

SHARED USE PLAYBOOK



ChangeLab Solutions

BENEFITS OF SHARED USE



People everywhere want access to safe and affordable recreational spaces. With shared use, public and private property owners can open underutilized facilities for community use. Though often used as a strategy to increase opportunities for physical activity, shared use has many wide-ranging benefits.



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ABOUT THE PLAYBOOK

The environments in which we live, learn, work, play, and worship have a greater impact on health outcomes than any other factor.

But for too many people, healthy environments – including safe spaces for play and recreation – remain out of reach. Communities around the country are looking for innovative policy solutions to help create healthy, equitable conditions for their residents. Shared use is one of those solutions.

The *Shared Use Playbook* provides an overview of how the strategy of shared use can support safe and healthy communities, often by increasing opportunities for play and recreation. It outlines the many benefits of shared use, as well as the settings in which it can occur, partners that can be engaged, and tools for implementation. This playbook also highlights real-world examples and includes links to resources that provide more detail on each element of a successful shared use arrangement.

Contact ChangeLab Solutions for more information on any of the shared use strategies discussed in this playbook.



WHAT IS SHARED USE?

Shared use, also called joint use or community use, occurs when government entities – or sometimes private organizations – agree to open or broaden access to their facilities for community use.¹

One common example is a school playground open for public use after school hours; however, shared use arrangements can create new users for many types of spaces, such as parks, garden plots, walking trails, pools, kitchens, meeting and performance spaces, and pavilions.

Successful shared use arrangements flourish in a diverse range of settings, involve a variety of partners, and achieve unique goals. Shared use is a widely promoted strategy for creating opportunities for physical activity, particularly in places where park space is scarce.²⁻⁵ Though shared use is not a substitute for adequate funding for public infrastructure and facilities, it can be an important component of larger initiatives to promote healthy living and advance health equity. When public health advocates thoughtfully partner with community members to develop shared use initiatives that meet community needs, this strategy can have broad and lasting benefits.

KEY RESOURCES

- ChangeLab Solutions' website has a variety of helpful [resources on shared use](#), including fact sheets, toolkits, and model agreements and policies. All resources listed in this playbook are by ChangeLab Solutions unless otherwise noted.
- [Resources from the National Shared Use Task Force \(Safe Routes to School National Partnership\)](#)



WHY SHARED USE?

By increasing the availability of spaces for health-promoting activities, shared use can help create and support healthy communities.

Physical Activity

Public health advocates of shared use often focus on increasing opportunities for physical activity. Physical activity is critical in the prevention and control of chronic disease.⁶ People are more physically active when they have access to safe, affordable, high-quality space for play, exercise, and recreation.⁷ However, across the country, many communities lack the resources residents need to be active. Six out of every ten Americans do not live within a half-mile of a park, and nearly half the nation's youth live in neighborhoods without parks, recreation centers, or sidewalks.⁸

Because recreational space is not equitably distributed, not everyone has the same opportunities to be active. Low-income communities and communities of color consistently have the fewest accessible, safe, and well-maintained recreational facilities. And perhaps not surprisingly, they're also less likely to have sufficient resources to create new recreational spaces.⁹⁻¹² By increasing recreational opportunities in the areas with the fewest resources, shared use can help address this inequity and associated health disparities.

60% OF AMERICANS
live further than half
mile from a park



Healthy Eating and More

Shared use can also support healthy eating and broader efforts to create and sustain healthy communities.

The problems of food access, obesity, hunger, and poor nutrition affect many communities. People who live in rural areas, people with low incomes, and people of color are more likely to have trouble accessing healthy foods.¹³⁻¹⁷ Together, the limited availability and high price of healthy food, limited resources and competing needs, and lack of access to infrastructure for cooking and storing food affect people's access to an adequate supply of nutritious food.^{14,18}

Community gardens, farmers markets, mobile grocery and meals programs, and food pantries are all appropriate for shared use sites. These activities can improve food security for under-resourced populations by increasing the affordability, availability, and usability of healthy food. Similarly, shared use of kitchen facilities and cafeterias can provide a setting for healthy cooking programs and small business incubation. Shared use efforts in support of healthy eating can promote civic participation, food literacy, job skills, and urban greening.

Creative shared use arrangements can also open up and activate spaces for many other activities that support community health, vitality, and cohesion, including health care, social services, health education and promotion programs, job training, and more. For example, in Brazos County, Texas, the local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program has sited clinics at local churches that had available space.

Efficient Use of Resources

Shared use maximizes access to existing spaces and facilities, making it an efficient and economical use of resources. Expanding public use of existing facilities is usually less expensive than building new facilities. And when planning for construction of new facilities, it is more efficient to plan for multiple uses and purposes. In many communities, inadequate funding prevents or delays the development and maintenance of public facilities, including parks and recreational spaces. Shared use is not a comprehensive solution to address the significant disparities in access to recreational space. But shared use can be a practical, cost-efficient element of a larger strategy to increase recreational access and reduce health inequities.

KEY RESOURCES

- [Benefits of Shared Use infographic](#)
- [Fair Play: Advancing Health Equity through Shared Use](#)
- [Dig, Eat, and Be Healthy: A Guide to Growing Food on Public Property](#)
- [Neighborhoods and Districts Benefit from Expanded Access to School Kitchens \(The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation\)](#)

WHERE CAN SHARED USE HAPPEN?

Shared use can happen on any public or private property suitable for community recreational use.

Shared Use of Public Property

Public property is a natural place to establish shared use. More than one-third of the land in the United States – nearly 900 million acres – is owned by federal, state, or local government.¹⁹ Public land may be an untapped resource for communities looking for more opportunities for recreation and physical activity.

Public School District Property

Public schools are a common starting point for shared use in a community. They are taxpayer funded and well distributed in most communities, and they often fulfill multiple purposes – as polling places, adult education sites, community meeting sites, and even emergency shelters – that make them true community anchors. Public schools may have recreational facilities like playgrounds, tracks, sports fields and



courts, swimming pools, locker rooms, and multi-use rooms, as well as gardens and kitchens. These facilities are often underused after school hours and on weekends and holidays.

Shared use of public school facilities doesn't just benefit residents and communities; it also has the potential to benefit school districts. Shared use can create deeper connections between schools and the community, widening the circle of "ownership" beyond just those with direct links to schools. Shared use also has the potential to broaden public support for funding to improve existing school facilities or build new ones.

Other Public Property

Public property is a common asset shared by all. Availability of public property is different in every community. Local government entities and agencies in particular are potential allies in expanding recreational access to public property. Promising yet often-overlooked owners of public land that may be appropriate for community recreation include universities and community colleges, utility districts, cooperative extension offices, senior centers and community centers, and the military.

Meeting Community Needs with Shared Use

Successful shared use arrangements often include many stakeholders: property owners, partners, and community users. Effective shared use arrangements are grounded in strong working relationships. Before implementing shared use, the parties involved must evaluate community wants, needs, and priorities. Meaningful community engagement ensures that shared use efforts identify and focus on locations, facilities, and programming that are most important to residents. A task force or working group can help cultivate and manage these important relationships and activities. By working together to create partnerships, everyone involved can help shared use successfully meet community needs.

Dancing Toward Health in Salt Lake County, UT

Nearly a quarter of the 60,000 Tongan Americans in the United States live in Salt Lake County, Utah. A survey by the locally based [National Tongan-American Society \(NTAS\)](#) found low rates of physical activity among the county's Tongan Americans, caused by 2 key culprits. First, most did not have access to physical activity resources like gym memberships, exercise equipment, or even sidewalks. Second, they preferred to exercise with other people, but there were few affordable options for group activity. NTAS created a shared use initiative to address these needs. The organization worked with school principals, faith leaders, and local decisionmakers to open 12 schools and congregations across the county for open use and free Zumba® and hula classes. The Zumba® classes, reaching up to 140 people each, have been particularly popular, attracting large and diverse groups.

Shared Use of Private Property

While shared use often happens on public property, it is important to also consider private property. Many communities require that new private housing and workplace developments include public spaces. And more and more community-based and faith-based organizations are implementing shared use. Many of these institutions have underused property and recreational facilities they can share with the public.

Faith institutions often have a variety of recreational facilities – gymnasiums, playgrounds, multi-use rooms, walking trails, gardens, and even parking lots – where people can be active. Faith institutions often have other types of facilities, such as kitchens and meeting rooms, that can be opened for community use. Across the country, congregations are embracing shared use as a way to create more opportunities for play and exercise and to improve the health of both their own members and the wider community. In many cases, these shared use efforts connect to broader congregational efforts to connect with and support their neighbors.

Hospitals are also increasingly opening their facilities for community use. Many hospitals are working to support active living by building playgrounds, exercise facilities, and walking trails on hospital and office grounds. These hospitals often allow community access to these facilities, supporting both patient and community health.

Finally, housing, workplace, and retail developments often have or are required by zoning to provide common areas such as central greens, courtyards, plazas, rooftop gardens, exercise facilities, and playgrounds. These existing public spaces are excellent candidates for shared use partnerships. For example, Asian Services in Action, a local health and social services organization in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, has partnered with a shopping center to offer tai chi classes for seniors in the plaza area.



EXAMPLES

Partnering with the Federal Government

ELLIOTT COUNTY, KY

Rural Elliott County, Kentucky, had an unmet need for recreational facilities and a mountaintop watershed with pristine streams in need of protection. To meet these needs, the county government partnered with the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to develop the Laurel Gorge Cultural Center and Hiking Trail on federal land. The county manages the facility under a 25-year lease with the USACE. Over the years and as funding has allowed, 3 miles of trails have been developed, including a portion that is wheelchair-accessible. The trails are lined with interpretive signs and stations and are regularly used by local schools and families for education and recreation.



Fruits, Vegetables, and Community Development

BIRMINGHAM, AL

The South Eastlake neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama, historically has had few places to buy healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables. For over a decade, Promoting Empowerment and Enrichment Resources (P.E.E.R., Inc.) has worked to bring fresh food and other resources for healthy living to the South Eastlake neighborhood. Much of P.E.E.R., Inc.'s work happens out of the Eastlake United Methodist Church, whose pastor is the founder and executive director. The church hosts a popular weekly seasonal farmers market. It also runs a mobile farmers market and senior market basket delivery program and operates a community kitchen at the church that incubates small food businesses and trains residents in commercial food preparation.



Congregations Opening Up for Community Recreation

CABARRUS COUNTY, NC

The Cabarrus Health Alliance's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) Project focuses on reducing health disparities in Cabarrus County, North Carolina. A key component of the project is working with congregations to adopt open use policies that allow free community access to their recreational facilities. The congregations actively promote their physical activity classes, facilities, and equipment to the public. For example, First Missionary Baptist Church provides bilingual handouts showing walking routes on their grounds. Another church has an improved track, and others have recreation rooms equipped with televisions and exercise videos. The number of participating congregations continues to grow, helping to increase access to recreational space throughout the county.



If You Mow It, They Will Come: The Trails

WINCHESTER, KY

It is not at all uncommon for land to sit unused for years as property owners figure out development plans. In Clark County, Kentucky, 3 fields of bluegrass have been transformed by property owners in this very situation. The Traveling Trail is a simple public walking path on property owned by the local hospital. Through a shared use agreement with county government, the hospital has opened this property to public use and the county has taken on maintenance and liability. Because the hospital originally planned to build a new facility on the site, trail construction was kept very simple: a path mowed in the grass. Over time, benches and shaded areas were added. The hospital eventually decided not to build on the site, but the simple trail remains and is a key recreational resource for county residents of all ages. The success and popularity of the Traveling Trail inspired a local church, Calvary Christian Church, to create a similar trail on its own undeveloped property. The simple mowed trail, called *The Path*, provides area residents with another safe and comfortable place not only for walking but also for gardening and sports league practices. The Clark County Cooperative Extension office joined in the shared use fun, adding a mowed trail called the *Garden Path* to its property. These relatively simple walking trails provide much-needed recreation space for thousands of residents.



KEY RESOURCES

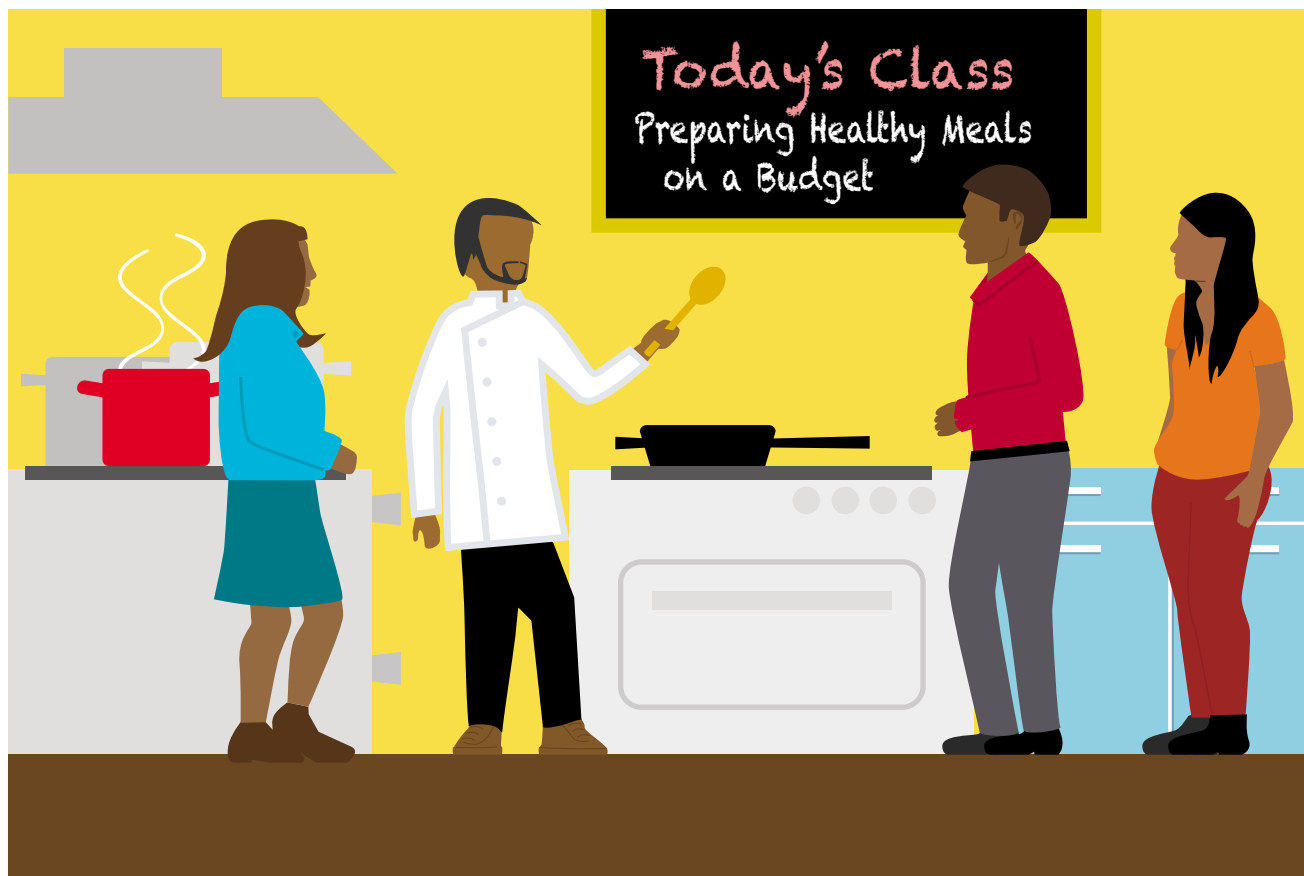
- [This Land Is Our Land: A Primer on Public Land Ownership and Opportunities for Recreational Access](#)
- [Congregation to Community: Shared Use by North Carolina Faith-Based Organizations](#)
- [Creating Healthier Communities Through Shared Use of Hospitals \(Safe Routes to School National Partnership\)](#)

This resource was designed for faith-based institutions and shared use advocates in North Carolina, but it can be adapted for use across the country.

THE HOW OF SHARED USE: MAKING IT OFFICIAL WITH POLICIES & AGREEMENTS

Successful shared use arrangements take many forms, and property owners and shared use partners use a number of written tools to formalize these arrangements.

Formal shared use policies and agreements are not necessarily legally required but can help property owners, partners, and community users clarify their commitments. Written policies and agreements can also help the parties involved come to a shared understanding of their respective rights, roles, and responsibilities; formalize that shared understanding; and help ensure continued access over time.



Shared Use Tools

The most commonly used tools to formalize shared use are facilities use policies, open use policies, and shared use agreements.

Facilities Use Policies and Agreements

A facilities use policy formalizes community access to facilities for educational, recreational, civic, social, or cultural activities. Almost all school districts, as well as many other property owners, have a facilities use policy. Under these policies, users are often required to fill out and sign a standard agreement (sometimes called a permit or license), pay a fee, and provide proof of insurance. These policies and agreements are often used by groups that want to access facilities to host specific programs and activities, such as basketball, soccer, or softball league games; tennis or swimming lessons; and classes in Zumba®, yoga, martial arts, or dance.



Open Use Policies

An open use policy spells out community access to recreational facilities for open play and recreation. Unlike other mechanisms of formalizing shared use, an open use policy allows a property owner to act alone, instead of in partnership with another entity. Open use policies can be adopted by school districts and other public entities, as well as by private property owners. These policies are most appropriate when the community wants to use a shared use site for casual, informal activities, such as using playgrounds, playing pickup basketball, or walking a track or path.



What About Informal Shared Use Agreements?

In many communities, the public has permission to use recreational facilities, but there is no written agreement or policy in place. Sometimes long-standing tradition grants implicit permission for community use. In other situations, there is explicit permission but no official written policy or agreement. These types of informal arrangements are often called *handshake agreements*. In many situations, formalizing the arrangement in writing will benefit both the property owner and the public. However, when informal arrangements provide successful and sufficient access, formal shared use policies and agreements may not be necessary.²⁰ The important thing to remember is to tailor shared use arrangements to fit the situation; there is no one-size-fits all arrangement.

Shared Use Agreements

A shared use agreement is a written contract between 2 or more partners that provides the terms and conditions for shared use of property. Shared use agreements have many different names: *joint use agreements*, *memoranda of understanding*, and *contracts*, among others. What the agreement is called is not as important as the intent of the parties involved and the content of the document. Shared use agreements allow partners to share responsibility for costs, security, maintenance, repairs, insurance, and potential liability. Shared use agreements are often used in partnerships between school districts and city or county governments. Agreements can allow shared use of facilities both for open play and recreation and for hosted programs and activities.



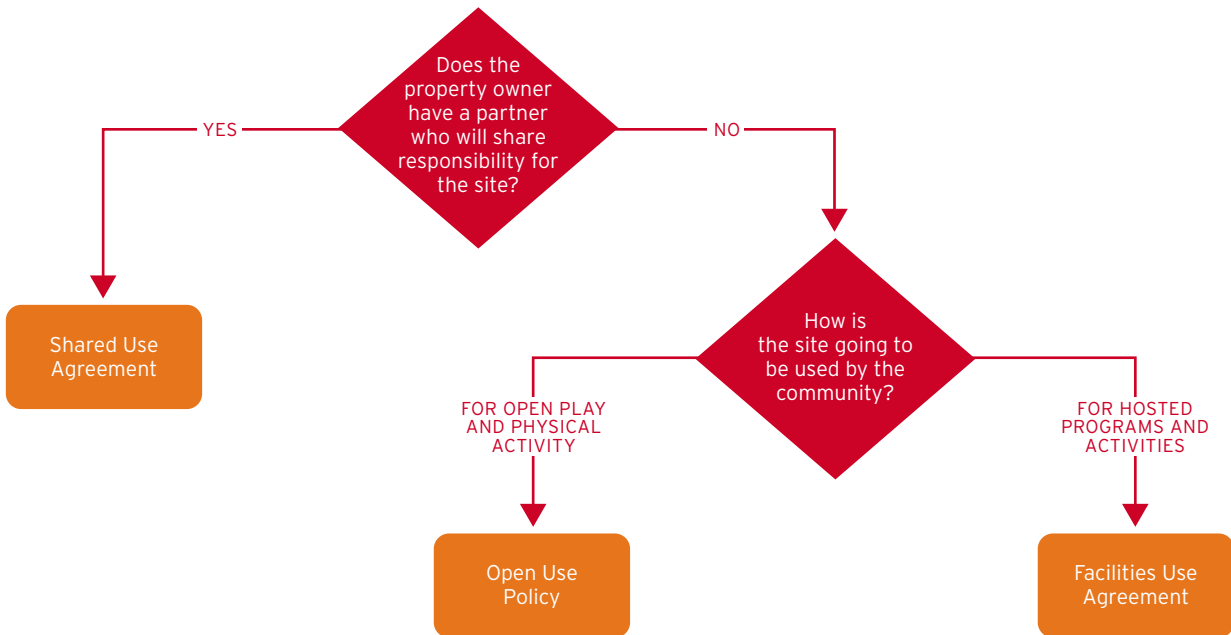
These tools are not mutually exclusive; property owners can use them individually or together to allow shared use of facilities. For example, a school district may rent its fields to a softball league and its kitchens to a local catering company under its community use of facilities policy; share access to and responsibility for its tennis courts with the city's parks and recreation department under a shared use agreement; and allow free community access to elementary school playgrounds and basketball courts under an open use policy. The key is to come up with creative ways to satisfy unmet recreational needs through efficient use of existing resources.

Comparing Tools for Formalizing Shared Use

	Facilities Use Policies & Agreements	Open Use Policies	Shared Use Agreements
Description	A written policy adopted by a property owner (without a partner) that allows community access to its facilities for educational, recreational, civic, social, or cultural activities	A written policy adopted by a property owner (without a partner) that allows community access to its facilities for open play and recreation	A written contract between a property owner and partner(s) that sets forth the terms and conditions for shared use of the property
Most Appropriate Types of Use	Hosted programs and activities, such as sports leagues, lessons, or classes	Open play and recreation, such as using playgrounds, playing pickup basketball, or walking or running on a track or path	Hosted programs and activities as well as open play and recreation
Approaches to Cost, Liability, Insurance, and Maintenance	Program organizers are often required to fill out and sign a standard agreement, pay a fee, and provide proof of insurance. Property owner is responsible for site management.	Responsibility for liability, insurance, maintenance, and costs stays with the property owner.	Typically transfers some responsibility for costs, liability, insurance, or maintenance from property owner to shared use agreement partner(s) for the duration of the contract

DECIDING HOW TO MAKE SHARED USE OFFICIAL

A common stumbling point for shared use advocates is figuring out the right tool to use to make shared use official. This flowchart can help determine the right shared use tool for your community.



Remember that shared use agreements, open use policies, and facilities use agreements are not mutually exclusive; property owners can use them individually or together to allow shared use of different facilities.

Other Ways to Support Shared Use

Shared use agreements, open use policies, and community use of facilities policies are the 3 most commonly used tools for formalizing shared use. However, other types of policies can demonstrate support for shared use. School districts can support and promote shared use by addressing shared use in local school wellness policies. Cities, counties, and other government entities can support and promote shared use by adopting shared use resolutions and including shared use in community planning documents. State government can support shared use by providing funding and technical assistance for state- and school district-level programs.

The Arkansas Department of Education provides grants to school districts to form shared use partnerships with local government entities, community-based organizations, and faith institutions. This funding, which comes from tobacco excise tax appropriations, has helped to increase school and community access to recreational spaces throughout the state.

The Mississippi Delta Health Collaborative provides mini-grants and technical assistance to local mayoral health councils committed to creating healthier environments throughout the 18-county Delta region. Many of the nearly 50 mayoral health councils operating have implemented shared use agreements with schools, churches, and community organizations to provide much-needed recreational space.

EXAMPLES

A Place to Play: A Shared Use Agreement

LEMON GROVE, CA

In 2012, after a budget shortfall forced the City of Lemon Grove, California, to close its recreation department, a community coalition increased public access to school grounds by modifying an existing agreement between the city and the local school district. They worked with the city manager and the superintendent of schools to develop a new shared use agreement that allows public use of a local middle school's facilities for informal play and exercise on Saturdays from dawn to dusk. School district staff open the gates and pick up trash in the morning, and city public works staff clean up and close the gates in the evening.



Open Use Policy Pioneers

HAMILTON COUNTY, TN

Many residents of Hamilton County, Tennessee, live closer to a public school than a park. But until recently, most of the county's schools were fenced off, with "No Trespassing" signs at the gates. In 2014, with input from the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Health Department, the school board passed an open use policy that allows community access to the district's elementary schools on weekends and holidays. The Health Department partnered with a local foundation to take down the "No Trespassing" signs and put up signs that promote open use. The partners are also working to add amenities like community gardens, picnic pavilions, and basketball courts to the school grounds.



State School Boards Associations Support Open Use Policies

NORTH CAROLINA & SOUTH CAROLINA

In many states, school districts rely on their state school board associations for policy guidance in the form of model school district policies and administrative regulations. Including an open use policy in a school board association's suite of model policies can help alleviate school district concerns and increase likelihood of adoption. The school boards associations in North Carolina²¹ and South Carolina²² have done just this. State and local health departments, along with community partners, have been able to effectively promote open use policies by pointing to the support of their state school boards associations.



KEY RESOURCES

- [Playing Smart: Maximizing the Potential of School and Community Property Through Joint Use Agreements](#)
- [Checklist for Developing a Joint Use Agreement](#)
- [Model Joint Use Agreements](#)
- [Shared Use Agreements and Tribal Nations](#)
- [Model Open Use Policy for School Districts](#)
- [Incorporating Shared Use into Local School Wellness Policies](#)

COMMON SHARED USE CONCERNS

Shared use arrangements can raise concerns for property owners, partners, and community users.

Liability and Insurance

Property owners interested in opening up their facilities for community use are often concerned about potential liability if someone gets hurt. All 50 states have their own laws governing liability. Typically, state law requires property owners to take reasonable precautions to protect users who are legally on their property. Some states' laws may also provide legal protections to public entities and to public and private property owners who allow public recreational use of their property. No matter what, a property owner who blatantly disregards safety or intentionally hurts users of their property will be liable for any injuries that occur.



Property owners can protect themselves with insurance, as well as prudent risk management, such as making regular inspections and repairs and warning users of any hazards. Property owners interested in allowing public access to their recreational facilities are encouraged to consult with a local attorney and with their insurer.

It is important to remember that many property owners that allow shared use – including school districts, community-based organizations, and congregations – already must and do keep their property and facilities safe for public users. In most states, state law does not obligate these property owners to make their property any safer for community users.

Funding and Resources

Because shared use makes use of existing facilities, it is typically a low-cost and efficient strategy. However, shared use often leads to increased use of facilities, which can create new costs. Sources of additional funding for shared use are different in every locality and for each type of property owner. Possible funding sources include grants from federal, state, and local government; grants from foundations; volunteer and member support; and in-kind donations. When appropriate, facilities use policies and shared use agreements can allow partners to share the costs of opening up recreational facilities for community use. It is important to acknowledge that shared use is not a substitute for adequate funding to develop and maintain infrastructure and facilities. Shared use will be most successful when combined with efforts to address inequities in public funding.

Facilities Management

Shared use requires addressing facilities management issues, such as unlocking and locking, scheduling use of the facilities, and providing for any additional janitorial or maintenance work. Successful shared use arrangements must meet the needs of both property owners and community users. Shared use agreements can allow partners to share facilities management responsibilities. In addition, shared use task forces, working groups, or committees can help to identify solutions.

Safety and Crime

Opening up space for public use can raise concerns about safety and crime, including vandalism. School districts and other property owners across the country that allow shared use typically do not report increased crime and vandalism. In fact, their experiences and research show that well-used public spaces can actually reduce crime.²³⁻²⁵ Hosting programs and events at shared use sites and posting signage and other marketing materials can help to increase use of the space.

In some cases, making environmental changes so that shared use sites have adequate lighting and sightlines, allowing users to see and be seen, can have a significant positive impact.²⁶

Access and Transportation

Creating meaningful and equitable access to recreational space is about more than simply unlocking gates. Aside from merely opening the space – an important first step – shared use spaces must also be safely accessible by walking, biking, and public transit. Accessibility options should be responsive to resident needs in both urban and rural settings. Shared use efforts should prioritize locations that meet the needs of members of the community who have the least access to recreational facilities.

KEY RESOURCES

- [Opening School Property After Hours: A Primer on Liability](#)
- [Covering Your Bases: Basic Tips About Insurance for Nonprofit Organizations](#)
- [Safe Routes to Parks: Improving Access to Parks through Walkability](#) (National Recreation and Park Association)
- [Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living](#) (Prevention Institute)



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