

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# An Analysis of Community Use Policies in Missouri School Districts\*

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**ABSTRACT**

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**BACKGROUND:** Joint use or community use policies are state-, district-, or school-level policies that allow for shared use of space or facilities between a school and a city or private organization. For this study, we (1) created an inventory of community use policies within Missouri school districts; (2) analyzed the policies for content, and (3) identified district characteristics that predict the presence of a community use policy.

**METHODS:** A coding tool was developed to assess the content of collected policies. Descriptors of 515 districts was gathered from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website. The policies were collected via district website or phone/e-mail contact and coded. Frequency of variables and a logistic regression to predict district presence of policy were computed.

**RESULTS:** Of the 515 districts in Missouri, 375 had a community use policy. Most (216) came from a policy template from the Missouri School Boards' Association or Missouri Consultants for Education (115). Only 42 districts had unique community use policies. Large or medium-sized districts were more likely to have a policy than small districts. Districts with higher percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch were less likely to have a policy.

**CONCLUSION:** Making changes to the 2 main resource templates have the potential to improve many district community use policies. Future efforts should focus on increasing policies and implementation in low resource and small districts. More research is needed on implementation and evaluation of community use policies.

**Keywords:** school policy; community; physical activity.

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Policy and environmental factors such as lack of access to healthy foods and places to be active add to the complex etiology of childhood obesity. Suggested intervention strategies include policy and environmental changes that are designed to provide opportunities, support, and cues to help children and adults develop healthier eating and physical activity behaviors.<sup>1</sup> School policies are of particular importance for this issue of childhood obesity. For example, school lunch criteria<sup>2</sup> or vending policies<sup>3</sup> can be modified to provide the healthiest food environment for students. Similarly, policies for physical education and recess can influence the amount of student physical activity.<sup>4</sup>

Another school policy relevant to increasing physical activity opportunities is related to joint or

community use of school facilities. Joint use or community use policies are state-, district-, or school-level policies that allow for shared use of space or facilities between a school and a city or private organization<sup>5</sup> emphasizing the benefits public school facilities provide to the community.<sup>6</sup> Schools often contain gyms, tracks, playing fields, swimming pools, and other amenities that may not be used to the fullest capacity beyond school hours. Farley et al<sup>7</sup> suggest that opening school yards during evenings and weekends increased physical activity in inner-city youth. Brink et al<sup>8</sup> found that observations from renovated school grounds outside of school hours contributed to increased physical activity of children. Whereas most public school districts allow some general community

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use (eg, civic use, community meetings, or special events), few promote recreation and physical activity.<sup>5</sup>

Several states have enacted community use legislation. Most of the state-level legislation merely allows districts to have joint use agreements or shields school districts from liability.<sup>9</sup> In Missouri, a state statute dictates "The board, by consent of those in charge, may use the facilities of other municipal or county departments, including those of schools and park boards and districts, if such use does not interfere with the primary purpose of the facilities are intended to serve, and trusteeship and responsibility for such physical properties and lands shall remain with the political subdivision which is responsible for them when not used for recreation."<sup>10</sup> This statute lays the foundation for individual school districts to determine the nature and extent of community use.

Whereas it seems intuitive that school gyms, playgrounds, and other facilities would provide convenient and inexpensive opportunities for students and community members to be physically active, little is known about district-level policies that support such use. In this study, we (1) created an inventory of community use policies within Missouri school districts; (2) analyzed the policies for content; and (3) identified district characteristics that predict the presence of a community use policy.

## METHODS

### Data Collection

Data collection began with identification of district characteristics from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO DESE) website.<sup>11</sup> Data regarding the number of students, their race/ethnicity, and the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch were collected and compiled into a database. The district office address was coded using the Rural-Urban commuting area (RUCA), a measure developed by the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service<sup>12</sup> to classify US census tracts using measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting. The index numbers (1-10) delineate metropolitan, micropolitan, small town, and rural commuting areas based on the size and direction of the primary (largest) commuting flows.

Collecting school district policies began with determining the presence of a district website. These websites were searched for policies and regulations pertaining to community use. If the policies were found on the website, they were copied and pasted into an electronic file. If the policies were not found on the website, an e-mail was sent to the district contact requesting the policy. For districts without websites ( $N = 67$ ), an e-mail was sent using contact information from the MO DESE website. Initial e-mails were followed up with phone calls. If the district

representative responded as having no community use policy or if after 3 contact attempts with no response, the districts were classified as "no apparent policy."

### Policy Coding

After reviewing several types of community use policies, a list of main components was compiled and developed into a coding tool to systematically analyze the content of each districts' policy. Components included application procedure, facility or organization specification, liability, and other factors (Table 1). Using this list, project staff coded and discussed 10 policies together for training purposes and to ensure consistency. Additional components were added to the list as a result of this training and the list was made into a coding tool. The coding tool was formatted to an online data entry system so that multiple staff could code and enter data into a common database. Trained coders read each policy and marked yes or no for each of the dichotomous coded components. When all policies were coded, the data was transferred into SPSS 17.0 statistical software (Chicago, IL). The coding data were merged with the file of descriptive district data.

### Analysis

District characteristics were reduced to categorical variables for analysis. Whole sample frequencies and separate descriptive statistics were calculated for districts with a policy and districts with no apparent policy. The first logistic regression analysis was performed with the dependent variable of having a community use policy = 1 versus no apparent policy = 0. The independent variables added to the analysis included size of district, percent of non-White student population, percentage of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch, and RUCA index category. The second logistic regression was performed with the dependent variable as community use policy containing a reference to recreation or physical activity = 1 versus community

**Table 1. Community Use of School Facilities Coding Tool**

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Does the policy outline an application process?
Is School Board or Superintendent contact necessary?
Does the policy specify which facilities may/may not be used?
Does the policy indicate indoor or outdoor facilities for use?
Does the policy outline eligible groups?
Does the policy list specific organizations (eg boy scouts)?
Does the policy mention fees for use?
Does the policy mention summer or weekend use?
Does the policy mention liability?
Does the policy mention maintenance?
Does the policy specifically state "recreation" or "physical activity"?
Is the policy from a specific template?
Does the policy have an implementation/adoption date?
Does the policy have a revision date? Does the policy reference additional documents?

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use policy not containing reference to recreation or physical activity = 0. The independent variables were the same as used in the first regression.

## RESULTS

Missouri has 522 public school districts. Of these 515 were used in this analysis. Charter schools and specialized school districts (eg, School for the Blind) were omitted from our sample. Of the 515 remaining schools, 373 had accessible community use policies. Most of the policies came from 1 of 2 sources: Missouri School Boards' Association Policy Bank<sup>13</sup> (N = 216) or Missouri Consultants for Education<sup>14</sup> (N = 115). Only 42 districts had community use policies that were not extracted from these 2 sources. Frequencies revealed that larger school districts, schools with lower percentage of free/reduced lunch recipients, and metropolitan school districts were more likely to have policies (Table 2).

**Table 2. Characteristics of Missouri School Districts With Community Use Policies**

Characteristic	Number of Districts	% of Sample	% of Total MO Districts
Size (# of students)			
Large (601+)	231	61.6	44.5
Medium (351-600)	49	13.1	9.4
Small (350 or fewer)	95	25.3	18.3
Percent non-White			
Less than or equal to 10%	290	77.3	55.9
Greater than 10%	85	22.7	16.4
% Free/reduced lunch			
Less than or equal to 50%	199	53.1	38.3
Greater than 50%	176	46.9	33.9
RUCA code			
1-3 metropolitan	159	42.4	30.6
4-7 micropolitan	144	38.4	27.7
8-9 rural	72	19.2	13.9

Table 3 identifies coding results. Whereas most districts used exact language from the policy templates from the 2 sources, some were changed or edited. Most policies clearly outlined the process of application, eligible groups, fees, liability, and maintenance. Schools using the MSBA policy template and only 7 (19%) of unique policies mentioned recreation or physical activity.

The results of the regression analyses and adjusted odds ratios (OR) are presented in Table 4. In the first regression analysis, size and percentage of free/reduced lunch were significant predictors of the district having a community use policy. Larger districts were almost twice as likely to have a policy (OR 1.85, 95% CI = 1.02-3.31). Schools with more than 50% of students qualifying for free/reduced lunch were significantly less likely to have a community use policy (OR 0.58, 95% CI = 0.36-0.92). Neither racial/ethnic makeup nor rurality was significant predictors in this model.

**Table 4. Logistic Regression Predicting Presence of Joint Use Policy by District Demographics**

Characteristic	Number of Districts	Odds Ratio	Confidence Interval	p
Size (# of students)				
Large (601+)	264	1.845	1.028, 3.312	p < .05
Medium (351-600)	72	6.555	3.887, 11.053	p < .001
Small (350 or fewer)	183			
Percent non-White				
Less than or equal to 10%	413			
Greater than 10%	106	0.850	0.452, 1.597	p = .613
% Reduced/free lunch				
Less than or equal to 50%	250			
Greater than 50%	269	0.578	0.364, 0.918	p < .05
RUCA code				
Metropolitan	198	0.749	0.391, 1.432	p = .382
Micropolitan	219	0.668	0.386, 1.159	p = .151
Rural	102			

**Table 3. Percentage of Coding Indicators by Policy Template**

Policy Indicator	MSBA* (N = 217)		MCE* (N = 116)		Other (N = 42)	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Application process	13.8	86.2	91.4	8.6	76.2	23.8
Superintendent contact	100.0	0.0	99.1	0.9	92.9	7.1
Specific facility use	6.9	93.1	4.3	95.7	35.7	64.3
Eligible groups	100.0	0.0	99.1	0.9	83.3	16.7
Specific organization	8.3	91.7	96.5	3.5	35.7	64.3
Fees mentioned	100.0	0.0	91.4	8.6	83.3	16.7
Summer/weekend use	97.7	2.3	91.4	8.6	33.3	66.7
Liability mentioned	100.0	0.0	91.4	8.6	83.3	16.7
Maintenance mentioned	99.5	0.5	91.4	8.6	64.3	35.7
Recreation mentioned	99.1	0.9	0.0	100.0	19.0	81.0
Implementation date	91.2	8.8	21.6	78.4	54.8	45.2
Revision date	22.2	77.8	4.3	95.7	19.0	81.0
Additional documents	77.9	22.1	0.9	99.1	11.9	88.1

\*Some MSBA and MCE Policies lacked regulations, explaining the discrepancy in the percentages.

When results showed that the majority of policies came from 1 of 2 sources, with 1 of those sources mentioning recreation and physical activity while the other did not, the second regression analysis was not relevant. This regression model would intuitively predict only the likelihood of a district using the MSBA policy template which referenced recreation/physical activity and thus was not computed.

## DISCUSSION

Our results highlight several important findings. First, over 70% of districts in Missouri have a policy outlining community use of school facilities. This is encouraging as it lays the foundation for promotion and implementation of these policies at the school level. Estimates from the 2006 School Health Policy and Program Study indicate that only 28.8% of the nation's public and private schools provided access to their physical activity spaces and facilities for all persons outside of normal school hours.<sup>15</sup> In spite of the potential for increasing opportunities for physical activity as an outcome of these policies, there has been little improvement in overall community use since 2000.<sup>16</sup> Increasing access to physical activity opportunities through use of school facilities remains a *Healthy People 2020* objective<sup>17</sup> and increasing the capacity of district policies is one way of improving community use at the school level.

Disparities in the availability of physical activity opportunities in low resource areas are well documented.<sup>18-20</sup> Our results showed that schools with a higher percentage of students qualifying for the free/reduced lunch program were less likely to have a community use policy. Opening school gyms or playgrounds in communities where few other physical activity facilities exist seems like a feasible option to improve access. However, in addition to the commonly reported barriers to community use such as liability and maintenance, low-resource schools may have other barriers. Lack of facilities (eg, no gym) or unsafe conditions (eg, poorly maintained playground equipment) may make community use impossible. Future studies should include an assessment of facilities available in underresourced schools. For schools with appropriate facilities, steps should be taken to foster these agreements with communities.

Implementing community use policies is a way to improve access to physical activity with low organizational or personal expense. As schools already exist, there is no expense of creating new facilities. In addition, facilities such as ball fields and playgrounds provide places to actively play for no cost to users. Past literature finds school facilities to be a viable resource for increased physical activity, particularly in underserved areas.<sup>7,8</sup>

The fact that the majority of the community use policies in the current study came from 2 state policy resources was surprising. Although this caused a shift in the analysis plan, it identified an excellent opportunity to influence this policy from the "top-down." Resources for model community use policies already exist in a variety of forms.<sup>21</sup> Providing these policies to the Missouri School Board Association and the Missouri Consultants for Education for dissemination through their policy banks has the potential to impact community use policies within the majority of school districts in Missouri.

Not all community use policies in this study referred to recreation or physical activity. Model policies should include an emphasis on the importance of physical activity to health and well-being. Promoting community use of school facilities should follow the course of school tobacco policies. Tobacco policies often include information on *why* the policy is important.<sup>22</sup> For example, they may state that school campuses are smoke-free because of the dangers of secondhand smoke. Community use policies should emphasize that opening facilities for recreation and physical activity can contribute to student and community health.

## Limitations

This study contributes to the growing literature on policies to promote physical activity, but several limitations warrant mention. First, data on community use policies was not found for 142 districts. The majority of these districts were small (350 students or fewer) and did not have a district website. More thorough investigation to confirm the absence of a policy is needed for further study. Additionally, the mere presence of a district policy does not imply implementation. Even though many Missouri districts have policies, the next logical step in investigation would be to evaluate the use of the policies. An inventory of community use applications through the district offices may provide insight into what groups are using the facilities and the extent of their use and whether they are being used for physical activity. Finally, this analysis was only conducted in 1 state. Because of the unique qualities of state education systems, generalizability may be limited. In spite of these limitations, findings provide a basis for future exploration into these policies as ways to increase access to physical activity opportunities within communities.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

Community use agreements can facilitate increased opportunities for physical activity among students and community members. With reductions or elimination of physical education and recess in schools,

these opportunities are particularly important to help children achieve the daily recommended amounts of physical activity.

Even though the number and composition of school districts may vary by state, this study outlines a feasible methodology for assessing district level community use policies using mainly web-based resources. Finding out the nature and extent of these policies can set the stage for more detailed assessment and intervention planning. It is also important to identify the source of the district policy language. In this Missouri study, districts used language from 2 main policy sources. Facilitating improvements in the language of these source policies can help improve the policies at the district level.

Finally, assessments such as this can foster policy action at the local level. Increasing public awareness of these policies (or lack of policies) can encourage relationships between communities and schools for increased use of these often underutilized publicly owned facilities.

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