIS

This report also used predictive models by the Aspen Institute's partner Kinetica to assess youth sports participation in Baton Rouge. The models create unique datasets to understand sport and recreation behavior, interest and engagement across 84,000 small local areas (census tracts) in the U.S.

The models utilize the complex relationship between demographic and socio-economic profiles and behavior and apply these results to each community. Additional factors are incorporated to account for geographic differences not otherwise explained by demographic profiles.

The output is a set of sport and recreation participation, interest, and behavioral data for each small local area, which can then be aggregated to other geographic boundaries. The methodology is similar to that employed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in its estimation of diabetes, physical inactivity, life expectancy and obesity. Kinetica also brings in additional data layers such as census and health and well-being data, as well as sport and recreation supply-side elements like facilities, workforce and programming to deliver a comprehensive picture for each community.



