



CASE STATEMENT



Active kids, bright futures, healthy communities:
*centering physical activity in our regional youth
development systems*

MARCH 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The King County Play Equity Coalition is a network of over 115, cross-sector organizations engaged in collective action to transform Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. County (King County) into a region where all youth - particularly youth from historically underserved groups furthest from play equity - experience the physical, social, and emotional benefits of play, sports, outdoor recreation and physical activity.

Youth physical activity is a predictor of long-term health and wellbeing. Gaps in access to exercise at young ages become significant community health equity gaps in the future. The benefits of movement for youth are well-studied and facilitate healing, promote resiliency and mitigate the effects of trauma.^{1,2,3} During this time of increased stress in communities that are disproportionately impacted by the health and economic consequences of Covid-19, the ability to move and play is essential for physical and mental health.

Unfortunately, youth in King County are not moving nearly enough: pre-pandemic, only 19% of youth in the County were meeting the CDC's recommended 60 minutes a day of physical activity. Youth of color, youth from lower income families, girls, youth with disabilities, and immigrant youth are even less likely to participate in physical activity and tend to be excluded from the systems and spaces where play happens.

Youth sports has grown into a \$19 billion industry, dominated by competitive travel teams and tournaments. This high cost, structured model of play has left many kids on the sidelines. Compounding this in King County are issues related to living in a region with a booming population. Lack of transportation options and too few fields and facilities are just a couple of issues that profoundly impact who can access opportunities to play. Further, sports and the outdoors are not immune from the historic and institutionalized racism that shape other public systems and policies. As such they warrant attention and investment if they are to become the transformational spaces for healing and resistance they have the potential to be.

1 Savina, E., et al. (2016). The benefits of movement for youth: a whole child approach. *Contemporary school psychology*, 20(3).

2 Bell, C. C. (2001). Cultivating resiliency in youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 29(5), 375-381.

3 Hlavinka, E. (2019, May 28) <https://www.medpagetoday.com/pediatrics/generalpediatrics/80105>

The Coalition's activities, including cross-sector collaborations and action teams, are designed to fuel a systemic re-imagining of the youth sports, outdoor recreation, and physical activity sectors by centering the needs of youth who have been excluded from them. By elevating the regional understanding of and commitment to physical activity and play as an essential part of human development, a human right, and a social justice issue, the Coalition will increase the rates of youth physical activity in King County and create widespread engagement in joyful play and movement.

Dedicated to challenging and changing systems, shifting power to community organizations, and centering physical activity as a key part of health and youth development, the Coalition is grounded in the following values:



Community centered. We work alongside communities to elevate the brilliance and expertise already there.



Empowering play at all levels. We recognize the protective value of play and fun.



Collaboration across sectors. We focus on systems-level solutions that require collaboration across public and private sectors.



Disruption of traditional systems. We recognize and work to disrupt systematic racism and oppression that are upheld and perpetuated by the status quo.

[Read our statement from June 1, 2020.](#)





HISTORY & COLLECTIVE ACTION APPROACH

The Coalition was born out of a research project: a community-informed, mixed-methods landscape analysis of youth access to and engagement in sport, outdoor recreation, and free play. The landscape analysis itself stemmed from Project Play, a national initiative of the Aspen Institute which is working to ensure that every child has access to sports regardless of zip code or ability. Stakeholders including the Seattle Mariners, Kaiser Permanente, King County Parks, and the University of Washington came together to sponsor the initial research, resulting in the publication of *State of Play: Seattle-King County* in September 2019.

The *State of Play: Seattle-King County*, discussed in more detail below, is a comprehensive report of regional trends, barriers and opportunities related to youth access to physical activity, organized sport, and outdoor recreation in King County. Its findings and recommendations galvanized the creation of a coalition to address the grave inequities identified through youth and parent surveys, interviews, focus groups, and GIS & policy analysis.

The decision to create a coalition came from the community advisory board that had been overseeing the State of Play research. Coalition building is a popular way communities work together to make systemic change, especially in the health and health equity space.^{4,5} Implemented well, coalitions can be an effective way to improve the policies, programs, and practices that will lead to systemic change and improved health outcomes. Physical activity is often a component of larger community health agendas but rarely has youth physical activity been the impetus for a stand-alone regional coalition. Some national examples of physical activity-focused coalitions include the group Action for Healthy Kids, which partners with Active Schools to seed collective impact at the state and federal level.

4 Kegler, M. C., & Swan, D. W. (2011). An initial attempt at operationalizing and testing the community coalition action theory. *Health Education & Behavior*, 38(3), 261-270.

5 (Granner, M. L., & Sharpe, P. A. (2004). Evaluating community coalition characteristics and functioning: a summary of measurement tools. *Health education research*, 19(5), 514-532.

With the ballooning of participation in youth sports, more regional coalitions focused on supporting safety, health, and development in the sector are forming: Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative and the Milwaukee Youth Sports Alliance are two examples. The Aspen Institute's Sport and Society program has also supported regional activation of stakeholder groups focused on youth sports in Harlem, Baltimore, Western New York, and other communities.

Many of these organizations, like the Coalition, view sports as a powerful space for unification, healing, community-building, and resistance to oppression. WNBA players and their coordinated activism during the Summer of 2020 offered a powerful example of the collective political and transformative power of sport. On an individual level, sports, and the outdoors, offer similar possibilities for transformation: research shows that sport and nature contact can support healing from trauma and adverse childhood experiences.⁶ For sports and physical activity to be a space for resistance and resilience, they first have to become systems that do not reinforce oppressive and exclusive practices; all kids have to have access to the systems and structures that give sport, physical activity, and the outdoors such power. As our *State of Play* report shows, that is not currently the case.



View all current
Coalition members:

<https://kcplayequity.org/membership/coalition-members/>

⁶ Elizabeth Hlavinka, "Sports a Win for Those With Childhood Trauma," MedPage Today, May, 28, 2019.



STATE OF PLAY KING COUNTY:

BROAD INACTIVITY, PLAY INEQUITY, SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

The results of the *State of Play* report give the Coalition fuel for its initial work:

- Prior to COVID-19, only 19% of King County youth met the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, and there are stark racial/ethnic, income, and gender inequities in access to physical activity, sport, and play.
- Girls (16%) are less likely to be sufficiently physically active than boys (22%).
- Youth in South King County have fewer playfields and parks in their neighborhoods and access to them is more restrictive than in the rest of the region.
- Youth of color are significantly less likely than white youth to have participated in an organized sport and spend significantly less time at the parks near them than their white peers.
- A far higher proportion of youth who don't speak English at home report having never participated in organized sports or recreation (43%), compared to those who do speak English at home (14%). This is especially problematic because since 2010, King County has had the third-largest increase in foreign-born residents among all U.S. counties. Now, nearly 1 in 4 King County residents (24%) were born outside the U.S., much higher than the national average (14%). The language, cultural, and cost barriers for immigrant youth to access sport and play in our region are particularly dire.

Further, focus groups of youth with physical disabilities and their families reveal a lack of programming to suit their needs and little community support to encourage physical activity. Parents say doctors and therapists lack knowledge about physical activity opportunities for their children.

The root causes of systemic exclusion of low-income, BIPOC, girls, immigrant youth, and youth with disabilities from access to physical activity cut across a variety of systems and include the following:

- ➔ **The defunding of low-cost, accessible community-based and school sports and recreation and a concurrent proliferation of high-cost, select sports programs that are out of reach for the majority of youth.**
- ➔ **Inadequate infrastructure - fields, sidewalks, bike facilities, community centers - to support play and recreation especially in South King County as well as restrictive policies governing access to facilities and schools.**
- ➔ **Socio-cultural barriers for girls, youth of color, and youth with disabilities based on the sexism, racism, and ableism that is embedded in many traditional sports experiences.**
- ➔ **Lack of female coaches, coaches of color, and coaches trained in youth development and inclusion.**
- ➔ **Physical activity and play equity not well understood as connected to equitable health and education outcomes and therefore not viewed as a funding and policy priority.**
- ➔ **Lack of inclusion of sports and physical activity in out of school time conversations, partnerships, funding streams, and program quality systems.**

[Read the full report.](#)



COVID IMPACT



COVID-19 has drastically exacerbated these systemic issues and inequities by cutting off most of the ways kids can be active – school recess and physical education class, structured after-school programs, and even playgrounds have been closed. A recent study in Canada found that during the height of the pandemic, only 3% of youth were getting 60 minutes of physical activity and those living in apartment buildings and near busy roads were least likely to be active.⁷ Similar patterns have emerged in the US and national research has indicated a decrease in physical activity amongst all youth, especially those 9 and older.⁸

Schools have historically offered the most equitable access point for physical activity, especially for BIPOC and low-income communities that are systematically excluded from high-cost youth sports programming. Since schools are virtual, many King County youth have few ways to play and be active. Community Centers, which also offer low-cost activities, are also closed, as are most community-based sports programs. Pay to play activities (club and select teams), on the other hand, continued to run programming for families that could afford that option. The built environment, especially in South King County, is not conducive to play access: most youth have limited safe access to parks near their homes. Throughout the county, youth living in apartments and small spaces are often unable to find space to participate in virtual physical education or exercise.

There is no systemic regional effort to address this major community health issue. Physical activity, sport, play, and outdoor recreation are disconnected from our region's broader conversations about how to improve health or educational outcomes for youth and how to dismantle systems of oppression that harm youth of color. Standard investments in youth sports and recreation often involve offering scholarships for kids who can't afford participation in a soccer program or mountain biking club. But scholarships are not enough; scholarships do not account for the cost of equipment or travel. They don't account for needing someone to leave work early to drive a child to a 4:30 practice across town. Further more, scholarships don't account for the systemic exclusion of thousands of kids from programs and teams built without them in mind.

The State of Play report, fortunately, offered solutions to many of these systemic issues, and the Coalition is built to address them.

7 Mitra, R., et. al. (2020). Healthy movement behaviours in children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring the role of the neighbourhood environment. *Health & place*, 65, 102418. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2020.102418>

8 Dunton et al. BMC Public Health (2020) 20:1351 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09429-3>



COALITION MEMBERSHIP STRUCTURE & LEADERSHIP

Systemic change requires a collaborative and cross-sector approach, which is why the Coalition includes members from school districts, parks and recreation, pro sports teams, health care groups, businesses, and community based organizations (CBOs). Of the 115 members, 40% are CBO directly serving youth disenfranchised from physical activity. The Coalition uses a collective impact model with the theory of change being that each organization commits to its own systemic changes while simultaneously working with other organizations so that the group's collective impact is substantially greater than the sum of its parts and the cascade of activity creates widespread change. The primary strategies necessary for collective impact are common agenda/shared vision, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization. While there are multiple structures coalitions might use to advance its agenda and activities, the Coalition is pursuing a model whereby action teams take on the work of pursuing the group's strategic goals: cross-sector, partner-driven working groups are guided by a leadership team and backbone agencies to catalyze systemic change collectively and within their own organizations. Another local collective impact organization, focused on educational outcomes, is the Road Map Project.

The Coalition's membership structure was created by the members themselves and requires that organizations (and individuals) sign on to pursue the mission of the Coalition within their organizations as well as collectively. The full Coalition meets quarterly to provide updates on action team work, share challenges and success, hear directly from member organizations, and strengthen commitment to play equity.

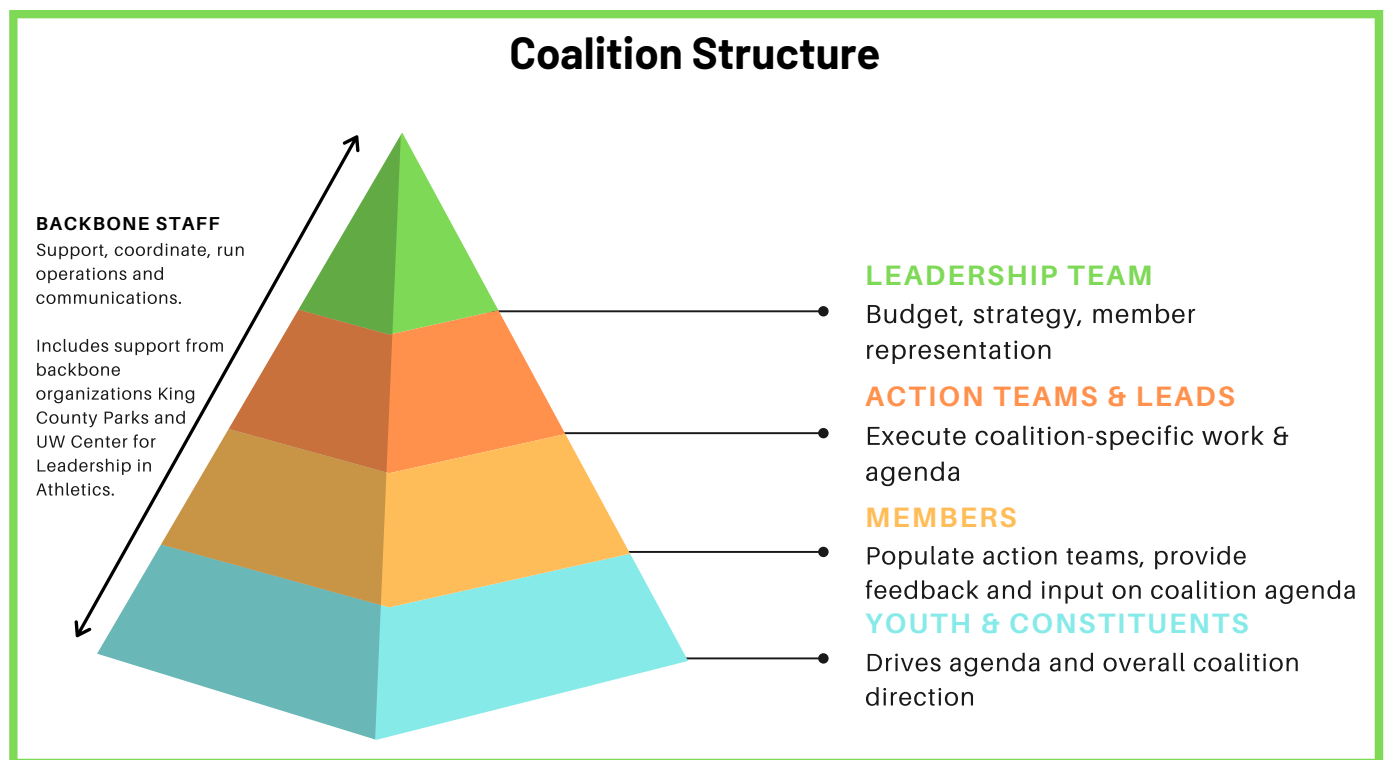
Coalition structures support centering the voices of programs closest to the communities being served. For example, becoming a member of the Coalition is based on a sliding financial scale. Organizations that need to be paid to make time for participation in monthly action team meetings can request a stipend; whereas, larger well-resourced organizations may make an annual donation as a member.

**Meet the
Leadership
Team.**

<https://kcplayequity.org/leadership/>

The Coalition decision-making, strategic, and financial planning is done by a leadership team reflective of the priority communities and voted on by members: the Leadership Team charter calls for the leadership to be made up of 50% BIPOC, 50% women-identifying, and 50% CBO representation. Leadership Team members are also stipended for the significant volunteer hours they contribute to Coalition oversight. For the first twelve months of the Coalition, the Leadership Team developed a leadership charter, engaged in strategic planning, and piloted Coalition activities.

Currently, King County Parks and the University of Washington's Center for Leadership in Athletics serve as backbone agencies, providing fiscal support and pro bono staffing: supporting the Leadership Team with guiding the vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding.



COALITION STRATEGIES & ACTIVITIES

Due to the fragmented nature of the youth sports and outdoor recreation sectors, much of the early work of the Coalition has been about building and strengthening the network of organizations committed to play equity as well as building space and structures for cross-sector, collaborative work and shared learning.



POLICY
ADVOCACY



RESEARCH &
DATA



COMMUNITY-
DRIVEN
COLLABORATIONS



NETWORKING



ACTION TEAMS

Coalition activities fall under three categories of work:

**STRENGTHENING
THE NETWORK**

**ADVANCING
POLICY: ACTION
TEAMS**

**SHIFTING POWER:
COLLABORATIONS**

STRENGTHENING THE NETWORK

The Coalition grew from 40 members to 115 members between October 2019 to March 2021, experiencing rapid growth even during Covid. Prior to Covid, monthly, in-person meetings were an excellent way for members to make connections, share stories, and fuel collaborations. Since Covid, full Coalition meetings happen quarterly via Zoom and usually entail an update on Coalition activities as well as an opportunity for sharing in breakout rooms. Along with quarterly meetings, network strengthening activities include:

- A monthly newsletter with information about events, funding opportunities, member stories, a blog, and coalition updates.
- Weekly email to members.
- Ongoing surveys & exit tickets to gauge member needs and collect feedback
- Capacity building through Resource sharing: webinars, research-based one pagers, equity-focused guidelines.
- Slack platform for ongoing connection between members.

ADVANCING POLICY: ACTION TEAMS

Action teams are cross-sector groups of coalition member organizations that meet monthly, or twice monthly for shared conversation, learning, and advocacy. The three current action teams are

- **Return to Play:** This team is a platform for discussion & shared learning centered around the successes and challenges associated with returning to play post-COVID.
- **Advocacy:** This group works at the level of policy & funding to create the conditions for increased equity in access to physical activity.
- **Facilities Use and Access:** The purpose of this team is to address one of the largest issues affecting access to sports and recreation: the ability of organizations and communities to gain access to fields, gyms and other facilities for youth physical activity programming. This group evaluates policies & practices impacting facility access such as Joint Use Agreements & Historic Use Policies.

SHIFTING POWER: COLLABORATIONS

One of the Coalition's main functions is to catalyze member collaborations that will help build capacity and push systemic change. The Coalition has seeded a broad range of partnerships including:

- Highline School District, UPower, and Seattle Children's Hospital to increase rates of youth physical activity at Glacier Middle School.
- Sounders and Storm to build a play court in Des Moines.
- UW, Schools Out WA, and Activities for Kids of All Abilities to design an app to provide information on sports and physical activity opportunities in King County.

The Coalition also funds member collaborations focused on serving BIPOC youth and driven by BIPOC-led organizations. Two of the recently funded collaborations are

- Seattle United, Soccer Without Borders, and Congolese Integration Network to train and support coaches who work with newcomer and immigrant youth.
- Evergreen, YETI, and Bikeworks to provide a full set of biking equipment to 16 foster youth along with instruction and activities outside to explore local parks/trails.



VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The vision for the future is that the Coalition galvanizes a renaissance in regional commitment to physical activity as a critical component of youth development. That commitment will ultimately lead to a re-thinking and re-structuring of systems and spaces in the county so that BIPOC, low-income and historically underserved youth have what they need to engage in joyful, healthy, play and movement in their own communities on their own terms. The social, emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits of this physical activity and play will lead to improvements in community health and educational attainment across the county. King County will become a national model for the centering of youth physical activity needs and the dismantling of the market-driven youth sports sector, and this innovative and scalable approach will be adapted and adopted in other regions of the country leading to wider change.

That vision is only possible with the investment of funders and champions who have the same aspirations for the health of our community. Seed funding from King County Parks has allowed the Coalition to grow over the last two years, and now funding is needed to sustain the progress and increase impact.

Our *State of Play* research shows that if 75% of youth in King County become physically active to the CDC's recommended 60 minutes a day, the County will save \$725 million in health care costs and 52,000 years of life. Additionally, we will significantly close the health equity gap, improve youth mental health, and increase graduation rates. The potential impact on individual youth is clear and compelling.

The collective impact will be just as profound: a transformation of the youth sports and recreation sector from one that reinforces systemic oppression to one that resists it and provides a space for individual and communal transformation and resilience. A small investment in youth physical activity is a critical investment in the health and well being of King County.

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