

ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS CHANGE LANGUAGE IN YOUTH SPORT

WHITE PAPER #2



Taking Systemic Action for Play Equity

Across the U.S., powerful initiatives are already working to tackle the inequities facing youth sport—led by coaches, community leaders, families, and young people themselves. These efforts are making a real difference in neighborhoods and schools, expanding access, challenging discrimination, and creating new opportunities to play. But to dismantle the systemic barriers that keep inequity in place—barriers rooted in policy, culture, funding flows, and institutional practices—we must complement these initiatives with coordinated systems action. Only by addressing the broader conditions shaping youth sport can we unlock lasting equity at scale.

Too often, “systems change” is treated as a vague or abstract goal. When we talk about systems change, we’re *often describing the outcome* – what happens once a system has shifted. For example, we might say the education or health system has been transformed and now creates new possibilities or conditions for people. But systems change is also an approach – it’s about the actions we take to change the underlying patterns, so that whole communities, sectors, or fields start to behave differently over time.

But if we want more people to engage meaningfully in this work, we need to offer clarity on what systems action *looks like* in practice. This paper names, elevates, and aligns around systems actions across the Coalitions of Sport Equity – not just conceptually, but in practice.

We invite you to explore what systems *action* actually looks like in practice, how it happens through coordinated effort, and where your current work fits in. Whether you’re a funder, practitioner, policymaker, or advocate, this is an opportunity to clarify what you’re contributing to, how you’re contributing, and how you might leverage your unique role to deepen that impact.

Giving Name and Clarity to “Systems Solutions”

Across the Coalition for Sport Equity and the Play Equity Funders Collaborative, we see a range of solutions aimed at making play equity the norm – from meeting the immediate needs of *all* young people through direct service, such as coaching, participation opportunities, or access to equipment, to efforts that focus on shifting the conditions that create those needs in the first place. These localized “direct impact actions” are essential, especially where the gaps are urgent and visible. At the same time, “systems actions” – solutions or ways of working that operate further upstream by shifting narratives, shaping policy, building knowledge, or changing how decisions are made – are just as essential. Though these efforts may feel less immediate in their impact, but they are what will enable long-term, sustainable change – continuing to the systems that influence youth sport are ensuring *all* young people are in benefit of sport and all it has to offer.

Let’s be clear – both forms of action are needed. Clarifying the difference isn’t about ranking one above the other – it’s about recognizing how they work together and giving each a name, so we’re clear on what outcomes to expect and how each contributes to addressing the deeper problems we face: the increasing commercialization of youth

sport, inequitable access to play, and the fragmentation of the youth sport landscape. Let's continue giving name but also example for greater clarity —

Direct Impact Solutions

Creating direct impact as a coalition looks different from how community-based sport organizations create direct impact – challenging perhaps our initial assumptions about this term as a “systems term.” Rather than delivering a one-to-one solution to a single group, coalitions aim to broaden access to that solution across multiple members by delivering key resources and building capacity.

Resource Delivery

This is a key strategy for expanding access to resources that might otherwise be out of reach due to cost, availability, or awareness – but are central to ensuring play equity in their communities. This includes reducing cost barriers by offering access to equipment, gear lockers, and play opportunities at no cost through partners. It also means equipping sport and fitness organizations with tools to grow their reach, such as connections to new funders, training opportunities, and shared services. As a coalition leader, delivering these supports directly to members helps open doors that may not have been accessible otherwise.

Capacity Building

This strategy aims to strengthen the skills, systems, and infrastructure of coalition members – those organizations working directly with young people – so they can serve youth more effectively. While the *what* of capacity building is often consistent—training on topics like fundraising, volunteer management, and cross-sector collaboration—the *how* varies depending on local needs and assets. This can look like hosting and/or providing member access to shared training events, coordinating action teams around shared goals, or expanding leadership pipelines for coaches and other providers in the coalition.

It also means investing in the training and empowerment of volunteers to strengthen the overall youth sport infrastructure. This helps fill critical gaps in current delivery systems — from providing equipment to supporting coaching and program operations.

Case Studies: Resource Delivery from Coalitions for Sport Equity

Many coalitions leverage their network to provide sports sampling or sport agnostic participation events for youth. These events tend to bring youth, families, and youth sports organizations together to show the range of program options and give youth a chance to try them out. Examples include:

- **FUEL Middle School Girls Summit (Oklahoma City Youth Sports Coalition):** The OKC Youth Sport Coalition co-hosted this event specifically for middle school girls, focusing on supporting girls' participation in sports.
- **Summer and Winter Free Play Series (Project Play Western New York):** Project Play Western New York provides grants to organizations hosting supervised free play activities while school is out during the summer and winter months, respectively. The goal is to provide youth in all eight counties of Western New York with opportunities to exercise creativity, set and achieve goals, learn interpersonal skills and develop a love of physical activity.
- **Sports Sampling Camps (King County Play Equity Coalition):** The King County Play Equity Coalition organizes free Sports Sampling Camps in partnership with professional teams.

Case Studies: Capacity Building through Coalitions for Play Equity

- **Play Equity Fund:** In California, this coalition has trained more than 130 coaches and helped create opportunities for over 1,000 girls to participate in sport. These interventions directly strengthen the partner organizations' ability to serve young people and improve the quality and consistency of programming delivered.
- **Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative:** Through a partnership with the Center for Healing and Justice through Sport, this coalition trained 1,200 young people who support summer camps at Parks and Recreation in a two-day training program.
- **Laureus Sport for Good Atlanta:** Through a partnership with the Positive Coaching Alliance, this coalition offered a 90-minute virtual workshop called "Sports Can Battle Racism" that teaches coaches how to combat racial discrimination and create inclusive team environments.

Indirect Impact Solutions

Indirect impact driven by coalitions refers to the influence coalitions have on the broader environment in which youth sport operates—such as shifting narratives, influencing policy, or realigning funding priorities. While this kind of impact doesn't always translate immediately to new programs or direct services, it plays a critical role in making the overall ecosystem more supportive and inclusive for young people.

In the Coalitions for Sport Equity, indirect impact appears through four core building blocks of systems actions:

- Knowledge development (collecting data and generating insights to address problems more effectively),
- Ecosystem development (strengthening networks by fostering shared standards and coordination)
- Behavior change (raising awareness and mobilizing communities to act)
- Advocacy (influencing laws, regulations, and policies across public and private sectors).

These actions strengthen the groundwork so that when direct resources or programs are delivered, they can be more effective and equitable.

Ecosystem Development

This action can be considered the bread and butter of coalition work. It involves actively building and strengthening a connected network of organizations, stakeholders, and community members who share a vision for play equity. This work shows up in regular partner meetings, collaborative campaigns, and creating spaces for shared decision-making. By uniting diverse players—like policymakers, funders, schools, and sports organizations—coalitions create collective power to influence cultural mindsets, policies, and funding priorities.

Knowledge Development

This action equips decision-makers, community leaders, and organizations with the data and insights they need to act more effectively. While the focus of knowledge development remains consistent—gathering, analyzing, and sharing information that advances play equity—the methods vary based on context. Across the Coalitions for Sport Equity, this can look like collecting and reporting local data on youth sport participation, curating resource libraries for member organizations, or publishing reports that connect sport access to broader social outcomes like mental health, academic success, and equity. In some cases, coalitions build awareness through social campaigns or share short-form content and case studies that make the data more accessible.

Case Study: Ecosystem Development

Through regular monthly coalition meetings, the Oakland Unified School District and fellow Positive Coaching Alliance Oakland Sports Equity Coalition partners identified a lack of affordable youth sports opportunities in Oakland's economically challenged areas and collaboratively developed a free elementary school sports program as the solution. The district successfully leveraged the coalition's ecosystem to unite 11 local youth sports organizations as program providers, creating collective power that transformed an ambitious vision into reality. This approach generated nearly 4,000 new sports opportunities for low-income youth, demonstrating how diverse stakeholders can create systemic change when connected through coalition infrastructure.

Case Study: Knowledge Development

The Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative partnered with Temple University's Sports Industry Research Center to provide data-driven insights to coalition members. Their research examined the condition, quality, and safety of 1,500 sports fields and play spaces across Philadelphia. PYSC also surveyed nearly 400 youth sport providers to identify critical needs and highlight gaps in services and programs. Together, these efforts were designed to assess the condition of the Parks and Recreation system, determine where programs are — and are not — available, and identify citywide trends. The findings revealed stark inequities: neighborhoods with higher concentrations of Black and brown families and lower household incomes had fewer programs and poorer-quality facilities, while the highest-rated play spaces were disproportionately located in predominantly white neighborhoods. These insights are now guiding policy and funding decisions to ensure that future investments and usage strategies advance equity and expand access to safe, high-quality opportunities for all Philadelphia youth

Behavior Change

This action aims to shift what communities, organizations, and policymakers value in youth sport by introducing alternative narratives and value systems that go beyond the traditional focus. Coalitions engage in this through public-facing campaigns, strategic storytelling, and partnership building that create broader allyship. They develop resources and training—such as coach education programs—that challenge assumptions and promote positive youth development as the core outcome of sport, rather than just athletic success. By changing the narrative on youth sport, coalitions work to align values and encourage collective solutions to barrier.

Advocacy

This action is a key driver of indirect impact. It focuses on shaping public policy and funding to support systemic investment in sport-based youth development. Unlike direct service, advocacy shifts the conversation from charity to structural responsibility—aiming to embed equity into the rules, regulations, and resourcing of sport. This can take many forms: creating regional policies on sport, pushing for local standards like P.E. time, or championing bills at the state level

Case Study: Behavior Change

Play for Dignity organized the Sport Equity Hub Toronto Region Forum to present research findings on community sport barriers and facilitate collaborative solution-building among regional stakeholders. The forum used interactive workshops to map shared challenges and engage participants in developing collective responses to systemic inequities in youth sport. Through dialogue sessions, the convening brought together diverse organizations around a shared agenda that prioritized equity and positive youth development outcomes. The event served as a platform for networking and partnership building among sport equity advocates across the Toronto region.

Case Study: Advocacy

The King County Play Equity Coalition successfully advocated for a new Washington State law in 2023 that mandates recess for all K-6 students. The coalition reframed recess as a public health issue and organized educators, healthcare providers, and community groups to support the effort.

The Principles of Systems Action for Play Equity

Naming and clearly defining what constitutes systems action remains critically important. Advancing play equity requires resourcing across these building blocks—not in silos, but holistically. Our rationale is simple: these principles explain why systems action is essential:

- **When we invest across regional leadership and decision-making:** Leads to *higher-quality programs and policies* grounded in data and community voice, ensuring youth experiences are safer, more inclusive, and better aligned with their needs.

- **When we advance aligned and coordinated efforts:** Ensures *more consistent and stable opportunities* for young people to access sport and play, regardless of where they live or what organization serves them.
- **When we take part in new cultural narratives:** Helps *youth feel seen and valued*, as communities begin to center play as essential to wellbeing, identity, and development — not just a reward or extracurricular.
- **When we are open to policy and investment reform:** Results in *systemic protections and resources* that make access to sport and play less dependent on luck or charity — and more a guaranteed part of growing up.

In short, the principles that underpin systems action reflect our belief that these efforts are how we shift from short-term interventions to long-term, scalable outcomes for young people.

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.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the change leaders at the heart of the Systems Change Action Group for their contributions in shaping this shared language and narrative. Their individual efforts and local contexts are essential building blocks of the larger national narrative we are collectively working to advance.

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| ● Positive Coaching Alliance | ● Oklahoma City Youth Coalition |
| ● Youth Sports Collaborative | ● California After School Network |
| ● Hartford | ● Oklahoma City Youth Coalition |
| ● Kansas City Play Equity Coalition | ● Mirna Hill Foundation |
| ● Play Equity Fund | ● Dodgers Foundation |
| ● Atlanta Sport for Good, Laureus | ● FundPlay Foundation |
| ● Project Play Western NY | ● NBA Player's Association |
| ● Play for Dignity | ● Vancouver Whitecaps FC Social Impact |
| ● Delaware Youth Sports Collaborative | ● Chicago Cubs Charities |
| ● King County Play Equity Coalition | ● Oakland PCA Coalition |
| ● Philadelphia Youth Sports Collective | |

