

TALKING ABOUT: JOINT USE

Joint use is a way to increase opportunities for children and adults to be more physically active. The term refers to two or more entities — usually a school and a city or private organization — sharing indoor and outdoor spaces like gymnasiums, athletic fields and playgrounds. The concept is simple: share resources to keep costs down and communities healthy.

Joint use agreements come in many forms:

- A principal unlocks the school gate after hours so neighbors can shoot hoops or play ball on evenings and weekends.
- A school and community swim team share a pool.
- A school opens its soccer field to a local league for weekend games.
- A YMCA opens its gym to the local PE teacher so students have a place to exercise.

Why is joint use needed?

The research is clear: the more active children are, the healthier they will be now and when they grow up. Yet certain places make physical activity harder instead of easier. Experts know that where we live, work and play — the physical environment itself — determines, to a large degree, whether we will be healthy.

Too often, kids find the gate to their school's blacktop or basketball court locked after school hours, locking them out of opportunities to be active. Closing off recreational facilities after school leaves many children and families struggling to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. They may live in an area without a safe park nearby or be unable to afford exercise equipment or a gym membership.

Joint use agreements can help address these problems. Joint use makes physical activity easier by providing kids and adults alike with safe, conveniently located and inviting places to exercise and play. Besides making sense from a health perspective, joint use agreements make sense financially because they build upon assets a community already has. Sharing existing space is cheaper and more efficient than duplicating the same facilities in other parts of the community.

Where is joint use happening?

Joint use is happening in cities throughout California and across the nation. In fact, the concept of joint use is not new. Schools have shared their land and facilities for community use for over 200 years. Most states, including California, have policies to encourage or require schools to make facilities open to the public. In California, a 2008 survey conducted by the Center for Cities and Schools revealed that close to 60 percent of responding school

districts already have some type of joint use partnership, but thousands still do not.

How does it work?

Joint use agreements facilitate a partnership between entities, often school districts and local government agencies (e.g. parks and recreation or nonprofit organizations), to open up spaces such as playgrounds, athletic fields, pools, and gymnasiums to the community outside of school hours, or to open up community facilities to schools at a reduced cost or for free.

Joint use partnerships can be formal (based on a legal document) or informal (based on a handshake), but formal agreements offer increased protections for both the facility and the community group using the facility. Since school staffing can change over time, personal relationships are not the most secure way to guarantee access to facilities into the future. A formal agreement can also help prevent problems related to maintenance, operations, liability, ownership or cost from arising.

What makes joint use partnerships successful?

To be successful, partnerships should have:

- Clearly articulated goals
- Detailed planning that includes sources of funding and division of responsibilities
- A recognition of the individual benefits to each partner
- A long-term commitment from everyone involved
- Ongoing communication among partners and with the community
- A process for resolving any conflicts that may arise
- Support from policy makers and community members

For more information and to connect with others working on joint use, go to www.jointuse.org.

Berkeley Media Studies Group's "Talking About" series provides advocates with straightforward language on how our environment shapes our health, and what we can do to improve both. Supported in part by a grant from The California Endowment. For more information, visit www.bmsg.org.