

ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS CHANGE LANGUAGE IN YOUTH SPORT

WHITE PAPER #1



Defining the Problems and Reinforcing Systems of Play (in)Equity in US Youth Sport Landscape

Introducing Systems Change in Youth Sport

Across the U.S., the youth sport landscape is shaped by overlapping systems that together determine who has access to play, under what conditions, and with what long-term outcomes. From the rise of the pay-to-play model to the decline of school-based programs and safe community spaces, youth sport today is a reflection of the systems that uphold it. To meaningfully challenge the inequities across youth sport, we must start by addressing the root causes: the policies, power dynamics, cultural norms, and institutional structures that uphold and reinforce unequal access and opportunity. A systems approach enables us to go deeper – beyond surface-level fixes – to create long-term, sustainable shifts in how youth sport functions and who it serves. For the purpose of our work, we are employing the following definition:

“ Systems change is an approach of tackling the root causes of a problem by identifying and creating shifts in the systems that are responsible for the problem. The goal is for the new state of the system to produce better outcomes on an ongoing basis. Ideally, these better outcomes are achieved in a more efficient way than by continuously treating the symptoms of the problem. (Ashoka.org) ”

But while the term "systems change" is often used, it's not always clearly understood – or thoughtfully adapted to the specific context in which it's being applied. That's why this work begins with a shared foundation to build the clarity, confidence, and capacity to map and shift the systems we operate in – locally, regionally, and nationally – and understand how our unique positions can become points of leverage for collective change.

The Web of Problems, Systems, and Stakeholders Across the US Youth Sport Landscape

Core Problems facing US Youth Sport

The start of any systems change journey is about clearly defining the problem – not the surface-level symptoms, but the deeper issues that give rise to them. In the context of U.S. youth sport, applying a systems change lens is often complicated by the urgency of notable symptoms – such as increased rates of youth athlete burnout, dropout rates, mental health challenges, and disparities in access. These challenges are further compounded by their intersection

with broader indicators of youth development, including physical health outcomes (e.g., obesity) and educational engagement (e.g., school attendance). But when we step back, we see that these patterns are symptoms of a system shaped by a set of core, reinforcing problems. In this phase, the Action Group named the core problems shaping the outcomes we care about, beginning with a reflection on what each member is working to address, and sharpening that into a clearer picture of the shared problems we're trying to solve.

One of the clearest is **inequitable access to sport and play**. Across the country, young people's ability to participate is determined not by their interest or potential, but by structural factors like race, income, gender, zip code, and ability. In many under-resourced communities, youth face little to no access to safe, high-quality, developmentally appropriate opportunities to move, play, and connect. This is compounded by shifts in public education systems that have deprioritized physical activity – removing one of the last near-universal entry points for youth sport participation.

Another problem shaping the system is the **increasing commercialization of youth sport**. What was once seen as a community asset or public good is now treated as a commodity. Pay-to-play models have become the norm, and families with fewer resources are effectively excluded from the most consistent or competitive options. As private club systems grow, community-based programs—those closest to youth with the fewest opportunities – are shrinking or disappearing altogether. In this model, sport becomes something to be purchased rather than something to which all young people are entitled.

A third problem lies in the **fragmentation of the landscape itself**. While many individuals and organizations are deeply committed to equity in youth sport, they are often working in silos without the shared language, infrastructure, or long-term support to coordinate their efforts. Leaders of Sport-Based Youth Development (SBYD) programs frequently operate without access to stable funding, shared data, or collaborative platforms that could amplify their impact. Public systems and private organizations exist side by side, but rarely in sync – leading to duplication, competition, and missed opportunities to drive change at scale.

Naming these core problems is the first step toward understanding both *where* and *how* to intervene. From delivering direct services that meet immediate needs in youth development and access to play, to driving systems change that addresses root causes—each level of intervention requires a different level of complexity, strategy, and constellation of stakeholders.

Defining Systems of Youth Sport

The problems facing youth sport and defined by the Action Group are not isolated or incidental. They are the design of a web of interconnected systems, shaping and reinforcing the functions, stakeholders' behaviors and attitudes, and relationships within the broader youth sport landscape. In systems change, these systems are the *roots* – the grounded structures that uphold the *trunk* of the problem and give rise to the patterns and symptoms we see everyday. Without understanding these roots, we cannot meaningfully shift the problems or prevent them from resurfacing in new forms.

Central to the Action Group's systems change journey is making visible the connection between these systems and the problems they uphold. In the context of U.S. youth sport, these include:

- **Political systems**, such as local government decisions that affect access to play through urban planning, transportation, and public funding.
- **Education systems**, which influence how, when, and for whom sport is offered in schools.
- **Healthcare systems**, which regulate safety standards, physical health requirements, and access to care for young athletes.

- **Economic systems**, particularly the youth sport economy that often prioritizes pay-to-play models over equitable access.
- **Cultural and social systems**, including the broader values, norms, and identities that shape how sport is perceived and who is encouraged to participate – *and why*.
- **Sport delivery systems**, such as clubs, leagues, and community-based organizations—ranging from well-funded private programs to grassroots, community efforts.

It would be an oversimplification to pinpoint one system over another as solely responsible for the current challenges in youth sport. We might ask: Is the economic system—through funding priorities and financial incentives—driving exclusion and limiting access? Does the lack of national regulation create a vacuum where private interests and informal norms set the rules and outcomes? Or is it a cultural system that prioritizes competition and performance over joy, inclusion, and well-being? In reality, the tensions and conflicts between these systems interact to reinforce and sustain these problems.

Beyond simply identifying and defining the systems shaping the landscape, breaking them down into five core components (listed below) helps deepen our understanding of how they function together and builds shared language – laying the groundwork for a collective narrative for change.

- **Roles** – who is involved and who holds influence
- **Relationships** – how those actors interact, align, or remain siloed
- **Rules** – both formal policies and informal norms that govern behavior
- **Resources** – how money, space, time, and information are distributed
- **Results** – the outcomes being produced, and for whom

The Action Group articulated four prominent systems – education, politics, economics, and culture – that directly shape the problems at hand. This systems mapping uncovers patterns that cut across different sectors, and begin to prioritize opportunities for more coordinated, equity-driven change.

Education Systems and Youth Sport

The education system remains one of the most visible and powerful access points for sport, particularly for youth in under-resourced communities. Teachers, athletic directors, and school administrators not only provide structure and mentorship, but also act as gatekeepers to spaces, programs, and experiences that support young people's physical, emotional, and social development. However, access within this system is shaped by a complex web of district-level priorities, resource disparities, and administrative policies—including those set by school boards and state or national athletic associations.

This system often sits in tension with both economic and political forces. On one hand, schools aim to foster broad participation and inclusive development; on the other, increasing economic pressures and competitive norms push them toward selectivity, performance, and revenue generation. In many districts, youth sport fees are used to offset budget deficits and have continued to rise, pricing out families and limiting who gets to participate. Political decisions—from educational mandates to school funding formulas—further entrench inequality, either expanding or restricting what schools can realistically offer. Meanwhile, school facilities, often the only accessible fields or gyms in a neighborhood, remain locked after hours, underutilized by the broader community

Case Study: King County

In response to challenges posed within the Education System, efforts like the King County Play Equity Coalition's push to mandate recess offer a compelling case for how to shift the culture of access within the education system. Recognizing recess as essential—not optional—for youth development, the coalition organized a multi-sector campaign involving educators, healthcare providers, and community organizations. By treating recess as a public health and equity issue, rather than an extracurricular activity, they successfully reframed the conversation at the policy level. This approach not only addresses administrative barriers but challenges the belief that academic

Political Systems and Youth Sport

Political systems—from local to federal—shape the boundaries of access and investment. Roles like government officials and activists influence infrastructure, school mandates, and public budget priorities. Resources such as favorable legislation, city budgets, and regulatory power can drive systemic change or reinforce existing inequities. Relationships with schools and teams can unlock opportunities or entrench fragmentation, depending on their strength and alignment.

Rules—such as federal mandates or city-level regulations—are intended to support equity, but when disconnected from local implementation or cultural readiness, they fail to deliver their promise. Political systems may reinforce educational efforts when mandates align with school priorities and funding, or they may contradict them when policies are unfunded or uncoordinated. Likewise, political action can be slowed or shaped by dominant cultural narratives, particularly when sport is viewed as non-essential or secondary to other issues.

Economic Systems and Youth Sport

The economic system surrounding youth sport is defined by resources like money, facilities, and foundation funding. Families with financial means can participate in club teams and travel leagues, while organizations with endowments or nonprofit status gain access to funding streams. Roles such as funders, nonprofit leaders, and wealthier families shape who gets to play, and under what conditions. Relationships are often transactional, and rules—like pay-to-play models or grant eligibility—favor those already resourced.

This system reinforces inequality within education: students from lower-income families are locked out of additional opportunities offered through club sport, and public schools with limited budgets cannot compete with better-resourced private or club teams. It also clashes with cultural values that prioritize community, belonging, and universal access. Even when youth development organizations aim for equity, they often must align with funding criteria that reward scale or performance, perpetuating the very exclusion they seek to disrupt.

Case Study: Philadelphia and Chicago

To address the sticky challenges in the Economic System, the Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative secured public funding to launch a new intramural program across local public schools—expanding access to sport for hundreds of students who had previously been excluded from organized play. Similarly, Sport for Good Chicago successfully mobilized public support, securing \$13 million from the Illinois state budget over the past three years to expand access to sport for more than 30,000 young people and provide youth development training to over 10,000 coaches. These cases demonstrate how strategic investment and coalition-building can reorient the economic system toward equity and inclusion.

Cultural Systems and Youth Sport

The **role of culture** sparked significant debate: is it a core system producing the problems we see, or is it the deeper mental model that reinforces how all systems function? Culture includes family beliefs, community norms, and long-standing narratives that shape who is encouraged to play, what sport is for, and how success is measured. Roles such as parents, coaches, and community leaders shape values and expectations. Relationships between mentors and youth can foster belonging—or reinforce pressure and exclusion. Informal rules like “sport is a privilege, not a right” or prioritizing winning over wellness are embedded across many touchpoints.

More so, professional teams and leagues represent a powerful cultural lever in this landscape. While their branding, visibility, and aspirational status have contributed to the professionalization of youth sport at younger ages, they also hold enormous potential to model and normalize a different set of values. By celebrating joy, inclusion, multi-sport participation, and lifelong engagement – not just early specialization and elite performance – pro teams can help shift what families and communities view as success.

Ultimately, the group recognized culture not as a standalone problem, but as the foundation of the mental models that cut across the education, economic, and political systems. Culture shapes how systems are interpreted and enacted—and can explain why certain policies stall, why economic models persist, or why educational opportunities remain uneven. In this way, culture doesn’t just intersect with the other systems – it **amplifies or constrains** their ability to shift. Its influence can explain the conflict between the role of a school and the rules of a funder, or the gap between legislation and lived experience.

So What? Making the Case for Systems Change

By mapping the systems shaping play, we uncovered where they intersect, where they fail, and where we must intervene for lasting, equitable impact. This foundation strengthens a national coalition of play equity actors to:

- Name the **systemic barriers** we’re working to address, and offer language that helps partners, funders, and communities see the bigger picture.
- Validate our **roles as systems actors**, no matter our entry point—whether as funders, advocates, educators, coalition builders, or grassroots leaders.
- Build a **framework for shared action**—one that connects local strategies to a broader national movement for play equity.

From this work, five core principles emerged to anchor our shared systems change narrative:

- **Play equity is a systems issue, not a programmatic one.** Inequities in youth sport are designed by overlapping systems – education, economics, politics, and culture – not just by gaps in programming. Expanding access requires us to shift the conditions that produce exclusion in the first place.
- **We must intervene at multiple levels, simultaneously.** Systems change is not about choosing between direct service or policy reform – it’s about building strategies that connect the two. The most powerful work happens when community needs, advocacy, and systems-level action are aligned.
- **Proximity to the problem must equal power to lead.** Decisions are too often made far from those most affected. True equity requires us to shift who holds influence – centering youth, families, and communities as co-creators of solutions, not just recipients.
- **Fragmentation weakens impact and equity.** Skilled actors are working across youth sports – but often in silos. Without shared infrastructure, language, and goals, efforts remain isolated. Alignment and coordination are essential for scale and sustainability.
- **Culture is the operating system.** Cultural norms – about who belongs in sport and what success means – shape all other systems. Systems change isn’t just structural; it’s also cultural. We must challenge the dominant narratives to open up new possibilities for youth.

We continue the journey by layering on the actions – and a shared invitation to act on this framework, together.

About the Systems Change Action Group White Paper Series

These white papers are produced by the Systems Action Group, a collaboration of funders, practitioners, and community leaders from the Coalitions for Sport Equity (CSEq) and the Sports Based Youth Development Funder Collaborative to provide a shared language for systems change in U.S. youth sport. This language defines the systemic shifts we seek and invites every reader to explore their role in advancing a youth sport landscape that benefits all young people.

About Ashoka Sport for Changemaking

Ashoka Sport for Changemaking brings systems change expertise, training, and the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs to drive positive change through and within sport. Backed by Ashoka's 40+ years of leadership in social entrepreneurship and innovation, and a community of more than 3,800 Fellows worldwide, we partner with sports changemakers, policymakers, and industry leaders to reimagine the role of sport in society.

About the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport

The Center for Healing and Justice through Sport (CHJS) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding access to healing-centered sport experiences for young people and athletes. Grounded in neuroscientific research demonstrating the physiological and psychological healing potential of sports, CHJS empowers coaches and teams through comprehensive training programs, expert consultation, and initiatives aimed at systemic change and collective action. Their mission focuses on harnessing the transformative power of sports to promote healing and foster positive development in young people, athletes, and communities.

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- Philadelphia Youth Sports Collective
- Oklahoma City Youth Coalition
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- Dodgers Foundation
- FundPlay Foundation
- NBA Player's Association
- Vancouver Whitecaps FC Social Impact
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