

Cost to Play  
Soc of Sport & Phys Activity ( HHPS 535)

The Aspen Institute's *State of Play 2023* report identifies five big trends around “*Cost of Play*”, and I think many look remarkably similar to what I experience in my work as a coach and teacher.

The first trend is that most Americans view youth and school sports as more deserving of public funding than college or professional sports. I couldn't have put it better myself. Many of the families I work with desperately want their children to play a sport, but they can't afford registration fees, equipment or travel expenses. The reality is that the less superb stories of the value of youth and school sports are those about how the programs prevent obesity and tooth decay while also teaching teamwork and discipline to children, all of which is worth significant public investment. But I'd like to see more detail on which particular costs, like travel or equipment, are presenting the biggest obstacles. The travel and club costs, from what I have seen, are particularly egregious. That's why I believe the resources we put behind solutions should be narrowly tailored to meet those challenges.

The second trend covers the influx of private equity dollars into the youth sports marketplace, which is driving consolidation and higher costs. You're right: Youth sports are becoming increasingly commercialized. “Elite” club programs and select teams often come with steep fees and travel schedules, putting them out of reach for many families. This change threatens to transform youth sports into a castelike system in which only those with financial means are able to participate fully. While that might streamline operations or offer more effective management in some cases, I doubt those efficiencies are realized across the board, particularly in less well served communities. For my own athletes, I am most intent on making opportunities accessible within the school system so that participation is not based on cost or access to one of those expensive club programs.

The third trend is that the state government is increasingly interested in itself and funding youth sports to support inclusivity. I do agree this is a start. Public investment in youth sports, especially in communities that are underserved, can have a big impact on participation and access. Yet I do believe we have to consider how well these efforts work. One off grants are beneficial, but infrastructure, facilities and trained coaches are what have the greatest long term impact. Based on what I've seen, being well funded is not a solution, it's how the funding is applied that is the most important.

The fourth trend examines what states are doing with the mobile sports betting revenue when it comes to funding youth sports programs. I have very mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, it's creative to find new revenue streams to make sports more affordable. On the other hand, youth sports funding linked to gambling can raise ethical and financial questions. Gambling

revenue goes up and down, and absent more appropriate guidelines, the means for divvying up that money can be chaotic. For me, I'd rather see something more stable in funding, say direct from the state or municipality budgets, where programs can count on regular support each year.

The fifth trend of spending more and better spending on athletics in elementary, middle and high schools, is the one I'm most in favor of. Early exposure to sports is crucial for skill development, confidence and healthy habits that will last a lifetime. As a middle school football coach and P.E. teacher, I've witnessed directly how young athletes gain from structured, inclusive programs that are not predicated on an expensive club system. School based programmes are usually cheaper and involve less time required for travel, so that all children can participate to a greater extent. But as more attention and money is poured into these programs, quality coaching, equipment and facilities need to be maintained while preventing the new programs from being feeder systems to elite clubs rather than inclusive.

On the whole, I support Aspen Institute's report because in my experience with youth sports, what they are finding is real. The cost itself is becoming a major deterrent for a lot of families, especially with this growing level of commercialization and the arms race between people who have money to put their kids into opportunities versus those that don't. Young public intervention and specific investments in the younger age groups are some of the necessary actions toward the equity of sport. But I think future research must delve into which costs matter most, how state investment affects participation and what the best solution could be to extend sustainable, inclusive access to all young athletes.

These are profound implications for my work as a coach and an educator. I want to develop football programs and PE lessons that are low cost, inclusive of all students and based on skill work rather than competition or travel. Promoting state and local funding can help keep fees low and give all students the opportunity to play. I also believe that we need to collect data, including on participation and dropout and financial barriers, so we can better advocate for funding and other resources in the future. By prioritizing inclusion, access and affordability, we can enable more kids to experience the long lasting lessons and values in sports.