

ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS CHANGE LANGUAGE IN YOUTH SPORT



Executive Summary

The Systems Action Group brings together a collaboration of funders, practitioners, policymakers, and community leaders from the Coalitions for Sport Equity (CSEq) and the Funders Collective for Play Equity. Alongside the leadership of Ashoka Sport for Changemaking and the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport (CHJS), this Action Group aims to surface a shared language for systems change in the US youth sport landscape. This language is a critical step in helping us collectively describe the systemic change we want to see in the U.S. youth sport landscape – and in inviting others to see themselves in that vision and join the movement.

Members of CSEq and the Funders Collective for Play Equity are uniquely positioned to lead this work – not only because they show up for this conversation again and again, validating its purpose in the play equity movement. Nor is it because of their reach across youth sport ecosystems. But, because of their proximity to both structural levers (e.g., funding, policy, governance) and the lived realities of young people. From engaging with legislators and education boards to partnering with coaches, administrators, and community organizations, these stakeholders have already begun to reexamine their role within the system.

Grounded in systems change terminology and our shared experiences with play equity, these building blocks form the foundation of our language.

Making the case for systems change across youth sport

When questions arise about why programming or funding alone are insufficient, the building blocks below provide clear, grounded language to explain how inequities in youth sport are rooted in complex, overlapping systems – moving beyond surface-level symptoms to the systemic challenges that shape the landscape.

- **Inequities in youth sport are systemic.** Barriers come from overlapping systems – education, economics, culture – not just program gaps. Real change means addressing these root causes – and the systems that have shaped play access as we see it today.
- **Youth sport is interconnected.** It involves schools, families, communities, and policies. Change must happen across all these levels, not in isolation.
- **Efforts are often fragmented.** Without shared language and coordination, good work stays siloed, limiting overall impact.
- **Power needs to shift to those affected.** Youth and communities must be leaders in creating solutions, not just recipients.
- **Culture drives systems.** Beliefs about who belongs and what success looks like shape all other systems. Changing culture is key to lasting equity.

How Systems Change Works in Practice

When asked how systems change differs from direct service or programming, these six building blocks provide clear language to explain the actions that shift the underlying patterns and structures of youth sport – going beyond individual efforts that address immediate needs, to instead transform the conditions that make those needs so persistent. These actions require short-term wins to drive long-term, systemic change – with each step of progress serving as a central activity within the building blocks outlined here:

- **Accelerating regional leadership and decision-making:** Strengthening the leadership of and the resources available to youth, families, coaches and communities to be the key decision-makers shaping priorities and ensuring programs and policies are grounded in lived experience.
- **Building coalitions to align and coordinate efforts across sectors:** Bringing together schools, nonprofits, funders, and policymakers to reduce fragmentation and build shared infrastructure for equitable access.
- **Material and human resources:** Provide funding, facilities, land, staffing, and volunteer support to sustain high-quality opportunities, particularly in underserved communities.
- **Taking part in reshaping cultural narratives:** Challenging dominant ideas about who belongs in sport and centering play as essential to wellbeing, identity, and development to shift *why sport is essential* in the growing-up years.
- **Advancing policy and investment reform:** Reimagining how sport and play are resourced and governed to embed equity in public systems.
- **Building and sharing knowledge to drive equity:** Using data, insights, and lived experience to equip youth sport leaders and organizations to take informed, impactful action.

Why and How We Drive Systems Change Together

At the heart of this shared language is **our why and our how**. We exist to show that youth sport can and must operate differently from the current system – one largely shaped by the pay-to-play model that limits access and equity. **Our why** calls us to advocate for policies that prioritize this alternative model and for funding structures that enable its equitable growth and sustainable scaling. This means moving beyond patchwork programs to systemic investment in a new framework for youth sport – a framework that is for ALL youth

Our how is rooted in collective action. As a network of funders, practitioners, and community leaders, we model the change we want to see. This means setting shared agendas, valuing the work happening outside traditional systems, and amplifying diverse approaches rather than trying to fit everything into the existing pay-to-play framework. Together, we create a collective force – not a single agenda – to reshape youth sport, demonstrating what’s possible when equity and inclusion guide every level of sport delivery and policy.

This work requires a collective action approach and the resources to sustain it. As we move forward, we have a roadmap for action recommended by this group of Play Equity leaders:

TRANSLATE

Our language is only the beginning. For this to become a movement, others need to see themselves in it. Using these building blocks, begin translating what systems change means to you, describing it in ways that align with your purpose, adapting it to your context, and continuing to share it.

MEASURE

Systems change happens through both short- and long-term wins. Measuring progress requires a roadmap that clearly articulates the systemic shifts we aim to achieve and tracks the incremental changes moving us closer to that vision across all areas of youth sport.

MAKE VISIBLE

Change is happening all around us. By highlighting these efforts, we demonstrate that systemic shifts are possible, inspiring others to engage and contribute to the movement.

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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- *Play for Dignity*
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