

ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS CHANGE LANGUAGE IN YOUTH SPORT

WHITE PAPER #3



A Shared Vision for Play Equity: A Space for All Youth and Every Voice

This final white paper from the Systems Change Action Group presents a shared vision for play equity and outlines the foundational changes we will see when that vision becomes reality—transformations that make play equity the central guiding principle across the youth sport landscape. It goes beyond simply understanding the system and naming actions; it goes beyond the numbers of young people accessing sport. It shows what a world looks like when play equity is truly embedded in our stories, policies, funding, and relationships by naming the systems that have shifted. At its core, the paper encourages all stakeholders to reflect on how this shifts their understanding of their role, resources, and measures of success—opening up new possibilities for youth sport.

Our Shared Vision

Our collective vision for play equity centers on ensuring **every young person has equitable access to safe, high-quality youth sports and play experiences**—no matter their race, income, or zip code. These opportunities are led by well-trained coaches and mentors who not only teach sports skills but also life skills, fostering joy, belonging, and holistic youth development.

We envision a future where **youth sport is a powerful vehicle for equity, health, connection, and community empowerment**—where play supports physical and mental well-being, educational success, and social-emotional growth. This future is one in which schools, community organizations, parks and recreation, and grassroots nonprofits work hand-in-hand to provide inclusive, culturally-responsive programs accessible to all children, including those traditionally underserved.

Central to this vision is the belief that **play is not a luxury, but a fundamental right and pathway** to thriving childhoods and communities. To realize this, we commit to building coordinated ecosystems that align public policy, shift cultural mindsets, and invest in the people closest to youth—families, coaches, and community leaders—ensuring that programs honor youth identity and foster leadership, confidence, and strong relationships.

We see a landscape where **families and communities are active co-designers**, not just participants, shaping play experiences that nurture emotional development alongside physical skills. Coaches and out-of-school-time professionals receive ongoing equity-focused training to cultivate inclusive environments grounded in belonging and continuous growth.

This shared vision is shaped by the unique wins and approaches of coalition members and funders around the world, each taking systems-level actions toward their own vision while aligning in pursuit of a collective, equitable future for youth sport.

Envisioning the Reality of Play Equity

We understand what play looks like when this vision becomes reality—when new stories replace old assumptions, and power and responsibility shift to give new voices agency and influence. Success is measured by fresh, meaningful indicators that reflect genuine growth and belonging. Practices and policies evolve to support and sustain these changes. These five foundational realities illustrate the future we are working toward—and how each of us can play a central role in making it happen.

The Reality of Play Equity Narratives

When play equity is truly at the center, the stories we tell about sport and play replace the old narratives—where sport is seen as a privilege reserved for elite athletes or “extra” activity just for kids—with new stories that affirm sport and play as essential for everyone’s growth, well-being, and community vitality. Play is no longer something earned after proving worth; it is part of how individuals discover their worth.

We now recognize play as fundamental to thriving communities, as vital as food, safety, and love. It is through play that youth learn trust, experience joy, and build resilience together. This reframing centers inclusion and leadership from populations historically excluded from sport, challenging old assumptions and opening space for new voices.

Even the story of change has shifted—our narratives go beyond what individual providers offer to show how the entire system has become a better host, removing hurdles like uneven maintenance budgets and inequitable permitting processes. Grassroots nonprofits, often closest to the communities served, require sustained support and funding to create ongoing programming and employment pathways for youth alumni. Equitable sport means removing financial and access barriers so that sport is for all, regardless of income or background.

The Reality of Play Equity Metrics

How might you begin to tell new stories of play equity that highlight joy, inclusion, and leadership—especially from voices historically left out?

When play equity is central, success begins with who engages. It is not just about initial participation, but about youth and alumni returning as employees, volunteers, donors, or advocates—demonstrating sustained, cyclical involvement that strengthens the ecosystem around play. This ongoing engagement reflects a community where young people are valued beyond the game, recognized as essential contributors shaping the future of sport.

How they engage matters just as much. Families and youth engage with sports and play in ways that nurture social and emotional learning—building skills such as resilience, empathy, and teamwork. Parents and caregivers no longer see play as simply a physical activity but as a joyful, meaningful experience that promotes overall well-being. The environments that foster this engagement are led by trained coaches who create safe, inclusive spaces where every young person feels seen and supported.

Finally, the outcomes for youth capture the true impact of play equity. Youth voices are elevated, sharing authentic stories of joy, belonging, and growth that demonstrate the deeper benefits of participation. Equitable access ensures that these positive experiences are not limited by socioeconomic status or background, but available to all children. This holistic success reframes traditional metrics to focus on long-term development—measuring not only skill or competition, but confidence, connection, and community uplift.

The Reality of Play Equity Relationships

When play equity is at the center, the way sport and its ecosystem show up fundamentally shifts. Stakeholders such as funders, civic leaders, governments, health systems, policy influencers, youth, and even play equity coalitions engage by following and supporting communities that already deeply understand their own populations and are innovating in unique, culturally relevant ways. Instead of imposing priorities, these stakeholders listen and align their efforts with community-defined needs, creating space for local leadership to guide decision-making.

When the relationship between the sport ecosystem and the communities participating in sport shifts – we see new agency emerge and roles reimaged. Funders become systems investors who commit to multi-year, upstream strategies that bolster community-led initiatives and invest in shared infrastructure for collective learning. Civic and policy leaders embed play equity benchmarks into planning and funding priorities, ensuring that resources flow where communities say they are needed most. Health systems recognize the power of play as a preventive tool and step in as advocates and co-investors, integrating play into broader wellness strategies. Governments, inspired by emerging models, establish structures that facilitate coordination and resource distribution to support play equity at scale, partnering closely with communities rather than directing from the top.

Youth move beyond being participants to become co-leaders and culture shapers, working alongside families, elders, and local leaders to co-design programs and shape the narrative of play. Play equity coalitions act as conveners and connectors, amplifying community voices and fostering collaboration across sectors.

In practice, this means sport organizations transition into teammates—partners working side-by-side with communities to co-create programs that reflect local culture and needs. Funders prioritize long-term commitments that nurture sustainable, community-led change. Civic leaders serve as enablers who translate play equity goals into actionable policies and investments. Health systems champion play as a critical element of youth wellness. Governments develop dedicated departments or initiatives that align resources and efforts for systemic impact.

How could your organization, school, or community begin measuring success in ways that capture belonging, confidence, and joy—not just wins, losses, or participation numbers?

Youth actively shape programs and leadership, while coalitions ensure these efforts remain rooted in community perspectives.

In your context, how could youth, families, and local leaders play a more central role in shaping the design and direction of sport?

The Reality of Play Equity Practices and Policies

Beyond the relationships between ecosystem players and sport, the relationship between policy and sport also transforms when play equity is centered. Education and sport step forward as co-leaders, working together to show what sport can truly do when intentionally designed—not just as recreation, but as a youth development strategy, a violence intervention, and a healing agent. This requires moving beyond assumptions that programs “work” simply because they exist, and instead defining clear strategies and supportive policies that position sport as a driver of social outcomes.

When this shift happens, policymakers and institutions begin to recognize the deeper value of sport, prompting resource providers across sectors to align their investments accordingly. Congressional funding can be directed toward a broader, coordinated youth sport strategy. Grant-making organizations—both large and small—prioritize programs that are equitable, community-rooted, and outcome-driven, resulting in an increase in funding streams specifically focused on sport for youth development.

Where do you see opportunities to influence or advocate for practices and policies that better recognize the broader social value of play?

Tipping into a Play Equity Reality

As you take in this vision for Play Equity—where play is shaped by and benefits all young people—what part feels most possible for you to champion, and how might you contribute to making it real? These changes are already taking root in pockets of the youth sport landscape that exist alongside—not in opposition to—the traditional pay-to-play model dominating much of the U.S. Scaling this reality doesn’t require overturning the existing system; it means nurturing and expanding the areas where play equity is already alive.

We’ve already shown it’s possible to center equity in policy, narrative, practice, relationships, and the roles each of us hold. While one day these values may also be fully embedded in the pay-to-play model, the truth is they can scale in parallel — becoming a viable, visible alternative that delivers deeper impact and greater access for young people to experience sport and play as a force for their positive development.

This momentum is already being driven by hundreds of sport-for-positive-youth-development organizations worldwide, and by Play Equity Coalitions in 18 cities. When this collective voice reaches critical mass, it becomes a tipping point — opening the door to policy change, attracting sustained funding, and showing that another way is not only possible, but already here.

If you want to see the future of play equity, look to this national movement — a united voice that does not need to directly dismantle pay-to-play to prove its point, but instead shows, through action and impact, that there is a thriving alternative tackling the root causes of inequity in youth sport.

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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