LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR KIDS IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

From Principle to Practice

Every child should have the opportunity to play sports with a trained coach as a role-model and teacher. The skills they learn on the field – persistence, teamwork, leadership and empathy – help kids to succeed in school as well as in their professional pursuits. And for kids between the ages of six to twelve, we know that providing opportunities to play sports with a capable and caring coach can set healthy behavior patterns that last a lifetime.

But today, only a third of children from low-income families play sports compared to two-thirds of those from wealthier communities. In neighborhoods with high poverty rates, these opportunities may simply not exist. Barriers include a lack of trained coaches and safe playgrounds, and the rising costs of athletics and intramural programs which have contributed to a “pay to play” culture that steeply disadvantages kids living in low-income communities. Meanwhile, wealthier families are spending more and more money and time to ensure that their children reap the benefits of playing organized sports.

So how do we change the game from pay to play to equitable play? How do we put into practice the principle of universal access so that 10.8 million low-income kids can get in the game?

Given the challenges faced by communities grappling with poverty, the solution is not simply replicating the conditions that support the availability of sports opportunities in wealthier communities. Rather, we must create a sports ecosystem that takes into account the stresses of poverty, and helps families overcome them.

The following hallmarks of thriving community sports ecosystems exist in most middle and upper income communities:

- Parents recognize the health, educational, and social benefits that their children gain from participating in organized sports with a good coach, and they create demand for these opportunities for their children.

- Parents and community members have the desire and time to coach, and have access to training on both sports skills and positive youth development.

- Supervised safe places are located within the community and easily accessible.

- Key community stakeholders, including school district officials, parks and recreation departments, business and corporate leaders, higher education institutions, and youth
advocates from the fields of health, violence prevention, and education, work together to create these opportunities for kids.

- Leaders within schools work to ensure that kids have time designated for organized sports, play, and physical activity during recess; before and after-school, and in physical education classes.
- Sports programming, tailored to the needs of the community is socially inclusive of all kids; including girls, differently-abled, and ESL students, of all age groups.

The Aspen Institute report, *Sport for All, Play for Life* (http://youthreport.projectplay.us/) offers great ideas for building healthy communities where there is universal access to sports. Coaching Corps’ platform for *Leveling the Playing Field* builds on these recommendations by zeroing in on key actions we can take so all kids, regardless of race, gender, income or zip code, have opportunities to stay healthy, play sports and gain valuable lessons that will last a lifetime.

**Coaching Corps Platform for Leveling the Playing Field**

1. **Support parents and other community members to volunteer as coaches, and to create the demand for youth sports**

   Most community-based youth sports programs in middle-income communities are sustained by parents, community volunteers, and paid coaches who put time and passion into the game. Surveys show that parents in low-income communities want to coach and attend their kid’s games, but barriers such as challenging and inflexible work schedules, lack of transportation or child care for younger siblings, and language barriers often get in the way.

   - **Offer support that responds to barriers:** At Coaching Corps, we have found that when we offer coach training and volunteer opportunities in low-income communities that are mindful of parents’ or caregivers’ work schedules, provided in appropriate languages, and specific to the sports that the community wants for their kids, parents (especially mothers) will not only coach but also advocate for expanded youth sports opportunities.

   - **Leverage existing community structures:** School wellness councils can help create and sustain the momentum of parents organizing to ensure that sports opportunities exist for their kids. Required as part of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, these councils oversee efforts by schools to increase physical activity opportunities on campus. Councils can provide a structure for parents to volunteer as coaches, organize sports programs and free leagues in their own communities, organize ways for kids in the neighborhood to get to and from practices safely, and advocate for additional resources such as increased budgets for parks and recreation departments and resources for renovating playgrounds and parks.
• **Create new pipelines of volunteer coaches:** Many people attribute their success to the life lessons they learned from playing sports. Often the opportunity to “play that forward” by volunteering as a coach is both appealing and viewed as a learning opportunity. At Coaching Corps we have found this is particularly true for college students. To date, we have supported almost 5,000 volunteer coaches, the majority of whom have come from universities and colleges, to coach over 60,000 kids.

> “When you coach, you teach. When you teach, you learn.”
> Volunteer Coaching Corps Coach

No matter where volunteers come from, it is essential to equip them with excellent training and support throughout their season that builds both their competence and their confidence. Coaching is a hard but rewarding job, and coaches need support to be able to see the best in every child, and then to help each child see it in themselves.

2. **Create safe and supervised spaces to play – and keep it local**

Young people in low-income communities are more likely to live in neighborhoods with fewer parks, recreational centers and other places where they can safely play. Busing kids to programs that are out of their neighborhoods is not a solution. Instead, we must invest in creating safe places to play that are supervised and in the neighborhood where kids can get to them easily and safely.

• **Schoolyards** are becoming a solution in a growing number of communities as they initiate “joint use” agreements that formalize group-sharing of indoor and outdoor spaces after school, including schoolyards and community facilities so that kids have a guaranteed space in which to play.

For more information on joint-use agreements visit [jointuse.org](http://jointuse.org).

• **Afterschool programs** serving low-income communities often have the space and the desire to offer sports as a youth development and engagement tool, but lack a workforce of trained coaches or the infrastructure for sports leagues to flourish. By supporting parents, caregivers and community members to volunteer as coaches, we can enable these programs to include afterschool sports in their enrichment offerings.

• **Recess** time can also be used by schools to offer sports and organized play opportunities with volunteer coaches.

• **Physical Education** is the longest in-school time for young people to be physically active, yet state requirements to offer it are rarely enforced. Law requires that it be taught by credentialed teachers, but budget cuts in low-income schools often result in a teacher/child ratio that is unmanageable. Parents and other community volunteers can be supported to volunteer as assistant coaches to support physical education teachers and thus reduce the teacher/child ratio.

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Playworks, a national program helping schools use recess time to engage kids in organized play, has shown dramatic benefits for kids and for teachers. [http://www.playworks.org/](http://www.playworks.org/)

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• **Existing space** can be renovated or repurposed creatively. For example, turning the top of a parking garage into a soccer field by investing in ground covering and lights may be the only option in an inner-city where no other open space exists.

KABOOM! works with communities to catalyze and create great places to play, particularly for those growing up in poverty in America. http://kaboom.org/

3. **Tailor sports programs to the needs and interests of kids and their community**

• **Customize sports programming:** In order for all kids in low-income communities to have access to sports, programs need to be designed with the needs of all kids in mind. This includes girls, differently-abled kids, ESL kids, and kids who suffer from prevalent health concerns such as obesity. Coaches need to be trained on how to address these differences in children’s culture, gender, background, language-proficiency and individual preferences. This may require teams that are specifically designed for these populations with coaches trained in how to engage the unique needs of individual players.

• **Include sports programming in wrap-around service collaborations:** Structure sports programs so they support community efforts to address the health of the whole child by partnering with groups that focus on teen pregnancy prevention, gang intervention, educational achievement, or other outcomes.

• **Ensure fair play for girls:** Make sure there are as many opportunities for girls to play as there are for boys. Girls-only programs with trained female coaches can encourage girls, who would otherwise sit on the sidelines, to play. Female coaches can be powerful role models and can design programs with the girls’ interests, cultural backgrounds and ages in mind.

• **Use policy to encourage fair play:** The Fair Play in Community Sports Act is a California law that prohibits gender discrimination in community youth sports programs. The Fair Play Act requires that girls be provided opportunities for participation in community sports programs that are equal, both in quality and scope, to those provided to boys. The Act allows community members to file suit against local agencies (such as parks and recreation departments) that do not comply with the law.
4. Engage community leaders

Youth sports programs thrive when prominent community leaders are committed and passionate about ensuring that these opportunities exist for all kids. In addition to parent leadership, school district officials, parks and recreation department heads, business leaders, higher education institutions, and advocates in violence prevention, health and education can all take the lead in ensuring that sports opportunities exist for low-income kids.

- **Build community ownership**: Advocates can rally support among key community stakeholders for high-quality youth sports programs in low-income communities, and enlist them in creating a culture where sports are prioritized as an investment in children's development and future.

- **Active Day, Healthy Life in schools**: School district leaders who oversee recess, physical education, and afterschool programs can work together to determine the best way to ensure every student is physically active for a minimum of 60 minutes daily by splitting the time into manageable pieces throughout the day, all year long.

**Conclusion**

High quality youth sports programs, run by skillful and compassionate coaches, ensure that kids learn lessons that help them unleash their full potential and believe in their best selves. The benefits and outcomes of quality sports experiences for youth are well-proven, but to ensure that all kids get access we must develop a youth sports ecosystem that takes into account the stresses caused by poverty and helps kids and their communities overcome them.

The Aspen Institute report, *Sport for All, Play for Life*, makes great strides towards building a nation where equitable opportunities exist for all youth to play sports. Accomplishing this vision will require a concerted effort among all stakeholders who passionately believe in equity, and in the power of sports to change the game for all kids.

**About Coaching Corps**

*Coaching Corps* is fueling a movement of volunteer coaches to provide kids in low-income communities with the same opportunities to play sports as kids from more affluent communities. We recruit college students and community members to volunteer as coaches and train them to use a season of sports to teach kids valuable life lessons, such as persistence, empathy, teamwork, and optimism. By placing them in afterschool programs serving low-income communities, we provide a trained workforce of volunteer coaches so that these programs can use the power of sports to improve health, education, and social outcomes for kids. For further information please visit www.coachingcorps.org.

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*Coaching Corps Platform | Release Date 2/20/2015*