IMPACT IN OHIO

Bringing the Community to Life with Shared Use

The time-worn phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” hit home in Ohio recently after advocates’ successful effort to open school grounds to community members.

According to Cresha Auck Foley, the American Heart Association’s government relations director in Ohio, the public and policymakers alike really had a hard time understanding what shared use is and why it is important to open school playgrounds, basketball courts, tracks and other fitness facilities to the local community.

“Shared use was not a term people grasped easily. It was hard to illustrate it and bring it to life. So we decided to create a photo project showing images of closed schools and the groups who could potentially benefit from their opening and use,” she says.

The photo campaign was accompanied by fact sheets that were provided to legislators, a website, a video and a social-media campaign. It took hold, in part, because it not only helped to illustrate the problem; it supported the belief by many legislators that because taxpayers help to fund schools, they should be given the opportunity to use the grounds of those schools.

Unfortunately, Ohio’s existing liability laws were confusing and conflicting. That meant that school administrators would repeatedly err on the side of caution and shutter their school grounds to the community.

“Many superintendents recognized the importance of schools and their grounds to their community, as well as the importance of a greater community connection. But liability prevented them from doing so,” says Auck Foley.

A bill to rewrite Ohio’s school-based liability laws was introduced in the legislature in August of 2013 but went nowhere initially because the legislature adjourned that fall. The measure started moving quickly in 2014 thanks not only to the photo campaign but to funding and technical assistance from Voices for Healthy Kids. It passed a House of Representatives committee in mid-March, the house floor in June, and then the Senate in the fall. Ohio Governor John Kasich signed the bill in December.

Auck Foley said the change in law brings a two-tiered benefit to Ohio. For the urban core and especially for communities of need, it creates a safe place for kids and families to go. Also, since a third of Ohio is in rural, lower-income Appalachia, shared use presents a unique opportunity to create community-based fitness centers.

“I believe that you can’t make a healthy choice unless you have a healthy option. And in many communities school fitness facilities are sometimes the only option residents have to get active,” adds Jen Morel, an Ohio public health advocate.

Auck Foley says that the effort to rewrite Ohio’s liability laws was successful not only due to the photo campaign, but because they engaged many community-based partners very early in the process, an effort that brought a secondary benefit.

“We now have a community-based component in place to implement the change,” she says.