



ANCHOR

ACCELERATING NATIONAL COMMUNITY HEALTH OUTCOMES THROUGH REINFORCING PARTNERSHIPS



SHARED USE SUCCESS: UNLOCKING PHYSICAL FITNESS POSSIBILITIES IN WEST VIRGINIA

The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing ([ANCHOR](#)) Partnerships Program is supporting healthier living in communities around the country. In Huntington, West Virginia, the ANCHOR program is working with communities to find safe places for children, families and the general public to exercise and play. West Virginia has the second highest adult obesity rate in the nation, in part because of increasingly sedentary lifestyles. But for people to become more physically active, they need recreational facilities that are affordable and convenient. Public school buildings fit that bill, especially in rural and low-income areas where gym memberships aren’t an option. School playgrounds, fields, running tracks and gymnasiums provide safe and accessible recreational options. Schools that have a “shared use” agreement with the community are helping to promote healthier, more physically active lifestyle habits.

The Challenge

The adult obesity rate in West Virginia is 35.6 percent, the second highest rate in the nation. Obesity also is a problem among the state’s young and poor: About 14 percent of low-income children ages 2-to-4 are considered obese. The condition puts individuals at greater risk for additional health problems, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Engaging in daily physical activity can reduce the risk of obesity, but finding access to safe, affordable and convenient places where children can play and adults can exercise can be difficult, particularly for families living in rural communities.



“The school is able to use it for gym classes and ROTC, and a lot of teachers and other people are just excited to have a trail that they can walk on for physical fitness.”

– Justin Cox, Huntington High School cross country coach, about the school’s new cross country track, which is open for shared use

The Solution

Public schools offer a variety of recreational resources including gymnasiums, sport courts, outdoor fields, playgrounds and running tracks. Opening up schools as “shared use” facilities to the public can help encourage communities to engage in regular exercise and physical activity in an affordable, cost-effective environment. It also strengthens connections between schools and community organizations.

In collaboration with West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition and other organizations, the American Heart Association’s ANCHOR team reached out to Cabell County school administrators to inform them about shared use agreements and the impact they have on a community’s welfare. The ANCHOR team also worked with administrators to identify which schools already had shared use agreements in effect., and provided technical assistance to schools that were interested but were starting from scratch.

Sustaining Success

ANCHOR launched an awareness campaign to help spread the word about school gyms, tracks,, sport fields and other recreational facilities available to the public through shared use agreements. The campaign included developing signs for each school to publicize hours of operations and rules of use. It also helped promote shared use agreements on school websites, in radio spots and in public service videos posted to social media platforms. The goal was to reach a wider portion of the local population, beyond families with children, to let more people know about the free recreational resources available to them.

Policy, System and Environmental Change

In 2015, West Virginia legislators passed a law that clarified school liability rules surrounding shared use, breaking down one of the most cited barriers and making it easier for schools to implement shared use agreements. Now Cabell County school board officials and other county entities are in the process of determining how to best apply those rules at the local level. With support from the American Heart Association, new shared use policies can be successfully implemented to support physical activity.

Results

The American Heart Association reached out to Cabell County’s top school administrators to discuss shared use agreements and explain the health benefits they provide to communities. The conversation led administrators to have their school board survey district schools to see how many of them already had shared use agreements. The American Heart Association then guided county leaders on how to work with schools interested in creating shared use agreements – or help reinforce pacts being utilized by schools that already had them.

Currently, at least two-thirds of Cabell County’s 27 public schools have entered shared use agreements, which are encouraging community members to lead more physically active lifestyles. In August 2016, county school officials invited the ANCHOR team to the ribbon cutting ceremony for a new cross-country course at a local high school. The course had become the district’s most recent addition to its list of shared used facilities.

Get Involved

Reach out to the closest local school and find out whether a shared use agreement exists for the campus. If it doesn’t, work with school leaders to create one; if it does, thank school leaders for setting up the agreement – and then work with them to broaden community access. For additional information about shared use agreements in West Virginia, contact ANCHOR Regional Campaign Manager Claire Butler at Claire.butler@heart.org.

