West Virginians don’t get enough physical activity. Shared use agreements can help change that. They provide children, families and the community residents safe places to play and get active. Shared use agreements allow schools to make their recreational facilities available to the public during off hours. That means community members can play sports or engage in other fitness activities on school playgrounds, tracks and gymnasiums. The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program team assisted Huntington, West Virginia schools as they explored, drafted, and ultimately adopted shared use agreements with their communities. It worked closely with school wellness councils, providing them with training and technical assistance to help promote the implementation of shared use agreements so that everyone, even those without children, can have safe, convenient and affordable opportunities for recreation and physical activity.

The Challenge
The obesity rate in West Virginia makes up more than 35 percent of the adult population. Among children ages 2-4, more than 16 percent are obese, a rate that only worsens as they get older. Obesity puts individuals at greater risk for additional health problems, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Complications from obesity also have cost West Virginia millions of dollars in healthcare charges. 65% of adolescents are not reaching the recommended 60 hours of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day, often because their communities lack safe space for them to run and play.

“it means breaking down barriers to access to safe places for parents that don’t always necessarily have funding to pay for a gym membership, an afterschool program, or for extracurricular sports activities for their kids.”

–Cathliene Gripper, parent and shared use champion
The American Heart Association (AHA) collaborated with the West Virginia Department of Education’s Office of Child Nutrition to accelerate the adoption of shared use agreements with county wellness councils throughout West Virginia. The AHA provided guidance and technical support to schools in their adoption of shared use within their school wellness policies. Schools were offered communication and other implementation resources to publicize shared use agreements already in place. These efforts allowed parents and community members to know about the gyms, sports fields, playgrounds and running tracks available to them before and after regular school hours.

The Solution

The AHA’s ANCHOR team in Huntington, West Virginia developed an educational video explaining the concept of shared use and how these agreements can provide an entire community with access to safe places to play and resources to encourage physical activity. The team also developed a shared use implementation toolkit for both county school boards and local wellness councils to use as they continue efforts to raise awareness about shared use agreements and the health benefits they provide.

Sustaining Success

Communities gained awareness about local schools that have shared use agreements. They learned how these arrangements benefit the community by providing everyone with convenient, safe and affordable access to recreational facilities to encourage physical activity. County school boards were also encouraged to consider making the necessary policy change to formalize agreements that were previously sealed with handshakes. Now, shared use agreements are being incorporated in school wellness policies throughout the state.

Policy, System and Environmental Change

Results

Shared use agreements are helping West Virginians get active and lead healthier lives by providing the public with easy, safe and affordable opportunities to be physically active. Opening schools as shared use facilities also encourages stronger connections with local neighborhoods. Marmet Elementary School Principal Cindy Schilling said shared use agreements are helping to contribute to a comforting and safe sense of community. “You have to have that family structure and I think having everyone hanging around the school, having that kind of block party feel, where everybody knows everybody’s name provides that,” she said. “We need to get back to that [community feeling] so that everybody can protect and help each other.” Schools recognized as shared use sites also make a strong statement to the broader community about the value of regular physical activity and developing healthy habits, whether they have a direct connection to the school or not.

Get Involved

Parents are encouraged to become champions of wellness. Reach out to your children’s schools and learn about what physical activity opportunities and resources exist. Likewise, community members may contact schools in their neighborhoods to determine whether it is a shared use facility. If it isn’t, contact the school’s principal and learn whether it can be turned into one.