TRSM's Dr. J.O. Spengler explains how sharing the use of school playgrounds and public recreation facilities could open a world of possibilities.

LEARNING HOW TO SHARE

by Allison Vitt
A HHP professor and researcher is at the forefront of an initiative to prevent obesity and promote physical activity, and believes one solution may be as simple as sharing recreational programs and facilities through a concept called shared use.

“Shared use” and “joint use” are terms often used to describe the sharing of school facilities with parks, community groups and neighborhood children. Many schools have playgrounds, gyms, fields and basketball courts that are closed outside of normal school hours because of concerns over issues such as liability, staffing, maintenance, operating costs and security.

Dr. J.O. Spengler, associate professor in the Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Management, has been involved in research that explores policy issues relevant to community health and development through sport and physical activity. He has been funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to conduct policy research on the subject of shared use of school and park recreational facilities and to measure physical activity in municipal parks in underserved communities.

According to an April 2012 research brief written by Spengler for RWJF Active Living Research, regular physical activity is recognized as a key factor for promoting health and reducing obesity risk. The publication also cites findings that show that providing access to safe, affordable and convenient recreational facilities is a critical strategy for helping children and adults be more active, especially in lower-income communities and communities of color that often lack such facilities.

Additionally, leading public health authorities, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommend sharing existing school and community recreational facilities to promote opportunities for physical activity. The American Heart Association also advocates for shared use. Spengler, an American Heart Association Volunteer, is currently serving on an AHA writing group for a policy statement on shared use.

“The broad-based interest in this issue has provided some exciting opportunities. It has been enjoyable to work with colleagues in such diverse fields as public health, urban planning, epidemiology, law and public policy; and to give invited presentations for the CDC, American Planning Association, AHA, Public Health Law Center and the National Legal and Policy Analysis Network,” Spengler said. “It is also rewarding to be invited to share my research to inform the work of Community Transformation, Communities Putting Prevention to Work, and AHA obesity fund grantees seeking to implement and evaluate shared use. This type of interdisciplinary collaboration is at the heart of this type of work and is what makes it so appealing to me,” he said.

“Physical activity, through recreation and sport, can have important physical health benefits such as controlling obesity and associated health risks,” Spengler said. “Likewise, there are important mental health benefits to physical activity such as reducing depression, relieving stress, and improving self-esteem and personal growth.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 17 percent, or 12.5 million, of all children and adolescents in the United States are obese; triple the rate from just one generation ago. The obesity rate in the US is projected to grow to 42 percent by 2030. Inactivity is consistently cited as a key factor leading to these and other health problems.

These staggering statistics have been a focus of organizations such as Healthy People 2020 and the Academy of Pediatrics, which both advocate the use of school recreational facilities before, during and after hours as well as on weekends, holidays and during the summer. The Institute of Medicine also recommends the adoption of legislative policies to address liability issues.

“In underserved communities in particular, evidence suggests that access to school recreational facilities during after-school hours improves the likelihood that community members will be physically active,” he said.

A survey of 12- to 18-year-old adolescents in three cities - Boston, Cincinnati and San Diego - found that these youth were significantly more likely to be physically active when they had access to fields and play areas after school.1

A study in two lower-income New Orleans communities found that the number of children who were physically...
active outdoors was 84 percent higher in a community that opened a schoolyard for public play than in a community that had closed schoolyards. Survey results also showed that children living in the community with the open schoolyard spent less time watching television, movies and playing video games on weekdays.2

Despite the growing evidence of the benefits of shared use, many schools cite concerns about costs, security, staffing and liability for not opening recreational facilities to the public. These perceived barriers are a major focus of Spengler’s research.

According to Natasha Frost, staff attorney at the Public Health Law Center, Spengler has been a part of an ever-growing movement to focus on how scientific results can be incorporated into the policy framework in a meaningful and timely way.

“Dr. Spengler’s research provided the foundation for the American Heart Association’s national effort to clarify state liability laws for community recreational use of school property during non-school hours,” Frost said.

In a RWJF-funded study, Spengler surveyed school administrators in lower income communities and communities of color and found that key barriers to sharing school recreational facilities and programs were liability concerns, insurance, cost of running activities and programs, staffing, safety concerns and maintenance costs and responsibilities.

“These barriers can be addressed at the local level through contracts - often termed ‘joint use agreements’ - and at the state level through legislation that encourages shared use, and where necessary reduces or eliminates liability for schools where use occurs outside of normal school hours,” he said. Spengler’s research on limited liability legislation applicable to schools has been published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine and has helped to inform advocacy efforts around state laws designed to promote shared use.

Public parks and community recreation centers also provide low or no-cost opportunities for members of the community to be physically active, and often have facilities such as athletic fields, ball courts, playgrounds and tracks that can help meet the exercise needs of the community.

“Although parks are facilities available for public use, the shared use of these facilities presents additional opportunities for schools and other organizations to carry out organized, active recreation and sports programs,” Spengler said. Joint use agreements are contracts which can be made between facilities, between schools and local groups, or between the local or state government and a facility. They provide a way to ensure mutual benefit to both parties, increasing the likelihood that they will be able to provide safe, convenient locations for recreation.

For example, In Chula Vista, California, Chula Vista High School and the American Youth Soccer League (AYSL) created an agreement to share the school’s soccer field. In return for use of the school soccer fields, the AYSL maintains the field and provides volunteers.

In Wilmington, North Carolina, the county and the school district purchased and, together, developed school facilities and a park. Both the community and the school use all facilities.

The benefits of shared use agreements extend well beyond personal health, as recreation and sport activities have been associated with positive social interactions and support among individuals and communities. “Sports and recreational activities often bring people together from different age groups, racial and ethnic groups, sexes and genders, and economic groups to strengthen the social fabric of a community,” he said.

Spengler hopes that his research and policy guidance on the topic of shared use will encourage schools and recreational facilities to provide safe, local resources for children and families to engage in active lifestyles and to foster healthier communities as a whole.

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