



STATE OF PLAY

Washington D.C.

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

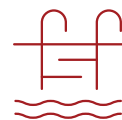




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The Aspen Institute thanks our partner Under Armour for its support of this report and appreciates the contribution from Fight For Children.

WELCOME

Under Armour is a brand born on the field and understands unequivocally that sports can change the world. Young athletes have a much higher success rate in life when access and opportunity are removed as barriers to their progress. This is exactly why we believe we are perfectly positioned as a leader in this space, and more importantly, an agent for change. We are a “Sports House,” one of a handful of brands that can credibly and authentically outfit any athlete anywhere in the world, and as such we are committed to understanding athlete needs and tapping into every resource available to ultimately unlock the next generation’s unrealized potential.

Under Armour and the Aspen Institute began this important research platform in 2017 with the first State of Play community report, in Baltimore. The outcome of that work resulted in what is the foundation of our blueprint of sustained positive impact here in Baltimore — known as “Project Rampart.” Through that lens and in an effort to expand this successful community initiative beyond Baltimore, we are proud to present State of Play Washington D.C. — the 16th report of its kind. These outcomes represent a culmination of over a year’s work alongside Aspen and an advisory group comprised of local leaders across the sports industry including schools, government, professional sports teams and nonprofit partners.

Our nation’s capital is considered one of — if not the most — sports-centric city in the country. Having grown up here and played at all levels — from pee-wee to high school and even college — it holds a close place in my heart. While participation statistics for this city are higher (62%) for young athletes ages 6-17, compared to the national average (55%), they are failing in other areas. For instance, only 53% of girls play sports compared to 70% of boys and only 51% of Black children play vs. 84% of White children. Finally, participation levels are lower in every sport outside of basketball and football in the poverty-stricken 7th and 8th Wards.

We must do better, and it starts with taking the success we’ve seen with Rampart in Baltimore and applying that to a city like Washington D.C. Through Rampart, which includes outfitting every varsity athlete in Baltimore with a new uniform every three years, programming for local coaches to help them better serve those athletes and ensuring there are safe places to play through a rigorous and comprehensive facilities refurbishment program, we have seen a direct uptick in Baltimore city student-athlete graduation rates. In fact, student-athletes that participated in a varsity sport each of their four years of high school have graduated at a rate of 92.6% vs. a rate of 76% for non-athletes. THAT is real data and a concrete example of how sports can change the world.

Rampart has also enabled us to build the first district-wide middle school sports offering, and with a keen focus on girls’ sports, we’ve recently introduced flag football at the high school level in Baltimore and across the state. Through our work in Baltimore, we are redefining what impact looks like and replacing instant gratification with a sustainable, informed and strategic investment that will impact the student-athlete of today and tomorrow.

We at Under Armour — and every member of our advisory group — believe that all children deserve the right to engage in sports. We are committed to ensuring that is a reality in D.C. and we will continue to find innovative ways in which we unlock those opportunities.



Kevin Plank

President & CEO
Under Armour

THE VISION

We aspire for every child in Washington D.C. to have the opportunity to be active through sports, play and outdoor recreation, regardless of race, gender, income or ability.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the nation’s capital, Washington D.C. is one of the most asset-rich cities in the world, and that goes for its provision of sports and recreation opportunities for youth as well. It has one of the most extensive park systems in the country, a deep and growing commitment to school-based sports that extends down to the elementary level, a rich array of professional and college sports programs to partner with, a large menu of sports inspired by its diverse international population, and many community programs doing tremendous work serving youth.

More youth ages 6-17 in the District of Columbia (62%) play organized sports than do nationally (55%), according to federal government data from 2022-23. This suggests a strong return from the COVID shutdown that, among other outcomes, underscored the need to get kids out of their homes and moving their bodies.

But the District is also one of the most complex and politically daunting cities in the country, with an array of municipal, school, federal and private entities organizing and regulating sport activities across eight

wards. Further, the characteristics of children living in those eight communities vary widely, as are the set of opportunities and challenges to play sports. Washington D.C. is a sport ecosystem with several sub-ecosystems, each shaped by geography, family resources, educational access, and other factors.

Peel back the top layer — as our Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program did over the past year with the help of a local advisory group — and we find disparities in the provision of sports for certain populations of youth, especially Black youth and girls. We find broad frustration at the high cost and often low maintenance of sports facilities, a challenging permitting process reflecting the complexity of delivering services in the nation’s only non-state city — and no civic mechanism to connect silos across stakeholder groups, balance competing interests and create shared solutions to shared problems.

In this report, “State of Play Washington D.C.,” we offer ways that local leaders can address these gaps. But first, some important insights that help frame the challenges they face.



Key findings in the Report:

- **Black children and girls are underrepresented in sports.** D.C. has the largest sports participation gap between girls and boys for any “state” in the U.S., and the difference between Black and White children who play is even larger. According to the 2022-23 combined National Survey of Children's Health data, 53% of D.C. girls played sports compared to 70% of boys. Only 51% of Black children played vs. 84% of White youth.
- **Youth in Wards 7 and 8, home to D.C.’s highest poverty rates, have less access to sports.** Parents in these neighborhoods are most affected by the costs to play.

Participation in almost every sport, except football and basketball, is lower in Wards 7 and 8 compared to Ward 3, which is the most affluent area of the city. High schools in Wards 7 and 8 within District of Columbia Public Schools average about two fewer sports offered than the rest of the city.

- **Children are motivated by joy and friendships to play sports.** The No. 1 reason D.C. kids said they play is to be with friends (58%), followed closely by having fun (56%), according to our youth survey. Winning games ranked fifth, and pursuing college athletic scholarships was 14th.

- **Charter schools struggle to grow sports access.** Charters comprise 36% of the District’s high school population and only 22% of the high school sports participants.
- **Boys most want to try boxing; girls prefer rock climbing.** Our youth survey also showed baseball, karate, archery and tennis as activities that boys want to try. Girls also like gymnastics, volleyball, cheer and swimming.
- **Transportation is a barrier to play.** While 91% of D.C. children from high-income homes are driven to sports activities by family members, only 50% of low-income youth enjoy that benefit.
- **Too few quality fields and gyms meet the demand.** Despite historic investments in D.C. parks, sports providers are frustrated by permitting and maintenance challenges.

Many people in youth sports want to better address barriers, but don't know where to turn. The disjointed youth sports system too often pays more attention to the scoreboard than the child in front of them.

One of the Aspen Institute’s recommendations is for the District to create a D.C. Athletic Council as a coordinating body (see page 10). The council would create common goals to build a more coherent system that focuses on quality sports opportunities, especially for underserved youth. In addition to knowledge sharing, the council could collaborate on projects such as:

- **Building an online youth sports directory.** Help families identify the right league, team and pathway for their children (see page 16 for more information). Use data collected from sports providers to identify systemic challenges in D.C. and build sustainable solutions.
- **Providing more training and mentorship opportunities for coaches.** There is a need for sustained development of coaches at all ages around positive youth development, and more than just one-time trainings (page 35).
- **Aligning pro-team investments around girls’ sports.** D.C. teams could collaboratively invest in multisport programs for girls, education and

distribution of sports bras (page 45), and initiatives to attract more women into coaching.

- **Creating one comprehensive permitting system for facilities.** Fields and gyms are operated by different entities with varying policies (page 28). This can be confusing and inefficient for the public. Although implementing this idea would be challenging, the council could aim to eventually create a more functional permitting system.

Most importantly, "State of Play Washington D.C." features the voices of young people.

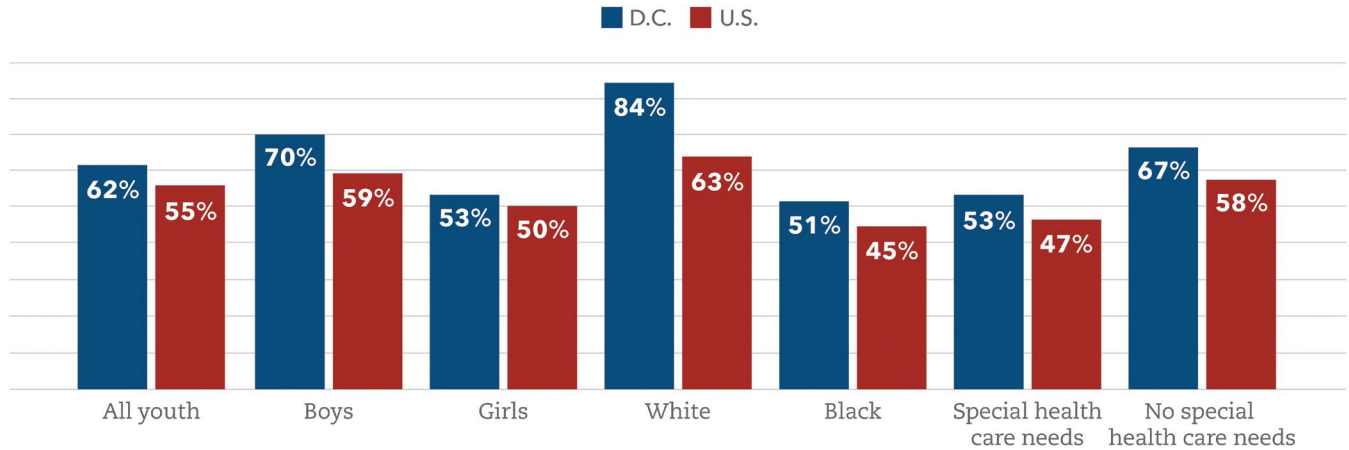
There’s the shot putter who struggles to find somewhere to practice. The soccer player who writes poetry to share his feelings. The high school seniors who organize bike rides to relieve stress. The quarterback who started playing tackle football in ninth grade. And the middle-school girl who turned to rugby because basketball makes her too nervous. By really listening to what children want from sports, the city’s “District of Champions” motto can carry greater meaning and lift young people up to new heights on and off the field.



KEY DATA IN WASHINGTON D.C.

D.C. YOUTH SPORTS PARTICIPATION, 2022-23

The federal government set a national goal of 63% of children participating in sports by 2030. D.C. is nearly there but has significant participation gaps by gender, race and special needs.



Note: Data represent the percentage of children ages 6-17 who played on a sports team or took sports lessons in the last year. Survey sample sizes for other races/ethnicities were too small to include. Children with special health care needs are those who have or are at increased risk for a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral or emotional condition, and who also receive health-related services of a type or amount beyond that needed by children generally.

Source: National Survey of Children’s Health, 2022-23

TOP 10 SPORTS PLAYED BY D.C. CHILDREN IN PAST 12 MONTHS

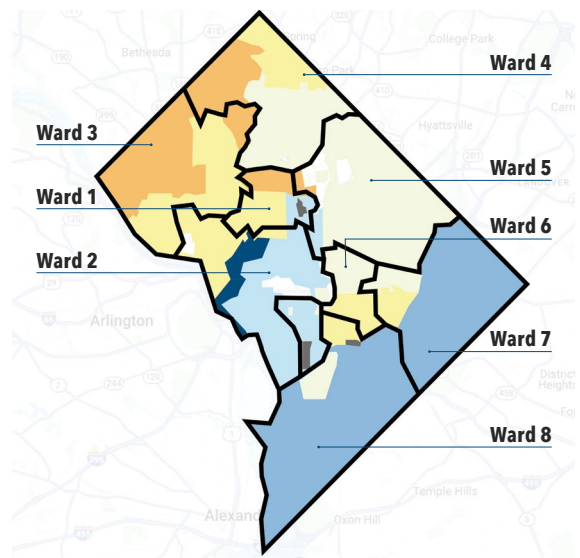
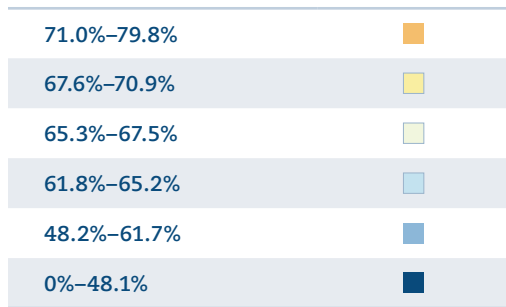
The Aspen Institute’s partner Kinetica is a company that utilizes primary research and predictive analysis to generate localized sports, recreation and well-being data for every community across the U.S. Kinetica’s data was used to assess youth sports participation in the District compared to across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

	D.C.	U.S.
Basketball	22%	17%
Swimming	21%	21%
Soccer	18%	14%
Dancing	16%	13%
Jogging/running	15%	12%
Baseball	12%	10%
Fitness/gym	11%	8%
Gymnastics	10%	8%
Cycling	10%	7%
Football	9%	7%

Source: Kinetica localized sport, recreation and well-being dataset, 2023

SPORTS PARTICIPATION VARIES BY COMMUNITIES IN D.C.

Lower % of kids in Wards 7 and 8 played at least one sport in past 12 months.




Source: Kinetica localized sport, recreation and well-being dataset, 2023

TOP SPORTS/PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES D.C. YOUTH WANT TO TRY

Boys	
Boxing	21%
Baseball	17%
Karate	16%
Archery	16%
Tennis	16%

Girls	
Rock climbing	22%
Gymnastics	21%
Volleyball	21%
Cheer	21%
Swimming	19%

White	
Rock climbing	29%
Tennis	21%
Archery	21%
Skateboarding	20%
Lacrosse	17%



From 1990-2007, boxing had the highest national injury rate requiring admission to a hospital among combat sports. The American Academy of Pediatrics opposes boxing as a sport for any child, adolescent or young adult.

Black	
Boxing	24%
Karate	21%
Flag football	18%
Basketball	17%
Swimming	17%
Track & field	17%

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Washington D.C. Youth Survey

WASHINGTON D.C.'S AMERICAN FITNESS INDEX RESULTS

The American College of Sports Medicine annually 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. In 2024, D.C. was rated the second-healthiest city in the U.S., behind only neighboring Arlington, Virginia.

	Washington D.C.	100-City Average
Bike score	69.5	52.3
Parks/10,000 residents	7.1	4.1
% within 10-minute walk to park	98.0%	71.4%
Walk score	76.7	47.9
Park expenditure/resident	\$209	\$129
Ball diamonds/10,000 residents	1.2	1.7
Basketball hoops/10,000 residents	6.9	3.6
Playgrounds/10,000 residents	1.8	2.5
Rec centers/20,000 residents	2.0	0.9
Swimming pools/100,000 residents	4.7	2.3
Tennis courts/10,000 residents	2.9	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, 2024



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, our seminal framework serves as the “how” stakeholders can rally to build healthy children through sports, with eight strategies (linked below) for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children. The framework, aggregating the most promising ideas that emerged from two years of roundtables with more than 250 thought leaders, has catalyzed activations by many organizations across the landscape, and shaped or unlocked more than \$100 million in grants.

- [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.





CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS IN SPORTS

Endorsed by more than 500 organizations, athletes, cities and states, the [Children's Bill of Rights in Sports](#) recognizes that all youth should have the opportunity to develop as people through sports. Developed by the Aspen Institute and a working group of human rights and sports policy experts, the bill of rights also serves as a statement of the minimum conditions under which children should be served by adults through sports. The 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.

SCHOOL SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Developed in 2022, this schools-focused 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 develop more students through sports with the educational, social, emotional and physical benefits that will serve them in life.

- [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.



EIGHT

Challenges and Solutions for Washington, D.C.

The following pages highlight eight important challenges that the Aspen Institute heard regarding District children’s access to sports, along with recommendations to help address each barrier. The recommendations target systemic changes that can grow quality access to sports for children, especially underrepresented populations identified in this report.

CHALLENGE 1

The District has made investments into sports and recreation, but lacks strategic, coherent systems to focus on quality opportunities for children.

Washington D.C. is filled with many quality and well-intentioned sports providers, coaches and government and school officials who want to make a difference in the lives of children. They just often operate in silos and without a cohesive vision to leverage assets and help grow quality access to sports for all children.

Youth sports are a messy, siloed space. Club and school coaches don’t communicate well with each other. Programs fight for facilities space and get frustrated with maintenance. Efforts to reach underserved populations are scattershot.

Although rarely enough, some valuable investments in youth sports are being made in the District. Examples include grantmaking, pro sports investments, new facilities, expanded middle school sports programming, robust elementary school sports offerings, and collaboration by nonprofits. (Go to as.pn/DCInvestments for a list of some valuable investments made in the District in recent years.)



What’s missing is a more coherent system that creates a long-term pathway for more District children to engage in sports and physical activity. How can these various entities leverage their knowledge and resources to create quality, affordable local opportunities for children to play at every age through programming that’s welcoming and fun?

Like many communities, D.C. lacks a shared vision for what a youth-centered sports ecosystem looks like and why we want children to play. Is the goal simply to create more college and professional athletes? That has value, within reason. But most young people who play sports quit well before then, having been weeded out at young ages due to costs and ability.

WHAT YOUTH LIKE MOST ABOUT PLAYING SPORTS



Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Washington D.C. Youth Survey

During focus groups with many District children, we heard common themes about why they play sports — to be with friends, to find joy, to distract from problems, and to identify a positive pathway in life away from violence. Some young people said they lack parental support to access sports, meaning it’s up to the child to find a way to play.

“If I hadn’t played sports, I probably wouldn’t be here,” said a 19-year-old male now attending the University of the District of Columbia. “If you don’t play sports, there are a lot of bad things you could do. My parents didn’t really care. In my 11th grade year, I started playing to save myself.”

Research shows that when high schools have strong sports participation rates, they report lower levels of major crime and fewer suspensions. **Other studies** find physically active children receive more physical, social, emotional and academic benefits, including being less likely to skip school. (Learn more about the impact

sports can have on absenteeism in D.C. schools at as.pn/DCAbsenteeism)

To be clear, playing sports doesn’t in and of itself result in these benefits. While sports can help personally develop young people, the opposite can be true too. If sports are not a youth-centered experience, they can damage a child’s mental health or cause children to quit.

D.C.’s sports participation rate is 62% — above the national average, according to 2022 and 2023 data from the National Survey of Children’s Health. D.C. is nearing the goal of 63% by 2030 set by the federal government and championed by Project Play. But dig deeper and there are tremendous disparities by gender and race, often due to costs, transportation and some sports environments that are not as welcoming as they could be.

SOLUTION: CREATE A D.C. ATHLETIC COUNCIL TO CONNECT SILOS

Across the DMV region, local governments are paying closer attention to how sports in their areas are organized and made available to youth. Fairfax County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland, are leaders in this effort, forming advisory groups in which community representatives regularly meet to balance competing interests and address issues ranging from field permits to facility rental prices to programming costs. (See box on page 13).

These issues, and more, can be found in the District of Columbia as well. We recommend the D.C. government support the creation of its own advisory group, drawing on the templates created by other communities and adapting as appropriate, in consultation with citizens and stakeholders, to determine the mission, scope and representation. The group could sit inside or outside the government and would have governmental support either way.

Athletic Council members could include representatives from the most popular sports, as well as District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), District of Columbia State Athletic Association (DCSAA), the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), and the Office of Out of School Time Grants and Youth Outcomes (OST Office). Other members could include representatives from pro sports teams, businesses, public entities and community sports providers. Fight For Children, a collaborative network of nonprofits using the power of sports to improve the lives of children, would be an essential member of the council and could serve as its convener.

The council could target its collective and individual efforts by aiming for 63% participation by all subgroups of children tracked in the research who are playing sports at lower rates, such as girls, Black children and those with special needs.

Thennie Freeman, director of DPR, signaled support for a more coordinated approach to sports during public testimony on permitting in 2024.

“I would like to see a unified system,” she said “One thing Mayor (Muriel) Bowser spoke about is how do families know what the access points are for sports? Where would one hear about these organizations and activities unless you’re already in that particular circle?”

Another option is the city government could endorse or financially support a non-government entity that serves as a coalition of stakeholder groups with the responsibility to increase youth sports opportunities in partnership with government agencies. This model, too, has been effective in some cities.

The city of Philadelphia financially supports the Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative (PYSC), a coalition of grassroots organizations that acts as an intermediary between the city and everyone else. The city allocated \$3 million in

2025 to a youth sports agenda. PYSC has received more than \$1 million through contracted work with the parks and recreation department and another \$525,000 from the city to distribute grants to small, neighborhood-based nonprofits.

No matter how silos across the District get connected, members of the “State of Play Washington D.C.” advisory group see value in creating a venue to continue to develop shared solutions to common problems. Many advisory group members who helped guide this research found the collaboration invigorating. They came from city government, schools, parks and rec, police, nonprofits, pro sports teams and more — a rare opportunity for these leaders to learn from each other and find opportunities for collaboration.

Initiatives by the council: Building long-term collaboration will not happen overnight. The “State of Play Washington D.C.” advisory group is committed to continue meeting and determine how to create a sustainable council, which would require public and/or private funding for multiple years to succeed.

The council could address high-impact areas outlined in this report, with a strong focus on reducing barriers for girls and children of color to access quality sports opportunities. Other areas of focus could include training more coaches and creatively improving sports providers’ access to and quality of public facilities.

The council could focus on short-term, medium-term and long-term projects while celebrating wins as they happen. Wins build momentum.

Short-term examples

- **Provide more training and mentorship opportunities for coaches.** There is a need for sustained development of coaches at all ages around positive youth development — and more than just one-time trainings (see page 35 for more information).

- **Create a master list of sports facilities and fields in the District and who permits them.**

Compile them into one central location, like a website, for sports providers to visit and learn how to access play spaces run by various D.C. entities (schools, DPR, Events DC and National Park Service).

- **Develop more after-school partnerships between OST and community sports providers.** OST supports the equitable distribution of high-quality, out-of-school time programs to D.C. youth through coordination among government agencies, grant-making, data collection and evaluation, and technical assistance to service providers. These service providers, who largely don't offer sports, figured out the bureaucracy to get their programs into public schools. The goal is to help more sports providers learn how to partner with OST and encourage some OST non-sports providers of the benefits to add a sports component to their work.

Medium-term examples

- **Build an online youth sports directory.** Help families identify the right league, team and pathway for their children (see page 16 for more information). Use data collected from sports providers to identify systemic challenges in D.C. and build sustainable solutions.
- **Provide sustained investment in programming for underserved populations.** Members of the council could advocate for greater public funding for sports opportunities. This could include expanding the city's \$1 million annual allocation to Events DC for grantmaking of youth extracurricular activities, including sports.
- **Align pro team investments around girls sports.** The audience for women's sports is booming, but far too few girls in the District play (see page 40). The Washington Mystics (WNBA) and Washington Spirit (NWSL) are focused on growing girls' participation.

Other D.C. teams could join them to invest in multisport programs for girls, education and distribution of sports bras, and initiatives to attract more women into coaching.

Long-term examples

- **Public awareness campaign on the value of sports.** It's not enough to hope the public understands how sports can help keep children safe, improve their academics, and boost their physical, emotional and social health. Attention spans are short and the public focus on sports often centers on game results. With a media partner, the council could collaborate on a campaign to educate D.C. residents about the value of sports participation that also attracts sports investments from public and private sources.
- **Recruit college athletes as youth coaches.** There are 22 colleges and universities in Washington D.C. With youth coaches hard to find, the council could recruit and train college students to coach children for university credit and/or stipends.
- **Create one comprehensive permitting system for facilities.** Fields are incredibly scarce in D.C. (see page 28). Currently, DCPS and DPR share permitting software, but every entity that operates public fields (such as DCPS, DPR, Events DC, and the National Park Service) has different rules and guidelines. This can be confusing and inefficient for the public. While it would be challenging for agencies to give up authority given their own needs for facilities, the council could work toward the goal of creating a more functional system.

Collaboration is never easy. It requires give and take, along with investments of time, money, trust and energy — all of which are in short supply. But the payoff of such an entity in D.C. could be significant, even by starting small as a knowledge-sharing group with smart, thoughtful leaders who want to collaborate, learn from one another and help all D.C. children.

Athletic Council Model in the DMV Region



Fairfax County, Virginia

Since the 1970s, the Fairfax County Athletic Council has served in an advisory capacity to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, the school district board and county agencies on sports-related matters. Why the 23-member council is effective:

- Representation exists across districts, sports, and government bodies.
- Historical knowledge of the county's residents, programs, facilities and systems ensures thoughtful and knowledgeable insight, which confers legitimacy.
- Manageable size allows the flexibility to act.
- Includes sports representatives close to the ground with authorities from essential governing bodies (park authority, school district, county government).
- Appointed representatives are respected among their constituents and have a longstanding interest in sports.
- The Board of Supervisors continues to support the council.

Learn more: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/neighborhood-community-services/athletics/athletic-council

Montgomery County, Maryland

Concerned about inequities in access to sports during COVID, the Montgomery County Council in 2022 established its Sports Advisory Committee to make more effective use of county resources. Why the 17-member committee is effective:

- Diverse group of members are united in their desire to improve the quality and availability of programs.
- Montgomery County Council is fully supportive.
- Each of the county's seven districts are represented.
- Committee appointments follow the standard county process for selecting and confirming appointments.
- The committee has a "let's-get-stuff-done" approach to the work.
- It's a standing committee with staggered three-year terms, which creates continuity and fosters institutional knowledge.

Learn more: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/rec/about/sac.html

YOUTH PROFILE

Madison Bess and Nathan Asres, 17

For a couple hours, Dunbar High School students feel their stress disappear while on a bike.

“Biking has helped my mental health a lot,” said senior Nathan Asres.

“When I ride, I can just be free and relax,” said Madison Bess, also a senior.

P.E. teacher Alex Clark started the bike club to keep young people off the streets during the pandemic, a period when five Dunbar students were shot and killed. Clark created a nonprofit called Prime Ability, which began with community rides and now includes 22 D.C. students on a cycling team in the Maryland National Interscholastic Cycling Association. The students come from all over — Dunbar, School Without Walls, Banneker and McKinley Tech.

Financing the team is challenging, making partnerships with nonprofits crucial. Registration



fees for races alone cost \$13,000, not counting expenses to transfer, maintain and fix bikes. Prime Ability received a \$10,000 grant from DPR in 2023.

“I think about (funding) all the time,” Clark said. “I pray it doesn’t come to a point where we can’t run the program anymore.”

Clark recruited Madison and Nathan through P.E. classes. Madison works with friends to structure the rides, picking three destinations for each session and creating questions or scenarios about mental health for fellow students to discuss.

How do you cope with your mental health? Has there been a time when you feel like you couldn’t manage it? If something happens in your family, how does that affect your mental health?

“A couple days before the ride we’ll practice on how to get there and how to get back,” Madison said. “We’ll practice the elevation of our voices and act like we’re in that situation. Then we make a flyer and print out everything that’s going to happen. I see a lot of kids catching on because of how fun it is.”



CHALLENGE 2

Many families lack information about available sports programming that makes sense for their children.

Meet Jasmine, a mom we spoke with during one of several focus groups with D.C. parents. Jasmine, whose name we changed for privacy reasons, needed help for her children after her husband died. Every grief counselor she called had wait lists.

“When I say I was lost, I was literally looking for anything,” Jasmine said.

Through word of mouth, she stumbled upon a one-day grief camp offered by the Nationals Youth Baseball Academy. Because her children attended the camp, Jasmine learned the academy also offers a nine-month program that, through trained coaches and staff, has since helped her children cope with their emotions. She was lucky to find the right program. Many do not.

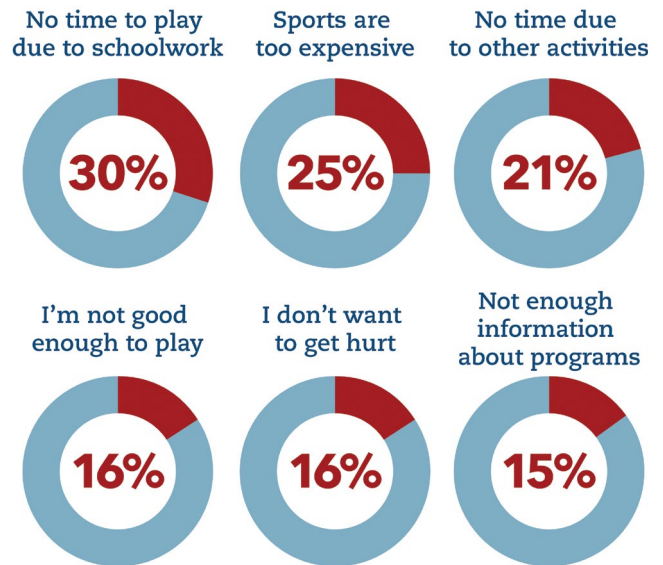
“You learn by random social media posts and word of mouth,” Jasmine said. “I used to drive around and see the signs (for sports programs). The marketing is not there anymore. If you don’t get it from another parent, you’re just not going to get it. And if you do get it, you probably missed the deadline to register.”

Young people notice this challenge too. In our youth survey, children who indicated they don’t play sports very often cited lack of program information — it was the sixth-most-popular reason among 16 answer choices.

Low- and medium-income youth are two to three times more likely than the wealthiest children to lack enough information on sports programming.

The District’s Out of School Time initiative (OST) has a [program finder](#) that includes sports activities such as basketball, baseball,

WHY SOME YOUTH DON’T PLAY SPORTS VERY OFTEN



High school students are almost two times more likely to believe they are not good enough to play sports than students in middle and elementary schools.

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Washington D.C. Youth Survey

cheerleading, bowling, flag football, soccer, running, volleyball and tennis, plus other types of extracurricular activities. The sports programs are often connected to life skills (like poetry, behavioral support, academic tutoring, nutrition, leadership, character development and conflict resolution).

OST often hears from families that they lack a streamlined way to learn about programs. So, it’s investing several million dollars to develop a platform launching in 2025 to better search for activities beyond the current directory of afterschool grantees.

The portal will include information such as whether the activity is free or costs money, how many spots are available, and how to apply or indicate interest in a program.

District officials hope to include activities at public schools, public charter schools, DPR and other entities — including organizations that are not funded by a government agency. They expressed interest in adding public or private sports programming to the directory in future years.



SOLUTION: CREATE A YOUTH SPORTS ONLINE DIRECTORY OF PROGRAMS FOR MULTIPLE USES

A good example for D.C. to learn from is the City of Boston, which launched the [Boston Youth Sports Directory](#) and [Boston Sports Facilities Map](#) in 2024 to help families locate nearby facilities and organizations and for government analysis. The District might operate a directory differently, and creating it could be a joint effort through a D.C. Athletic Council. Still, Boston's directory offers a glimpse of its benefits and challenges.

More than 300 organizations of all sizes — both for-profits and nonprofits — are in the Boston Youth Sports Directory, accounting for an estimated 60% of providers in or near the city limits. 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. Schools are not included in the public-facing database because their information was incomplete and city leaders wanted the activities to be open to anyone, unlike school sports that often require tryouts.

Clicking on organization names in the directory reveals additional information about them. 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 on their page who they are, their costs, registration timeline and process, extra enrichment opportunities (such as academic tutoring), and who to contact.

Not only can the directory help families, but it also helps the city focus more on the community's needs and communicating opportunities.

Boston uses the directory to share information about grants, events and coaching development, and evaluate how government and other potential funders can help. Learn more about Boston's efforts at as.pn/BostonDirectory.

Fight For Children, a local youth-development sports organization, has considered building a somewhat similar directory in D.C. to help families of its nonprofit partners search for programming by sport, geography and youth development components such as mentoring and academic tutoring. Several sports providers in D.C. said such a directory would be valuable.

"I wouldn't understate the importance of building a platform so people could identify a program like ours," said the director of a small sports club that includes youth development components.

"It would be knowledge and information that can serve as the starting point to address a lot of these inequities with access to quality sports opportunities. At the same time, it could be difficult for some providers to keep up with new demand from this new exposure on a directory without more funding to build the capacity to serve more children."

In addition, the District's existing Youth Sports Day could be built out to include partners of the D.C. Athletic Council, which would expose more families to sports programming. In 2024, the annual event hosted by Fight For Children brought nearly 2,000 attendees to The Fields at RFK, where kids participated in sports and received free backpacks, school supplies, health exams and haircuts.



YOUTH PROFILE

Nadia Lytle, 18

Good luck being a shot putter in Washington D.C. Ask Nadia Lytle, a senior without a permanent place to practice at School Without Walls, which has no sports facilities.

A future scholarship athlete at the University of Delaware, Nadia struggles to find throwing circles for her event. Any venues with circles are usually locked, or local fields are not well kept.

Nadia used to practice at a field outside Banneker Community Center, about a 45-minute Metro ride from her school. Banneker doesn't have a throwing circle, so School Without Walls bought a portable circle and Nadia threw off the end of the track into a grassy area.

"But one day some parks person came and yelled at me for doing that," Nadia said. "He was talking about permits. I've been practicing there for three years, and it had never been a problem."

Later, Nadia noticed a tree planted in front of where she threw. "I think that was maybe a message to have me stop because my throws were making dents in the grass," she said.

School Without Walls shifted practices to Dunbar High School, which has a quality throwing circle and track. Because Nadia is her track and field team's only thrower and given the limited facility space, she often practices alone before school, missing out on being around friends.

"It's not fun having to train by myself when the entire team is together," she said.

Nadia also plays soccer for School Without Walls, whose home field is at The Fields at RFK, about a 45-minute Metro ride for each practice.

"Our top rival has a soccer field right outside their classroom so it's really convenient for them to go straight from class to the field," Nadia said.



"We're all hauling our backpack and soccer bag (on Metro), so that's taxing on your body. We have to do all this work to get to the field and then play a full hour of practice, so it's definitely inconvenient."

Nadia wishes School Without Walls could have buses to transport athletes, but doubts that will happen because of what she describes as the "politics" around special treatment for teams. "I wish there was an understanding that we're struggling right now to get to practice, and it's OK if we need a little more help than (schools with on-campus facilities)," she said.

Once, Nadia's track practice was cancelled because a homeless man was found dead nearby. Safety concerns are part of everyday life in D.C., and Nadia and her teammates always travel in groups. "You sort of get used to it and you're never alone," she said.

Despite the challenges, Nadia loves playing sports. She knew nothing about shot put until ninth grade. Sports provide her with friendships, better health and financial support in college. "There's hundreds of benefits of playing a high school sport — like the list can go on forever."

CHALLENGE 3

Charter schools struggle the most to grow sports access

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

Charter schools comprise 36% of the District’s high school population but only 22% of high school sports participants. Similar challenges to grow sports participation occur at the elementary and middle school levels for charters, which struggle more than any other school stakeholder to access facility space and financial investments for sports.



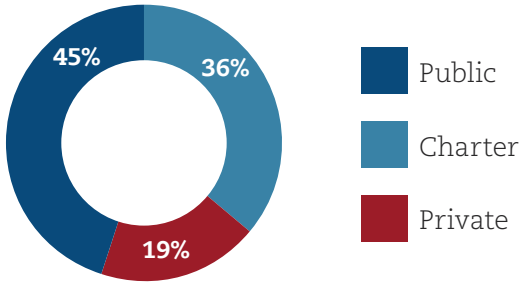
D.C. HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS PARTICIPANTS BY SCHOOL TYPE

| | Number of Participants | % of all D.C. Participants |
|---------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Private | 5,312 | 41% |
| Public | 4,918 | 38% |
| Charter | 2,844 | 22% |

Note: “Participants” refer to roster numbers by sport, meaning duplicate students are counted since some students play more than one sport.

Source: District of Columbia State Athletic Association, 2023-24

D.C. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT POPULATION BY SCHOOL TYPE



Source: Pew Research Center, 2021

It’s a common challenge for charters across the country. As of 2017-18, less than 4 in 10 (39.8%) charter schools nationwide offered interscholastic sports to their students; for traditional schools, it’s twice that (81.4%). Sports aren’t a major feature at many charters — a category born from a desire by parents for greater school choice.

Some educators are fine with having no sports in charter schools. They say sports divert dollars from academic pursuits and can reshape the school culture in unhealthy ways, particularly when games become community entertainment.

“Charter schools focus on academics first, but athletics is a way for us to keep our kids engaged and provide safe opportunities for them throughout the day,” said Kendra Williams, regional athletic director at KIPP DC, which offers expansive sports opportunities. “A lot of charter schools are just now realizing the importance of sports. You can be in the IB program academically and still be an athlete. You don’t have to compromise one to be great at both.”

A team of dedicated educators founded KIPP DC’s first school in 2001, in a church basement in southeast Washington. Since then, KIPP DC has scaled from 80 students in one middle school to 7,300 pre-K to 12 students across 20 schools. After more than 10 years of existence, KIPP DC started offering sports because of student demand to alleviate rigorous academic days.

In another example, the Friendship Public Charter School system has made significant investments in athletics. Friendship Collegiate high school has long been competitive locally and nationally in football. Friendship Tech Prep, a high school of less than 300 students, is a rising basketball powerhouse that will soon move into a gym at its newly constructed school building.

But many charters lack sports facilities. Some have attached gyms. Less often there are fields and tracks. Charters have smaller student sizes, creating challenges to field rosters, and often lack ways to transport students to facilities far from campus given budget constraints. This means their playing spaces are limited to near their school, or they reduce practice days to save money for transportation to games.

Inspired Teaching Demonstration School started offering basketball to middle school students in 2022-23 and later added cross country, track and field, flag football and soccer. Miosha Dangerfield, the school's athletic director, operates with an annual budget of less than \$10,000 — not enough to get new flag football uniforms that she had hoped for, given other needs.

“It’s been trial by error, especially budget-wise because I’m not used to a tight budget,” Dangerfield said. “We have great athletes in the building and that’s why I’m pushing for (sports). At first, a lot of kids came to middle school

here and transferred to another school because we didn’t have sports. Parents are looking for schools that offer sports because parents want nice schools. They want to apply later for a private school and say (their child) played sports for this middle school.”

Charters often must form their own interscholastic leagues, having been denied access to established leagues dominated by traditional schools whose leaders aren’t always happy with the siphoning of students and dollars into charters. In D.C., athletic leagues play a crucial role in how sports are offered and governed within school settings. DCPS schools are members of the District of Columbia Interscholastic Athletic Association (DCIAA), Catholic schools play in the powerhouse Washington Catholic Athletic Conference, and most independent schools join leagues that fit their athletic philosophy and competitive level.

Meanwhile, public charter schools belong to the Public Charter School Athletic Association (PCSAA), which lacks a paid administrator and must be managed by overburdened athletic directors. Very few D.C. charter schools have financially stable budgets for sports.

“They want to have athletics, and their ADs are actively working to improve their programming,” Williams said, “but financially it’s very tough.”



SOLUTIONS

The good news for charter schools: While many are relatively new to sports, they also bring fresh perspective that can help update and strengthen the school sports model. It's not necessary for charters to produce the exact same model as traditional public and private schools. But charters do need more support as they continue to dip their toes into athletics.

Identify affordable sports that interest students.

Football is the second-most played sport by high school students in D.C. charter schools, but it's the most expensive and injury-inducing sport. Ultimate frisbee can be a great option to get students moving at scale for close to no cost. Players organize practices and games, so there are no coaches or refs. Ultimate can be played in any open field that's 70 yards by 40 yards. Equipment is negligible. About 200 high school students in D.C. played ultimate in 2023-24, equitably distributed among public, charter and private schools, according to DCSAA data.

Invest in building more sports facilities for charter schools. Charters educate nearly half of the city's public-school students, but most lack gyms or fields. Some rely on public fields or traveling to neighboring cities for practices and games. Those charters that do have space could benefit by building places for children to play.

Partner with everyone. That's the advice of leaders from ICEF View Park, a charter K-12 school in Los Angeles that the Aspen Institute previously studied. Despite having only 450 students and no athletic facilities on campus, View Park offers seven interscholastic sports, five intramural sports and three clubs tied to physical activity. The school couldn't host any sports programming if not for many community partnerships.

In D.C., charters could build relationships with DPR and work with local universities on programs, spaces and curriculum.

Hire a director for the PCSAA. Administering D.C.'s charter school league has become increasingly complex for volunteers. It's only going to continue as more charters add athletic programs. Most leagues in D.C. have a paid employee to help administer programming, such as securing event locations and creating and enforcing rules among members. For charter school sports to effectively grow, PCSAA will need a permanent paid employee.

MOST POPULAR HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS AT D.C. CHARTERS

Participants per sport in 2023-24

| Boys | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| 1. Basketball | 367 |
| 2. Football | 285 |
| 3. Soccer | 218 |
| 4. Outdoor track and field | 215 |
| 5. Cross country | 107 |

| Girls | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| 1. Volleyball | 249 |
| 2. Cheer | 184 |
| 3. Outdoor track and field | 147 |
| 4. Basketball | 131 |
| 5. Soccer | 111 |

Source: District of Columbia State Athletic Association

CHALLENGE 4

Sports participation is lower in Wards 7 and 8 of southeast Washington

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

Black children in D.C. played sports at a higher rate (51%) than the U.S. average (45%) in 2022 and 2023, according to the National Survey of Children’s Health. But the gap compared to White participants in D.C. (33 percentage points) was far greater than it was nationally (18 points).

Wards 7 and 8 are historically the most underserved communities in the District. They skew younger, more Black and lower income than the D.C. average. The highest number of young people live in Wards 7 and 8, representing 37% of D.C. residents who are under age 18.

Children in Wards 7 and 8 played at least one sport in the past 12 months at relatively lower rates than every other ward, according to

predictive analysis by Kinetica. Participation in almost every sport or physical activity, except football and basketball, is lower in Wards 7 and 8 than in Ward 3, which is the most affluent area of the District.

Yet the demand exists to play sports. Compared to all of D.C., Wards 7 and 8 have a higher percentage of parents with children who don’t play sports but expressed interest in their child participating, according to Kinetica.

Costs are the biggest challenge. Parents in Wards 7 and 8 expressed a higher level of agreement with the statement, “I am reducing the amount I spend on sport and recreation due to cost-of-living pressures,” than parents in the rest of the District.

“It’s definitely a financial strain,” said a mom of a youth football player. “It’s easily \$500 per football season with all the extra costs. That’s tough.”

D.C. YOUTH SPORTS PARTICIPATION IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS BY WARD

| | Ward 3 | Ward 7 | Ward 8 |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Basketball | 21% | 27% | 26% |
| Swimming | 28% | 15% | 17% |
| Dancing | 20% | 14% | 15% |
| Soccer | 21% | 13% | 13% |
| Jogging/running | 21% | 11% | 12% |
| Gymnastics | 11% | 9% | 9% |
| Fitness/gym | 13% | 9% | 9% |
| Football | 9% | 9% | 9% |
| Baseball | 14% | 9% | 9% |
| Track and field | 9% | 7% | 7% |

Source: Kinetica localized sport, recreation and well-being dataset, 2023

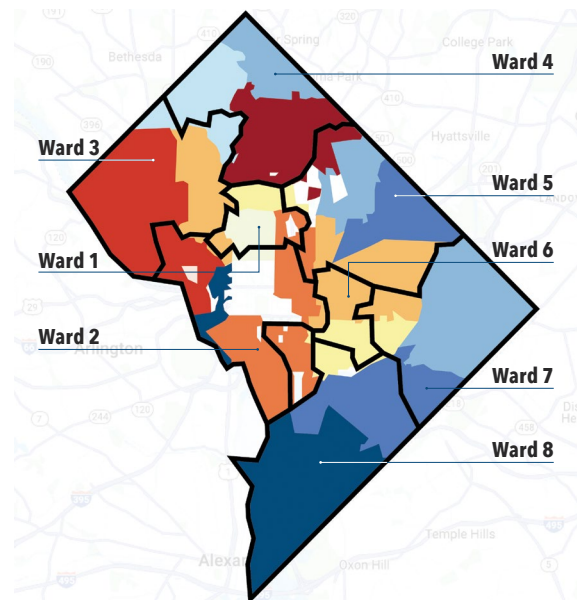
HOW CHILDREN USUALLY TRAVEL TO SPORTS AND PLAY SPACES BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME

| | High Income | Medium Income | Low Income |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| Driven by family member | 91% | 76% | 50% |
| School bus | 19% | 9% | 2% |
| Metro or public bus | 16% | 38% | 56% |
| Walking | 14% | 19% | 21% |

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Washington D.C. Youth Survey

FEWEST FIELD PERMIT HOURS ARE IN SOUTHEAST WASHINGTON

| | | | |
|-------------|---|-----------|---|
| 3.43K–4.6K | ■ | 989–1.07K | ■ |
| 2.29K–3.42K | ■ | 649–988 | ■ |
| 1.99K–2.28K | ■ | 540–648 | ■ |
| 1.14K–1.98K | ■ | 143–539 | ■ |
| 1.08–1.13K | ■ | 0–142 | ■ |



Source: District of Columbia Department of Parks and Recreation fall 2023 data analyzed by Kinetica

Transportation is also a major barrier. District children from low-income homes are driven to sports activities by family members at much lower rates than high-income youth, according to our youth survey. Children from low-income homes are three times more likely to use public transportation for sports than their high-income peers.

Another barrier in Wards 7 and 8 is access to quality fields. In fall 2023, 15 of the 20 most-permitted DPR fields throughout the District were in the more affluent areas of northwest Washington, according to DPR data analyzed by the Aspen Institute. None of the 20 most-used fields by permit hours were in Wards 7 or 8.

Children in Wards 7 and 8 also have fewer opportunities to continue playing sports as they get older. High schools in Wards 7 and 8 average about two fewer sports offered than the rest of D.C. No public high school in Wards 7 or 8 offers soccer, even though our analysis by Kinetica shows that soccer is the third-most played sport in the city. At all other D.C. public high schools, 71% of them offer soccer.

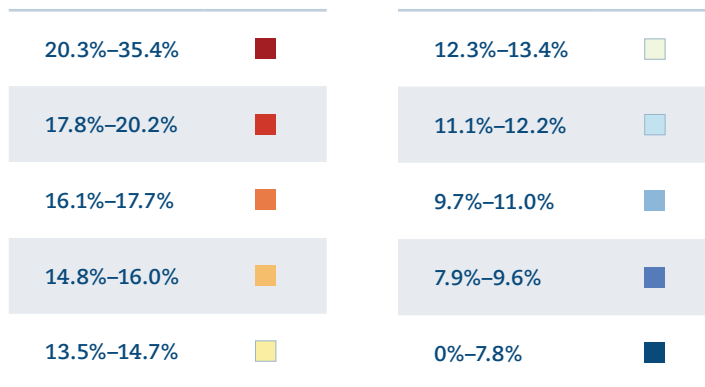
“We have to address that in some places the pipeline doesn’t continue. It just stops,” said Zoe Wulff, community relationships manager for the Washington Spirit. “What sort of pipeline are we building? Are we building a pipeline for kids who are incredibly talented and are being recruited by big colleges, or a pipeline for kids and adults who know how to play recreationally as they age, not just as a 10-year-old? That’s one of the biggest sticking points for youth sports in general.”

SOLUTIONS

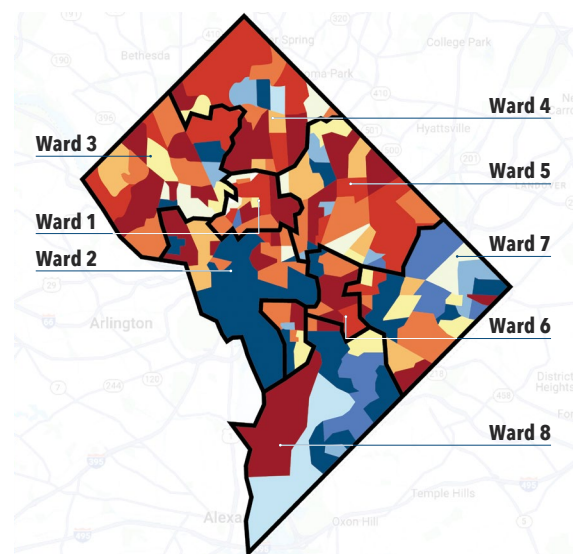
Efforts exist to provide quality sports opportunities in Wards 7 and 8. More investment is needed, especially through sustainable funding, strategic community partnerships with schools and bringing sports near where children live to reduce transportation challenges.

Two soccer organizations – one well established, one up-and-comer – offer intriguing models for others in the District to emulate no matter the sport. They intentionally teach life skills off the field, not just soccer.

FEWER KIDS PLAY SOCCER IN SOUTHEAST WASHINGTON THAN IN REST OF D.C.



Source: Kinetica localized sport, recreation and wellbeing data intelligence, 2023



DC SCORES

DC SCORES represents what a sustained, legacy project from a major sporting event (the 1994 World Cup held in D.C.) can produce. By focusing on youth development as much as soccer, partnering with local pro teams and operating within schools, DC SCORES opens doors for more children to play sports and develop as young people.

DC SCORES is a member of the Fight For Children Leadership Council and serves more than 3,000 District children, at 64 elementary and middle schools with free soccer, poetry, and service-learning programs in seven of D.C.'s eight wards. Typically operating in Title I schools with high rates of poverty, DC SCORES has a heavy footprint in Wards 7 and 8. Its parent organization, America SCORES, reaches over 20,000 students nationally.

During the fall, beyond practicing and competing in soccer matches, DC SCORES kids work with writing coaches to compose poetry about their passions and the world through their eyes. In the spring they translate the poems into a service-learning project to help their communities. Projects include neighborhood and school cleanups, raising money for the homeless, and awareness campaigns about immigration rights, suicide prevention and gun violence in schools.

Schools serve as an equalizer of sorts to help lower-income children play sports, even though many children in D.C. change schools during their academic career. Since D.C. schools do not provide busing for students to attend school, DC SCORES spends \$500,000 to \$600,000 annually to help transport children to activities.

“We consistently hear from families that transportation is the biggest barrier,” said Katrina Owens, executive director at DC SCORES. “Many of our kids travel from school from a different neighborhood than where they live, so ensuring that consistency and access to play spaces is critical.

Utilizing teachers and staff from within the community to lead them has also been a powerful connector because families already know those people. They trust them.”

DC SCORES has a waiting list of 14 schools that want to join. “The goal is once we’re in a school, we stay there forever,” Owens said. “Even if a kid moves schools within Ward 7, there’s a good chance they’re going to be in a DC SCORES school and can find a home in a new building.”



TRAVEL TEAM SPORTS PARTICIPATION BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| High Income | 36% |
| Medium Income | 24% |
| Low Income | 14% |

Source: Aspen Institute State of Play Washington D.C. Youth Survey

Open Goal Project

In 2015, former MLS player Amir Lowery and former DC Scores coach Simon Landau started Open Goal Project, helping dozens of D.C. youth soccer players overcome financial obstacles, transportation challenges and logistical hurdles to play club soccer in more affluent communities. Then they came to the realization that the existing American youth soccer model was not working for these kids.

“The system has to be there in their communities, just like it’s in everyone else’s community,” Lowery said of underserved children.

In 2019, Open Goal Project launched the District of Columbia Football Club (DCFC), a fully funded soccer club that’s completely free for players. Rather than making children travel to affluent suburbs on teams with excessive costs and different cultural environments, Open Goal Project brings resources to the children.

Landau said the equity gap in marginalized D.C. communities is not about access to rec soccer, but rather club soccer. With largely Black and Hispanic players from lower-income homes, DCFC competes against clubs with predominantly White, upper-middle class players. “The impact on kids removed from their community and getting socially and emotionally dumped into a situation where they don’t feel safe or relatable to coaches and teammates was really core to building this,” Landau said.

Open Goal Project is a member of the Fight For Children Leadership Council and serves 500 D.C. children between its tryout-based club team, summer and college identification camps, and an in-house rec league through MLS GO for kids ages 5-12. Open Goal Project plans to start programming in Wards 7 and 8 in 2025.

All of Open Goal Project’s practices are intentionally held within walking distance of

public transportation. DCFC plays an independent club schedule to mitigate travel costs within manageable distances. Bilingual coaches help assimilate the club’s players who speak Spanish.

“I tried out for a club team in Arlington (Virginia) and there was not a single Black or Hispanic,” said an 18-year-old Hispanic girl who plays for DCFC. “I felt like if I said something wrong, they would say I should leave.”

Lowery and Landau acknowledge that their model of free club soccer may not be replicable everywhere. Their total program costs about \$550,000, and they’re trying to scale up, piecing funding together through DME and DPR grants, relationships with the Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs, and individual donors and sponsors. Open Goal Project also offers academic tutoring, mentorship, SAT prep, college counseling, health and wellness support, and Friday night events in a safe and supervised environment.

“Youth sports alone isn’t going to drive funding for sports providers to succeed,” Lowery said. “You have to build a holistic program that will address community needs and attract funding sources that are available.”



YOUTH PROFILE

Jazelle Leonard, 13

No sport is historically more popular in D.C. than basketball. But although many boys still play basketball throughout their childhood, far fewer girls play once they reach high school.

Some of this is due to anxiety within the sport, as described by Jazelle. She's at a critical sports age — an eighth grader who plays basketball, volleyball and rugby at Cornerstone Schools.

“With basketball, I always felt pressured on the court, and felt like I underperformed because of the pressure,” she said. “I was too nervous to perform.”

Jazelle feels supported by her basketball teammates, who keep encouraging her to shoot after misses. But rugby, not basketball, is now her favorite sport. She never heard about the sport until recently and found it “really cool” once she started playing. She enjoys that rugby is like football and “actually very safe to play once you know the rules.”

Jazelle plays for Washington D.C. Youth Rugby, which is free so children from low-income households can participate without worrying about costs. Founded in 2004 by members of the Washington Rugby Club, the youth organization includes many members of the expat community, from countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Argentina and Japan.

Jazelle and her mom usually learn about sports through social media and Google. “Basketball was pretty easy to find,” she said. “Soccer and rugby, those are the two hardest to find. I would like to try tennis, but I haven't really seen any tennis programs.”

Sports allows Jazelle to enjoy a break from stressful schoolwork. “Some people go to the spa or take a bath when they relax, and I like to go to sports,” she said. “It's my calming place.”



After Jazelle's father died, she found that playing sports allowed her to stay close to him.

“When I'm playing, I feel like we still have something to connect with him even though he's not here because we were both really big sports fans,” she said.

CHALLENGE 5

Too few quality fields and gyms are available to meet demand, and sports providers get frustrated by permitting and maintenance challenges.

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

Washington D.C. is viewed as a national leader for parks. In 2024, it was named by Trust for Public Land as having the best big-city park system in the U.S. for the fourth consecutive year. Twenty-four percent of District land is reserved for parks, among the highest in the country. The District also outperforms most of the U.S. in park-equity metrics among different races and ethnicities.

And yet no challenge associated with D.C. youth sports access seems to create more passionate debate than public fields and permitting.

“Despite historic investments in our parks, including \$494 million in DPR’s six-year capital improvement plan, population growth in D.C. has led to a demand for facilities that outpaces current infrastructure,” said Paul Kihn, the city’s deputy mayor for education. “Spaces suitable for highly competitive, regionally and nationally ranked athletics programs with capacity for large numbers of spectators are especially limited. Additionally, there is an increase in demand for athletic facilities from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., when the academic day is over and when after-school programming occurs.”

In November 2024, field challenges were on display at a D.C. Council hearing on permitting, reflecting similar concerns we heard in speaking with coaches, parents and sports administrators. Dozens of sports providers testified over five hours, raising complaints about the inability to access unused fields, lack of maintenance on fields, DPR and DCPS permitting policies, costs associated with security fees to rent fields, and other concerns.



“I’m here to beg you — we’re out of space,” said Jon Wadsworth, commissioner of the youth sports organization Sports on the Hill and soccer coach of 16- to 19-year-olds. “I get 90 minutes on half a field once a week. It’s a crashing derby with 25 young men on that space. Younger teams have five or six teams on a field. ... In 20 years, I’ve never had a full-field scrimmage. We’re out of room.”

Wadsworth gets most frustrated when he sees unused fields, but stopped asking schools how much their fields cost because they were too expensive due to security fees. “After two or three times, security wouldn’t show up,” he said. “You’re at the whims of whatever a principal says (if a school provides a permit).”

Rodney Cephas, director of athletics and mentoring at Beacon House, said he spends \$22,000 a year to play four football games at high school fields — with the high cost largely due to security and maintenance fees. “We do need security,” Cephas said. “But we have to find a way so no organization jeopardizes future programming because of the hefty bill that we’ve been paying.”

Northeast Track Club founder Matthew Kesting said he pays \$800 per two-hour session at school tracks, with \$500 of that going to security fees. “We have no idea if they’re securing us or the facility,” he said. “It’s really a job one person can do, but (multiple people) kind of stand around and I’m not sure what they’re doing.”

"We also understand that a very small percentage of the permit fees go to the school and that bothers us. We want them to receive some money from these permits. That's often a barrier to entry. They see a big group that wants to run there, they get very little money in permit fees, and often permits are denied."

Field rentals through DPR cost even more. DPR increased security costs by \$17,000 per day for youth football games due to spectator violence, DPR Director Thennie Freeman said. That covers six additional guards at each location to work games from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. "Unfortunately, we have to (spend more) to protect our residents and visitors at these events," said Freeman, noting that private leagues that rent fields can charge admission to recoup costs.

Field maintenance is also a significant challenge with the D.C. Department of General Services (DGS), which is responsible for managing public buildings and assets, including fields. Sports providers gave numerous examples of maintenance problems at fields: urgent safety issues with baseball netting, uncut grass, missing pieces of turf, broken lights for over a year, locked restrooms, and challenges communicating with DPR and DGS to address issues.



"What I've observed in 25 years as a resident is there is a woeful lack of maintenance," said Anne Corbett, founder of Go Play, which handles scheduling for The Fields at RFK and advocates for high-quality fields on the east side of D.C. "We invest hundreds of millions of dollars in DPR and DCPS sites for capital projects with no practical plan in place for maintenance when they're designed. When I engage DGS on this issue, there are no technical experts there who understand what the specifications are for maintenance."

Planning based on available fields and the permitting process are also sources of frustration. "If you have a week's notice, that's generous for planning," said Greg Andrulis, executive director of DC Soccer Club, the largest youth sports provider in the District. "It's not finger pointing. DPR is getting 55 phone calls a day regarding field space."

DC Soccer Club enjoys historic use at some fields, as certain organizations are given the same fields they had the prior year. This helps DC Soccer Club schedule its 400 teams on 45 to 50 fields.

Organizations with historic-use agreements also invest their own money into field renovations and maintenance. For example, Capitol City League said it maintains its five historic-use fields at an estimated cost of \$16,000 per year. The league also spent \$25,000 over four years on field renovations and repairs, plus \$50,000 to resod the fields.

However, historic use can be a barrier to access fields for new programs, said Michael Worden, executive director of Player Progression Academy, a youth soccer and basketball club serving about 4,000 families in the DMV area, about half of whom he said live in D.C.

"DPR and DCPS guidelines were developed about 10 years ago when the landscape of youth sports was different, and it's outgrown the current guidelines," Worden said. "It creates gridlock and heavier reliance on historical use."

DPR and DCPS Permit Processes

Generally, permits are issued on a first-come, first-served basis. But to manage high demand for seasonal permits, DPR establishes four permit windows and prioritizes seasonal permitting requests in the following order. DCPS uses permit windows as well. Both agencies outline a similar priority order, with top priority given to their own activities.

1. DPR- or DCPS-sponsored activities
2. D.C. nonprofit partners recognized in a written agreement (DCPS does not specify that its partners with a written agreement must be nonprofits)
3. Athletic programs organized by DCPS, D.C. Public Charter Schools or the DCSAA for competitive league play (DPR notes this does not include intramurals)
4. Youth nonprofit organizations, including schools, principally serving D.C. residents
5. Adult nonprofit organizations principally serving D.C. residents
6. Other D.C. organizations, groups or individuals requesting private use.

Note: “Principally serving” requires 75% of participants to be D.C. residents.

Source: D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation, District of Columbia Public Schools

“I think there are merits to historical use, but without limits this creates problems. There are great territorial monopolies where certain organizations have rights to the fields and because of the guidelines never have to relinquish those fields. Usage should be aligned with community use rather than legacy.”

Go Play, which contracts with Events DC to manage The Fields at RFK, created a permitting process in which 60% of field time is allocated to amateur sports organizations, 20% goes to community open play and 20% goes to special events, tournaments and other Events DC activities. The Fields at RFK issues permits by prioritizing youth sports (70% of permits) over adults (30%), as well as programs with participants from the zip codes surrounding the facility.

SOLUTIONS

Explore policy changes to access more fields.

In November 2024, D.C. Council member Charles Allen (Ward 6) [introduced legislation](#) designed to make it easier for youth sports leagues to secure permits for games and practices on city-owned fields. The Department of Parks and Recreation Field Priority Access Amendment Act proposes two approaches:

1. **Standardize youth sports leagues under one umbrella and give them priority booking to access public fields in the early evenings and on weekends.** The bill would reorder the priority for permitted use of recreational spaces, placing certified community-based youth sports organizations ahead of other nonprofit and private groups. To ensure that leagues are prioritized to serve D.C. youth, those that qualify for prioritized booking could not “cut” kids from participating and must offer ways to waive or lessen fees for families to participate. The goal would be prioritizing leagues that are most inclusive of all kids in the community.

2. Make DCPS outdoor fields more readily available rather than leaving them empty and unused behind a locked gate. The current permitting process is inefficient given the need for approval by multiple entities such as DCPS security, DCPS maintenance, DGS and school principals. Under the bill, DCPS must ensure its fields are still first and foremost available for school athletics use. “There are simply not many spaces available to build new fields, so we must increase access to the ones we already have,” Allen said.

Additionally, the bill would require DPR to provide lighting and maintenance support for these field uses and prohibit public schools from passing on associated staffing or security costs to the certified youth sports organizations.

Incentivize schools so they’re more willing to permit their space. It’s important to remember that schools want flexibility for their spaces, don’t always know when their spaces are available, and may have concerns about how their facilities are used by the general public. Schools need assurances they will receive permitting revenue for use of their fields or gyms.

The city could encourage principals to annually submit their field schedule, so the public knows when fields are unavailable, and release other dates to the public. It won’t be easy. There needs to be a greater benefit for schools, such as a larger share of the permit fees going directly to the permitted school. Additional revenue could support school sports or other extracurriculars.

Create a sports trade industry association to advocate for better access to facilities. Given the challenges to access facilities and programs, Go Play is building a coalition of local sports organizations for athletes of every age and skill level. The association aims to push for better facilities, smarter policies and more opportunities for D.C. residents to play.

“As an example, during COVID, we could get permission to go back to a restaurant and bar at 25% capacity to have a drink thanks to efforts by the D.C. restaurant association, but I couldn’t give a permit to someone to play soccer,” Corbett said. “The public safety issue of playing outside was unaddressed for many months. What needs to happen within the industry and the government is better dialogue of the role of sports and recreation for all residents.”

Create and fund long-term maintenance plans for fields. Investments in fields would benefit the public by including sustainable plans for enough funding and staff capacity to maintain them. Maintenance plans could include general repairs, lighting, aeration, mowing, fertilizing, watering, seeding, weed and pest control and turf replacement.

“When we invest in a field, what’s the maintenance plan and the cost for that in the next 10 years?” said Katrina Owens, DC SCORES executive director. “We have amazing facilities in the city. How do we actually ensure we have the money to prioritize that? I don’t know that we’ve taken enough time doing that. It’s a massive undertaking for DGS. They’re fixing air conditioning in schools and also need to do maintenance on fields.”

Build a comprehensive sports permitting system. This is the ultimate dream and the hardest one to crack. Agencies may be unwilling to give up authority, legitimately fearing problems that could arise by having their spaces permitted without their knowledge or control.

The benefit of a comprehensive system is giving customers a one-stop shop for every public field, no matter who operates it. All of the rules could be the same. Any effort to create greater coherence could start in the mayor’s office, so that there’s a position of power overseeing what’s likely a very challenging project.

YOUTH PROFILE

Will Hewitt, 15

Will, a sophomore backup quarterback at Jackson-Reed High School, grew up dreaming of playing tackle football — but he waited. He played flag his entire childhood through Flag Star Football until joining the high school tackle team in ninth grade.

“It was more about convincing my mom — at games, she gets super nervous,” Will said. “I think flag definitely helped me. Youth football contact leagues are good too, but I was still able to learn the game in flag without having to play 10 years of my childhood and risking injuries.”

Flag football is exploding across the country and in D.C. as an accessible, inclusive and safer form of the sport than tackle. Nationally, more children ages 6-12 play flag than tackle — a dramatic shift from a decade earlier. While tackle remains popular in many communities, demographic changes and parent fears of brain injuries are impacting how children play the most-watched sport in America.

In D.C., Black children regularly play tackle at more than four times the rate of White children, according to the Aspen Institute’s youth survey. White and Black children play flag at similar rates. Between 2018 and 2023, tackle football participation was up 32% in D.C. public middle schools and 18% in high schools, according to DCIAA data.

Jackson-Reed, which had a 6-36 record from 2021 to 2024, has challenges recruiting students to join the football team. It’s the most diverse DCPS high school, with 38% White students, 29% Black and 24% Hispanic. In 2023, Jackson-Reed had the smallest percentage of students playing football among D.C. public schools that offer the sport.

“What helps a lot of other schools is they have a big group of kids who have played contact their whole life,” said Will, who also plays basketball at his high school. “That’s not as true at Jackson-Reed.”

Will sustained some injuries as a high school freshman. Injuries are “definitely in the back of



PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS PLAYING FOOTBALL

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Ballou | 15% |
| Ron Brown | 15% |
| Anacostia | 13% |
| H.D. Woodson | 12% |
| Dunbar | 10% |
| Phelps | 10% |
| Roosevelt | 7% |
| Coolidge | 6% |
| McKinley Tech | 5% |
| Columbia Heights | 4% |
| Jackson-Reed | 3% |

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of 2023 data from the District of Columbia Interscholastic Athletic Association and school enrollment figures

your mind,” Will said. “But if you play worried about getting injured, you’re more likely to get injured. You’ve got to give 100% of your effort and not play timid.”

Will loves the discipline and friendships gained from football. He especially appreciates Jackson-Reed’s work with Men of Code. Led by the nonprofit Becky’s Fund, it’s a prevention education program for young male athletes that addresses intimate partner violence.

“It gives us values on what it means to be a man and learn a lot of important things that we can use later in life,” Will said.

CHALLENGE 6

More trained coaches are needed to create youth-centered sports experiences.

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Simply finding coaches is increasingly challenging in D.C. Less free time, longer work hours, limited pay for coaches and hassles with parents are among the reasons it's hard to find coaches, who are the backbone of youth sports. The best coaches are mentors, role models and inspirations for generations of young athletes — some of whom will grow up to coach as well.

Unlike other educators, youth sports coaches are often unpaid or underpaid volunteers, with little training or time to complete it beyond the mandated certifications in critical topics. Research has shown that kids who play for trained coaches have a better experience and are more likely to return.

D.C. coaches have greater incentive to work in the private athletic sector, which is generally unregulated and hit or miss on coach training, because of better compensation. Within schools, DCPS coaching stipends are lower than those in surrounding areas (Montgomery County, Arlington, Fairfax, Alexandria) and most independent and parochial schools.

Parent behavior also impacts whether people want to coach. Some coaches act poorly as well. In one focus group we conducted, several parents expressed frustration that they spent significant money on tournaments only to have their child's team disqualified due to the behavior of their coach. Two moms said their young children no longer play tackle football because of the coaches; one witnessed an opposing coach yell at a player to knock her son's helmet off, resulting in an injury.



“Sports teaches kids morals and structure, but when the coaches implement violence and the wrong stuff, it discourages parents from even wanting to go out in the community to watch,” said a mom. “Yet you want my child to play on your team?”

For many years, coaching development in D.C. public schools was fragmented based on requirements set by each school. The shortage of well-qualified coaches resulted in DCSAA instituting a coaching-development program in 2019-20 that standardized certification across D.C. schools. Sports leagues and programs outside the DCSAA still maintain their own rules and process, but the DCSAA coaching-development program captures a large number of coaches.

DCSAA’s coach training includes first aid, CPR, automated external defibrillators, concussions, heat illness prevention, DCSAA rules, and at least five hours of continuing education every two years (two of the hours must be sport-specific). DCSAA smartly [lists all certified coaches on its website](#) so there is a public record.

It’s important to note that coach training doesn’t account for the quality of the instruction and whether it makes a difference. The best school districts and sports providers intentionally provide year-round support for coaches. Behavior change comes from a feedback loop, but the coaching field generally lacks accountability and people consistently mentoring the coaches.

“I’ve had great coaches who care about you, and I’ve had coaches who are very competitive and the fun just disappears out of their brain,” said a multisport high school female athlete. “They don’t know how to tone it down, but you could literally have fun while working hard at practice because some coaches are good at that. If you don’t make it fun, kids think, ‘Why do I keep coming to practice if I’m not getting in the game, or I’m not getting anything out of it?’”

Coaching can be stressful. Nationally, 69% of youth coaches report feeling moderately or extremely stressed, according to the Aspen Institute’s [National Coach Survey](#).

“Youth sports has become really transactional,” said a D.C. swimming club coach. “Parents are looking for some sort of future payoff, like a college scholarship, so you’re balancing two different things — you want to help this kid become a good person through sports, but yeah, results do matter. And mom and dad don’t always want to hear about how long the process takes. They just want the result.”



SOLUTIONS

Create more oversight and mentorship of coaches.

Coaches can learn from each other. Frequent and informal conversations make a bigger difference than required, one-time trainings. “As soon as we leave that room after one training, how are we then putting that in motion?” asked a D.C. basketball coach. “You would never expect a teacher to graduate and turn them loose and say, ‘Go teach whatever you want.’ The coaches are human beings just like the kids. If we want coaches to execute a task, we have to be very methodical and process-driven. Oversight is important, and there’s not enough of that.”

Schools could adopt the coaching evaluation tool used by Jennings County High School (North Vernon, Indiana), which was recognized by the Aspen Institute for its unique model. Worried that the school board would require a minimum winning percentage to retain coaches, Jennings County’s athletic director created the [Deserve to Win grid](#). The document covers 28 areas in which coaches are evaluated, such as creating a safe environment, increasing sports opportunities for younger children, providing academic opportunities for athletes beyond maintaining playing eligibility, understanding racial and gender discrimination, and demonstrating good interpersonal relationships.

The idea is to focus on the process, not necessarily the results. It gives coaches exactly what they are being measured on, while recognizing that each athlete is a unique person. Listening is also a value of the Deserve to Win grid because it serves as a starting point for conversations between the coach and AD before, during and after the season.

Build more partnerships with coaching leaders. One example is Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), which helps coaches provide a

positive, equitable and accessible youth sports experience for children. PCA has partnered with some D.C. organizations, such as DC SCORES, Fight For Children, DCSAA, Nationals Youth Baseball Academy, Washington Wizards, Little League and Open Goal Project.

Utilize existing coaching resources. Clubs, rec teams and schools don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Plenty of resources exist to help coaches, such as:

- **[Positive Coaching Alliance Resource Zone:](#)** Explore free coaching content related to topics such as first-time coaches, athlete development, team culture, sports equity, mental wellness, parent/coach partnership, motivation, and inclusivity in sports. There’s also the [Positive Youth Sports Culture Index](#) to help assess the sports organization’s culture and create an action plan, along with free workshops to PCA partners in D.C. And PCA’s [coach evaluation form](#) allows parents to provide feedback on their child’s season.
- **[Aspen Institute’s Calls for Coaches:](#)** Aspen partnered with Harvard University to create resources that teach coaches how and why to develop their athletes’ social and emotional skills. There’s an easy-to-follow [practice checklist](#).
- **[From the Huddle:](#)** Take a free coach self-assessment to measure the frequency and consistency of positive behaviors associated with developing social and emotional skills.
- **[MOJO:](#)** Download the app and get easy-to-use practice plans by video and text for soccer, flag football, basketball, baseball and softball. Practices can be customized depending on the children’s ages and skill levels.
- **[Center for Healing and Justice through Sport:](#)** Utilize a [toolkit](#) for coaches to create inclusive environments.

CHALLENGE 7

Athletic trainers are overstretched and struggle to provide appropriate care to athletes

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Since DCPS launched its athletic training program in 1991, student sports participation in the system has tripled while the number of athletic trainers (ATs) has barely budged. The AT shortage was a crucial topic during DCPS teacher contract negotiations in 2024, at which time DCIAA (the district’s public high school athletic league) said it planned to hire a 15th athletic trainer. When DCPS added middle school sports in 2004-05, ATs asked for more staff, but no additions were made, so they became stretched thin even more trying to care for both middle and high school athletes.

“As we added more sports and athletes, that meant more responsibilities for the middle schools, and it became harder and harder to deliver any kind of care,” said Jennifer Rheeling, one of the first ATs in DCPS, who left in October 2023 to serve at KIPP College Preparatory Public Charter School. “A lot of athletic trainers don’t want to work these hours and given the pay. Athletic trainers have compassion fatigue. You can’t be everything to everybody.”

At the time she left DCPS, Rheeling was responsible for athletes at H.D. Woodson High School, Bard High School Early College, Kelly Miller Middle School, Sousa Middle School and about five elementary schools. Through the years, ATs offered proposals to DCPS for three more high school ATs and six more middle school ATs.

“There are dead spots in the system, like charter schools and middle schools,” said Rheeling, a former chair of the National Athletic Trainers’ Association’s secondary school committee. “What scares me is middle school football. It should be either you play tackle football and have an athletic trainer, or you play flag football.



During the summer months, there was no one taking care of the middle school kids while we were all at high schools.”

Rheeling said the DCIAA budget also does not allow enough for acquisition of supplies, equipment, maintenance and repair for AT services. Some items that need repair, such as ice machines and golf carts for ATs to travel on while assisting multiple sports teams, fall outside the scope of DGS or needs to be addressed faster than DGS can accommodate.

Administrative paperwork and other responsibilities of ATs take too much time away from the delivery of health care. For instance, D.C. public school ATs spend more time on administrative duties (17%) than they do on treatment and rehab, according to research conducted by the ATLAS Project Database through the Korey Stringer Institute.

DCIAA Executive Director Michael Bryant described D.C. as a national leader in athletic training services, noting that other school districts have adopted DCPS' model.

DCPS partners with George Washington University to provide medical coverage for varsity football games, using licensed medical professionals to help school district ATs evaluate injuries, determine the return-to-play status, and provide referrals for students who may have sustained injuries. "This partnership supplements the work of our ATs in one of our most high-contact sports programs and ensures quality medical coverage for student-athletes at varsity home games throughout the season," said DCPS Chancellor Dr. Lewis Ferebee.

D.C. is not unique with its AT challenges. Rural and inner-city schools nationally have far less access to ATs than those in the suburbs. Finding athletic trainers to work odd hours and for the amount offered by schools is increasingly challenging. In recent years, the athletic training profession transitioned to require a master's degree in order to be certified, meaning these students leave college with job opportunities in higher-paying industries than schools, where the sports financial model is backward. Budgets focus first on every aspect related to competition and only then allow for an athletic trainer, if there's enough money.

Some good news for the District: The D.C. Council passed a bill mandating cardiac emergency response plans in every public, private, public charter, independent and parochial school by the 2025-26 school year. The bill, authored by council member Kenyan R. McDuffie, also requires schools to have at least one automated external defibrillator (AED) for athletic events plus cardiopulmonary resuscitation and AED training for coaches, trainers and school nurses. D.C. joined 13 states that have enacted similar policies.

SOLUTIONS

In support of the [D.C. high school sports study](#) commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education and released in 2022, Rheeling shared the following ideas on how to improve athletic health care in D.C. schools.

Hire more athletic trainers. Add four 10-month ATs for elementary school sports, six 11-month ATs for middle school sports, and six additional 11-month ATs in select high schools (Jackson-Reed, McKinley Tech, H.D. Woodson, Banneker, Bard and a planned new high school). The three added to existing programs would be event floaters and support larger high school programs where needed. ATs at high schools without football would work a schedule that includes June and July.

Identify separate funding for an athletic training budget. This would ensure availability of supplies, equipment, maintenance and repairs outside the scope of DGS.

Identify and fund an electronic medical record (EMR) system that can communicate with other systems and save time for ATs. Such a system could be accessed by hospital systems and accept electronic submission of athlete participation documents. One EMR example is [Healthy Roster](#), which brings forms online, documents injuries and saves time on paperwork.

Create an athletic trainer coordinator position. This dedicated role within DCIAA would oversee the athletic training program.



Add an athletic trainer position to DCSAA (D.C.’s state athletic association).

This person’s roles would include:

- Oversee policies and procedures related to health and safety in the District
- Coordinate training with D.C. emergency medical services
- Coordinate medical care at DCSAA events
- Oversee the DCSAA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee
- Collaborate with other agencies to improve athletic health care throughout the city
- Recruit students who want to pursue careers in sports medicine
- Explore how to fund additional AT jobs by implementing career technical education for sports medicine as an educational offering

ATHLETIC TRAINER SERVICES IN D.C. SCHOOLS

| | Average ATs/School | % Schools with Multiple ATs | AT to Athlete Ratio |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| D.C. Public Schools | 1.0 | 0% | 1 to 206 |
| D.C. Private Schools | 1.6 | 57% | 1 to 300 |
| Virginia Public Schools | 1.3 | 28% | 1 to 361 |
| Hawaii Public Schools | 1.8 | 74% | 1 to 277 |

HOW ATHLETIC TRAINERS SPEND TIME ON TASKS

| | D.C. Public | D.C. Private | Virginia Public | Hawaii Public |
|------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Avg. contracted hours per week | 33 | 37 | 36 | 39 |
| Avg. actual hours worked per week | 34 | 38 | 37 | 41 |
| % of time on acute care | 19% | 25% | 25% | 24% |
| % of time on treatment/rehab | 16% | 22% | 19% | 25% |
| % of time covering games/practices | 48% | 40% | 40% | 30% |
| % of time on administrative tasks | 17% | 12% | 14% | 20% |

Note: Data are from 2022. Hawaii was evaluated because of its strong commitment to athletic training services. The state earmarks more than \$4 million annually in the public-school budget, enough for all but the smallest high schools to have at least two athletic trainers.

Source: Robert Huggins Ph.D., ATLAS Project Database, Korey Stringer Institute

YOUTH PROFILE

Moises Rios, 12

Which sports children gravitate to are often impacted by family. Connections to family, friends and culture are deeply embedded in Moises, a seventh grader at Brookland Middle School whose passion to play soccer is intertwined with his parents and his family's El Salvadoran heritage.

"The biggest reason I play is because I love the sport and I want to make my parents proud," Moises said. "Soccer's where I can leave my emotions."

Moises plays soccer with DC SCORES. He discovered he could express himself by writing this poem as part of the organization's poetry program:

**One bright, sunny day in
El Salvador, with green coconut trees that look
More alive
Than a car
The water giving that nice breeze
The sounds of
Raspados
Sounds like music to my ears
Kids playing soccer in the sand
Reminds me of the stories my tios told me
When they played soccer in
El Salvador
Just like they're with me**

The poem is "important to me, because I feel like I'm representing my country," Moises said. "It's about sports, soccer and family."

Moises sometimes visits El Salvador over summer break and used to play soccer with his



cousins on trips. "But now everybody's here, so if I go back, I have nobody to play with," he said.

The Washington D.C. region has the second-largest Salvadoran population in the country, and it's the only metropolitan area with Salvadorans as its largest Latino group, according to American University's DC-Metro Latino Research Initiative. Nearly a million Latinos live in the D.C. area, over half of whom are foreign-born.

Moises has played soccer since age 3 and dreams of being a pro. He is grateful that his parents and older sister can take him to and from soccer practices, although his dad works a lot and can't always attend games. When his dad can come, "I feel excited," he said, "because you're watching me play."

Although he recognizes that costs prevent some children from playing sports, Moises appreciates that schools offer sports programming. He really likes his DC SCORES middle school team because he's with friends and feels safe at school.

"I like my coaches," he said. "They help me not give up."

CHALLENGE 8

Girls play sports and move their bodies less than boys

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The gender gap for sports participation in D.C. is real and problematic. Only 53% of District girls participated on a sports team of any kind in 2022 and 2023, compared to 70% of boys. That's the largest gender gap for U.S. states, according to the National Survey of Children's Health. Our youth survey also showed that D.C. girls are less physically active than boys, according to CDC-recommended levels.

The student ratio at DCPS schools is 51% boys and 49% girls. The breakdown of DCPS sports participation by roster spots looks somewhat different, according to 2023-24 data analyzed by the Aspen Institute:

- **Elementary schools:** boys 54%, girls 46%
- **Middle schools:** girls 53%, boys 47%
- **High schools:** boys 53%, girls 47%

Girls' participation peaks in middle school and then plummets in some sports. Consider track and field, which is very popular in the District. Nationally, kids usually start it at older ages. But in D.C., girls' participation in outdoor track declined by 43% between elementary and high school ages, while boys' participation declined only 21%.

Girls' basketball participation completely fell off the map between middle school and high school—a 42% decline for girls vs. a 42% increase for boys. Nationally, high school girls' basketball has significantly declined over the past two decades for various reasons, including costs, fewer quality local programs at young ages, more girls playing volleyball, early-sport specialization and lack of interest by girls to play basketball.



Why the gap for girls in all sports? In our D.C. youth survey, boys indicated that they like playing sports in order to compete at twice the rate that girls did. Girls were slightly more likely than boys to say they like supporting their teammates and learning new skills. In focus groups we held with girls, the reasons some gave for not playing sports include:

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

“My friends (who are girls) want to play sports, but they’ve never played in their life before, so they have a lower skillset than other people,” said a ninth-grade girl who plays four sports. “That makes them nervous to play and the coaches add a lot of pressure.”

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS) SPORTS PARTICIPATION

Number of participants by school level, gender and sport in 2023-24 and the percentage increase or decrease since 2018-19 (before the pandemic.)

| Elementary School | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Sports | Boys | % Change | Girls | % Change |
| Basketball | 446 | -21% | 308 | -11% |
| Outdoor track | 340 | -9% | 328 | -14% |
| Cross country | 257 | +367% | 241 | +488% |
| Flag football | 214 | -16% | 101 | +11% |
| Cheer | 5 | N/A* | 134 | -23% |
| Soccer | 146 | +19% | 81 | +3% |
| Indoor track | 84 | -565% | 81 | -574% |
| Totals | 1,492 | -5% | 1,274 | -2% |

* No boys participated in cheer during 2018-19.

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of DCIAA sports participation data



| Middle School | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| Sports | Boys | % Change | Girls | % Change |
| Basketball | 324 | +62% | 278 | +62% |
| Outdoor track | 255 | +13% | 257 | +1% |
| Soccer | 194 | +38% | 164 | +25% |
| Cheer | 1 | -50% | 342 | +59% |
| Tackle football | 256 | +29% | 6 | N/A* |
| Cross country | 96 | -46% | 102 | -45% |
| Indoor track | 105 | -38% | 86 | -51% |
| Volleyball | 1 | 0% | 183 | +10% |
| Swimming | 73 | +192% | 104 | +131% |
| Archery | 78 | +26% | 72 | +24% |
| Baseball | 130 | -12% | 11 | +175% |
| Lacrosse | 45 | +15% | 76 | +55% |
| Softball | 0 | 0% | 105 | -5% |
| Bowling | 0 | 0% | 39 | -29% |
| Wrestling | 30 | -47% | 2 | -60% |
| Unified basketball | 19 | -57% | 4 | -60% |
| Golf | 5 | -75% | 4 | -75% |
| Adaptive sports | 4 | N/A** | 0 | N/A** |
| Totals | 1,616 | +7% | 1,835 | +11% |

* No girls played football in 2018-19.

** No adaptive sports participants were listed for 2018-19.

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of DCIAA sports participation data

| High School | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Sports | Boys | % Change | Girls | % Change |
| Basketball | 464 | +18% | 162 | +3% |
| Tackle football | 599 | +18% | 3 | 0% |
| Outdoor track | 268 | +63% | 188 | +47% |
| Cheer | 11 | +10% | 423 | +39% |
| Soccer | 199 | +11% | 168 | +5% |
| Indoor track | 180 | -8% | 147 | +14% |
| Volleyball | 1 | -50% | 244 | +21% |
| Baseball | 228 | 0% | 1 | -67% |
| Cross country | 124 | -10% | 96 | -17% |
| Softball | 0 | -100% | 159 | +24% |
| Flag football | 0 | -100% | 158 | +10% |
| Swimming | 57 | +8% | 54 | -2% |
| Lacrosse | 33 | -21% | 78 | +8% |
| Golf | 52 | +86% | 47 | +124% |
| Crew | 43 | +105% | 51 | +113% |
| Wrestling | 76 | +347% | 16 | +700% |
| Tennis | 38 | -16% | 42 | +5% |
| Ultimate frisbee | 43 | -33% | 24 | -20% |
| Bowling | 7 | -42% | 58 | -9% |
| Field hockey | 0 | 0% | 28 | -39% |
| Totals | 2,423 | +13% | 2,147 | +15% |

Source: Aspen Institute analysis of DCIAA sports participation data

In our youth survey, boys indicated they were more likely to play sports in P.E. classes (56%) than girls (47%). Over several decades, girls have been impacted by decreased emphasis on quality physical education in schools, according to some P.E. teachers in the District. “There’s less education,” one P.E. teacher said. “It’s more like you go outside or go to the gym and play. There’s curriculum, but sometimes it’s almost like modified recess without enough structure. Some girls don’t want to participate in class. It’s not for them.”

An impactful development to help girls be physically active in DCPS is a district-wide program called Cornerstones, which serves boys and girls. The program teaches biking in second grade, swimming in third grade, archery in fourth grade, hiking and orienteering in sixth grade, parkour in seventh grade and rock climbing in eighth grade.

“Our goal in P.E. is to make you want to move and enjoy movement,” said Miriam Kenyon, director of DCPS P.E. and health. “We want to change our instruction to meet every kid where they are, so they have a lifelong love for movement.”

Launched in 2017, the swimming program is now in 62 D.C. elementary schools, with a focus on third grade so children learn as early as possible to stand in the shallow end of a pool. As children get older, they can take scuba diving lessons offered at four high schools and can become lifeguards.



In our youth survey, swimming was the No. 2 activity girls indicated they most regularly participate in and among the top five activities they most want to try. Girls were five times more likely than boys to say they learned to swim at school.

Bringing swimming to schools is particularly poignant for Black children given the history of segregated public pools in the District. “It’s a generational impact and our responsibility to teach kids to swim to change that negative impact,” Kenyon said. “If I’m a parent and I can’t save my child from drowning, I’m not taking them to a pool.”

The DCPS biking program through Cornerstones began in 2015. With a fleet of 1,000 bikes, DCPS teaches six lessons to second graders, culminating with a class bike ride of five to seven miles to a nearby park.

Several years ago, the development of DCPS middle school archery teams was a natural outcome of Cornerstones teaching the sport to fourth graders in P.E. class and interest growing. In 2024-25, the DCPS P.E. department began surveying students to understand what they learned in P.E. class and how they can apply it elsewhere and to other interests.

SOLUTIONS

Listen to girls about why they play or don’t play. Conduct surveys of middle school and high school students to assess their interests, abilities and attitudes about sports. Include in the survey interest levels of club and intramural sports. It’s helpful to take this a step further and use focus groups to assess girls’ intentions and goals for playing sports.

In our youth survey, girls said they were most motivated to play sports to have fun and play with friends. The top reasons why some girls don’t play sports were costs, no time due to schoolwork, no time due to other activities, and fear of injury.

Launch a campaign to distribute sports bras.

As girls experience puberty, inadequate access to sports bras is a consistent cause for them dropping out of sports. A sports bra is an essential piece of athletic equipment, but one that a girl is unlikely to have if she can't afford it or doesn't know where to look. Sports bras that fit correctly can make a significant difference in girls playing confidently and without pain or discomfort.

According to a [2016 study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health](#), 46% of girls ages 11-18 years reported that their breasts had some effect on their participation in sports and exercise. This challenge was more prevalent in girls ages 13-14 (51%) and in larger-breasted girls (63%). More than half of the surveyed girls reported never wearing a sports bra during sports.

Imagine every D.C. pro sports team teaming up for a sustained District-wide effort to give out free bras while educating girls on how to find a properly fitting bra. There's also a need for girls to receive period products in certain sports. Leveling the Playing Field, a local nonprofit that collects and donates sports equipment, partners with the Washington Spirit, DC SCORES and CVS Health to distribute bras at Spirit games and local soccer clinics.

Emphasize positive self-talk. Coaches should not pressure girls to conform to a certain body image or physique. Females are at greater risk than males for eating disorders. Coaches should avoid any reference to body weight or appearance and any comments that might suggest an athlete is overweight. Instead, coaches should connect sports and women's health and fitness and discuss the correlation between athletic participation, women's health risks and prevention of disease, [according to the National Federation of State High School Associations](#).

Because boys have had a longer history of sports participation, sports providers need to be aware and sensitive to the dynamics of young female athletes who may not have had the same experiences.

Coaches may need to provide precise feedback and encouragement to girls to help them develop self-confidence as opposed to screaming at, denigrating or punishing them when they make a mistake. Coaches need to understand the fear and anxiety that many young females may experience when playing sports. [Coaching HER](#), a project of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, offers a free coaching module that challenges the status quo and the assumptions of what it means to coach girls.

Examine the community athletic programs that currently exist. High schools need quality feeder programs for girls to continue playing. Cultivate relationships with community-based athletic leagues or clubs. Reach out to younger athletes and invite them to participate in the schools' programs in the future. Just reaching out can be impactful when a young female is uncertain whether she wants to commit to playing school sports.

Hire more female coaches and support them. Representation matters. But only 28% of youth sports coaches nationally are female, according to data from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. [A study of 20 women high school coaches](#) found that a supportive partner who encourages them to coach and doesn't make them feel guilty about coaching is key. For women with children, coaching may be a family activity. Children can become part of the program, extended family may pitch in, and the wider school or sport community helps with caretaking.

Build physically and emotionally safe sports programs. Abuse and harassment in sports deters girls from participating. Implementing policies to safeguard them reduces the likelihood of such offenses. The Women's Sports Foundation has resources to help address [sexual harassment and sexual relationships](#) between coaches and other athletic personnel with athletes, and [verbal, physical and psychological abuse of athletes](#).

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” broadly includes 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 Washington D.C. Youth Survey, administered online and in-person from May to September 2024 through the Resonant Education platform. The survey was completed by 561 youth in grades 3-12 who live in Washington D.C. Surveys were distributed primarily through local sports providers.

The demographics of survey respondents were:

Gender: 62% male, 36% female, 1% prefer not to answer, 1% nonbinary

Race/ethnicity: 51% Black, 24% White, 9% Hispanic or Latino/a, 8% two or more races/ethnicities, 4% not listed/prefer not to answer, 3% Asian, 1% American Indian or Native American

School grade: 38% 3rd-5th grade, 38% 6th-8th grade, 17% 9th-12th grade, 7% 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 Washington D.C. 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.

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.

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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

ABOUT UNDER ARMOUR

Under Armour, Inc., headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland, is a leading inventor, marketer, and distributor of branded athletic performance apparel, footwear, and accessories. Designed to empower human performance, Under Armour’s innovative products and experiences are engineered to make athletes better.

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ABOUT FIGHT FOR CHILDREN

Fight For Children has been a pillar in the D.C. philanthropic community for more than 30 years. Through a combination of direct service programming, capacity-building and grantmaking, Fight For Children has impacted the lives of more than 400,000 young people throughout the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The fight continues today with a mission to help individuals, organizations and communities leverage the power of sports to improve the lives of underserved youth. For a complete list of Fight For Children members, visit

fightforchildren.org/members

