



YOUTH SPORTS MUST BE REBUILT

A Letter to the Editor;

Over the past generation, youth sports in America has become increasingly privatized and exclusionary. Families with resources often move children into club programs costing hundreds or even thousands of dollars a year, chasing college athletic scholarships and preferential admission to universities. According to research from the Aspen Institute and Utah State University in 2022, youth from low-income homes quit sports because of the financial costs at six times the rate of those from high-income homes. This statistic is particularly troubling as research shows physically active children are less likely to be obese, report lower levels of depression, perform better academically, have reduced health risks as adults and become active parents with their own children.

Investment in youth sports that serves all children is an upstream solution with long-term benefits. What is currently lacking is equitable youth sports programming that serves children at scale. It's community-based play made available at low-cost and close to home. It's Little League Baseball, house basketball leagues at the rec center and learn-to-swim classes at the local pool. Quality youth sports opportunities in these spaces have been challenged for a long time. The budgets of park and recreation departments plummeted 21 percent from 2009 to 2013, according to a 2018 study by Penn State University commissioned by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). By 2013, spending on parks and recreation comprised just 1.9 percent of total local government expenditures. According to NRPA, 90 percent of park and recreation professionals reported the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted their agencies' youth sports programming as they faced budget cuts and layoffs, as well as liability and policies that private sports providers may not. Lawmakers need to know our society is at risk of harming youth sports in a major, "irreversible" manner. Regular participation in team sports among kids ages 6 to 12 fell from 45 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2014, according to the Sports & Industry Fitness Association. By 2019, only 23 percent of kids growing up in poverty played sports versus 44 percent from homes of \$100,000 or more.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the average child living in a household making \$100,000 or more spends two hours more on sports each week than a child in a home under \$50,000, according to research by the Aspen Institute and Utah State University in 2022. We need to fortify the capacity of community-based providers to deliver youth sports programming. We need more responses like that of Montgomery County, Md., which approved a \$1.55 million investment to aid recreation departments in developing sports leagues, provide grants to organizations in need and offset facility rental costs for programs that are free or low-cost for lower-income families (Adhikusuma, 2020). Programs must have a majority of participants eligible for free or reduced meals (FARMS), target a special needs population, or deliver service in or near a Title I or high FARMS participation county school. Every other state legislation should be doing this, so America as a whole, can improve the state of youth sports.

While we recognize municipalities face major financial challenges, adequate funding of parks and recreation has never been more vital. Investing now in youth activities means investing in a healthy community. Large majorities of Republicans and Democrats support public investment in recreation. Given our nation's growing divisions, sport programs and facilities that bring people and communities together can play an important role in helping us heal. They can help address matters of racial equity and other forms of equity. When children play together, they get to know each other, creating ideas of what psychologists call their "in-group," or trusted members, a key feature in the development of a child's life. Investing in local sports and recreation is one way we rebuild America. One park, and one program, at a time. Go to your city halls and demand lawmakers to invest in your child's sports programs. These children deserve the best experience whenever they go to the park, step on a basketball court, or run on a field. Invest in the children's fun and invest in their future.

Sincerely,

Luis Monell, Founder of 360 Academic Sports Academy