

STATE OF PLAY

Washington D.C.

ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the nation's capital, Washington D.C. is one of the most asset-rich cities in the world, and that goes for its provision of sports and recreation opportunities for youth as well. It has one of the most extensive park systems in the country, a deep and growing commitment to school-based sports that extends down to the elementary level, a rich array of professional and college sports programs to partner with, a large menu of sports inspired by its diverse international population, and many community programs doing tremendous work serving youth.

More youth ages 6-17 in the District of Columbia (62%) play organized sports than do nationally (55%), according to federal government data from 2022-23. This suggests a strong return from the COVID shutdown that, among other outcomes, underscored the need to get kids out of their homes and moving their bodies.

But the District is also one of the most complex and politically daunting cities in the country, with an array of municipal, school, federal and private entities organizing and regulating sport activities across eight

wards. Further, the characteristics of children living in those eight communities vary widely, as are the set of opportunities and challenges to play sports. Washington D.C. is a sport ecosystem with several sub-ecosystems, each shaped by geography, family resources, educational access, and other factors.

Peel back the top layer — as our Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program did over the past year with the help of a local advisory group — and we find disparities in the provision of sports for certain populations of youth, especially Black youth and girls. We find broad frustration at the high cost and often low maintenance of sports facilities, a challenging permitting process reflecting the complexity of delivering services in the nation's only non-state city — and no civic mechanism to connect silos across stakeholder groups, balance competing interests and create shared solutions to shared problems.

In this report, “State of Play Washington D.C.,” we offer ways that local leaders can address these gaps. But first, some important insights that help frame the challenges they face.



Key findings in the Report:

- **Black children and girls are underrepresented in sports.** D.C. has the largest sports participation gap between girls and boys for any “state” in the U.S., and the difference between Black and White children who play is even larger. According to the 2022-23 combined National Survey of Children's Health data, 53% of D.C. girls played sports compared to 70% of boys. Only 51% of Black children played vs. 84% of White youth.
- **Youth in Wards 7 and 8, home to D.C.'s highest poverty rates, have less access to sports.** Parents in these neighborhoods are most affected by the costs to play.

Participation in almost every sport, except football and basketball, is lower in Wards 7 and 8 compared to Ward 3, which is the most affluent area of the city. High schools in Wards 7 and 8 within District of Columbia Public Schools average about two fewer sports offered than the rest of the city.

- **Children are motivated by joy and friendships to play sports.** The No. 1 reason D.C. kids said they play is to be with friends (58%), followed closely by having fun (56%), according to our youth survey. Winning games ranked fifth, and pursuing college athletic scholarships was 14th.

- **Charter schools struggle to grow sports access.** Charters comprise 36% of the District's high school population and only 22% of the high school sports participants.
- **Boys most want to try boxing; girls prefer rock climbing.** Our youth survey also showed baseball, karate, archery and tennis as activities that boys want to try. Girls also like gymnastics, volleyball, cheer and swimming.
- **Transportation is a barrier to play.** While 91% of D.C. children from high-income homes are driven to sports activities by family members, only 50% of low-income youth enjoy that benefit.
- **Too few quality fields and gyms meet the demand.** Despite historic investments in D.C. parks, sports providers are frustrated by permitting and maintenance challenges.

Many people in youth sports want to better address barriers, but don't know where to turn. The disjointed youth sports system too often pays more attention to the scoreboard than the child in front of them.

One of the Aspen Institute's recommendations is for the District to create a D.C. Athletic Council as a coordinating body (see page 10). The council would create common goals to build a more coherent system that focuses on quality sports opportunities, especially for underserved youth. In addition to knowledge sharing, the council could collaborate on projects such as:

- **Building an online youth sports directory.** Help families identify the right league, team and pathway for their children (see page 16 for more information). Use data collected from sports providers to identify systemic challenges in D.C. and build sustainable solutions.
- **Providing more training and mentorship opportunities for coaches.** There is a need for sustained development of coaches at all ages around positive youth development, and more than just one-time trainings (page 35).
- **Aligning pro-team investments around girls' sports.** D.C. teams could collaboratively invest in multisport programs for girls, education and

distribution of sports bras (page 45), and initiatives to attract more women into coaching.

- **Creating one comprehensive permitting system for facilities.** Fields and gyms are operated by different entities with varying policies (page 28). This can be confusing and inefficient for the public. Although implementing this idea would be challenging, the council could aim to eventually create a more functional permitting system.

Most importantly, "State of Play Washington D.C." features the voices of young people.

There's the shot putter who struggles to find somewhere to practice. The soccer player who writes poetry to share his feelings. The high school seniors who organize bike rides to relieve stress. The quarterback who started playing tackle football in ninth grade. And the middle-school girl who turned to rugby because basketball makes her too nervous. By really listening to what children want from sports, the city's "District of Champions" motto can carry greater meaning and lift young people up to new heights on and off the field.



