

Foundation puts ball in kids' court

Activity

Report: 88% of area youth don't meet activity marks

STATE OF PLAY

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Jenny Thomas, a resident of Rochester's 19th Ward and mother of five, has always encouraged her children to be physically active.

From organized team sports to riding bikes to hiking on camping trips to jumping on the trampoline in their backyard, the Thomas kids are on the go. Their mom doesn't need to read the mountain of scientific studies that show an active body means an active mind.

"It's a must for their brain power, to maintain their health, their clarity, to release all those feel-good hormones," Thomas, 42, said. "To stay joyful and happy, they have to be active. Anyone who sits around for a

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Joel Alicea, 17, pitches Wednesday, during a Rochester Hispanic Youth Baseball League game at Baden Park in Rochester. "I feel like kids should always keep playing baseball, you never know what the sport can do for you in life," Alicea says.

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Alicea is among the athletes featured in the *State of Play for Greater Rochester & The Finger Lakes* report.

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER **“To me the biggest gap is accessibility for kids not yet ready for organized sports but they need to have the playground experience.”**

CHRIS LAVIN

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE GENEVA BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

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long period isn’t a happy camper.”

For families who do adhere to active lifestyles they will be shocked to learn that, per a groundbreaking report released Thursday, 88 percent of children (those younger than 18) in Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes are not getting the one hour of physical activity per day as

recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Meanwhile, despite acknowledging the positive work achieved by a legion of private, public and nonprofit organizations and individuals who work with youth in sports and recreation in the six-county region, the report, *State of Play for Greater Rochester & The Finger Lakes*, concluded there are many gaps in the system and areas for improvement.

A survey of 103 sports providers asking what grade they would give the region when it comes to getting kids active through sports resulted in a C+. The comprehensive 42-page regional assessment of participation, programs and facilities was conducted over eight months by the Aspen Institute Sport & Society Program on behalf of the Rochester Area Community Foundation and Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation.

Assembled with input from more than 1,000 people, including a 30-person task force, it provides a playbook on how best to utilize a permanent endowed fund for youth sports at the RACF, established in May with a \$5 million gift from the Wilson Foundation, the charity arm of the late Buffalo Bills founder and owner.

The overarching goal is to strengthen the quality, quantity, and accessibility of youth sports and recreation programs in the region. The two foundations plan to host a series of community roundtable discussions in the near future. Guidelines for grant applications will be released in the fall.

Wilson's foundation previously established youth sports funds in Buffalo and the Detroit, Michigan area, Wilson's hometown.

"Yours' is a community that is not all that different from other communities we studied in Buffalo and Detroit," said Tom Farrey, executive director of Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program. "Parents want their kids involved in sports and yet kids, only 12 percent, are physically active on a daily basis. Clearly kids are not getting as much access to sport and physical activity on a regular basis as they could or should." Aspen's research showed 16 percent of youth in Greater Buffalo and 13 percent in Greater Detroit/Southeast Michigan are physically active at least one hour a day.

Some findings for Greater Rochester:

- » The majority of parents want their kids in the game: 81 percent responded that it's "very" to "somewhat" important that their children are regularly involved in sports; 4 percent believe it's not important at all.
- » There are more than 30-plus sports offered for the region's 227,000 youth at 951 community sports facilities. Monroe County (31) and Ontario (24) offer the most sports to play. For kids who opt out of team sports, there are 18 individual sports to try, including martial arts, curling, fencing and parkour.
- » The average number of sports played by boys is 1.8 and by girls 1.6, confirming the demise of the three-sport athlete. Basketball (27 percent) and soccer (23 percent) for boys and swimming (20 percent), soccer (16 percent) and running (16 percent) for girls are the most popular.

» Access to parks or recreation facilities is greatest in Monroe (93 percent) and Ontario (83 percent) counties and poorest in Wayne (65 percent) and Yates (51 percent).

» Pick-up games in the neighborhood have gone the way of wooden hockey sticks. Only 3 percent of youth play pickup soccer and 4 percent play baseball. It's 10 percent for basketball, 19 percent for football. A good number, 68 percent, still ride their bikes.

Healthy kids

Writing together, Jennifer Leonard, President and CEO of RACF and David O. Egner, her counterpart with the Wilson Foundation, with Farrey, surmised that all stakeholders in the project are united by a belief that "sport can create light, and that light can be shaped to develop healthy, vibrant kids and communities" that benefit everyone.

Utilizing the supercomputer technology of the Global Obesity Prevention Center at Johns Hopkins University, *State of Play* projected that if the percentage of daily active youth was increased from 12 percent to 50 percent in the region and those kids stayed active into adulthood, the health and economic benefits would be eye, if not button, popping. Try some 20,578 fewer obese children, \$348 million in direct medical costs averted (fewer cases of stroke, heart disease, cancer, diabetes), \$369 million in productivity losses averted (fewer sick days, longer working lives), and 27,339 total years of life saved. "I feel like kids should always keep playing baseball, you never know what the sport can do for you in life," said Joel Alicea, 17, a pitcher at East High who in the summer plays in two leagues, including his local Rochester Hispanic Youth Baseball League. "For me, I've been playing since I was 5. It helps mold you into a good person, you meet lots of people, and you learn teamwork. You can't do this sport alone."

Alicea is among the athletes featured in the *State of Play* report. Another is Chad "CJ" Thomas, Chad and Jenny Thomas' 13-year-old son, who played football and baseball in Greece and Gates because opportunities in their city neighborhood didn't exist or weren't desirable when he was younger.

Alicea is encouraged that grant money could become available to improve the fields at Upper Falls near School No. 6 where he and his friends play and attract more kids.

"It could use some help, probably throwing some actual good dirt on it," Alicea said. "When it rains, that field can barely take it. It's just little things."

For some programs held together by rubber bands and the dedication of volunteers, funding for equipment and some sprucing up of a field or gymnasium could mean all the difference.

But the report, on the recommendation of task force members, focuses on broader strategies for structural change that will lead to improving the way young athletes are served and keep them from checking out.

They include asking kids what they want out of sports, re-introducing the age-old concept of free play that fosters a love for a game and teaches

problem solving, encouraging kids to play multiple sports, training parents and volunteers to be better, more nurturing coaches so players don't become discouraged and quit, and devising ways to maximize use of facilities, particularly those at public schools.

And now there is grant funding to give people a kick start.

"It will give people some seed money to think of new and creative ways to address the 88 percent of kids who are spending too much time in front of a screen," Chris Lavin, task force member and executive director of the Geneva Boys & Girls Club, said of Wilson's gift.

Encouraging fun, not a scholarship

The explosion of travel leagues for sports such as basketball, soccer, lacrosse and ice hockey has had a negative ripple effect on participation numbers, the report said.

In-town house leagues have been stigmatized as inferior, "a casualty of tryout-based, early forming travel teams that cater to the 'best' child athletes." "The youth sports landscape in America — and it's reflected in Greater Rochester — has been transformed over the past generation by the chase for the athletic scholarship," Farrey said. "It's a bit of a mirage." Farrey cited other research by Global Obesity that found that in the United States and Europe, physical activity tends to peak at about age 7 for boys and girls and tails off throughout adolescence. More than two-thirds of children rarely exercise at all. "That's crazy," Farrey said. "The question is what role does our current sports system play in contributing to that outcome? We're now sorting the weak from the strong at ever earlier ages to create these travel teams. We're telling some athletes 'You're not so great.' They get the message and check out." In order to keep parents with means from fleeing to travel programs with their future Jack Eichel in tow, sport providers in each town must offer programs that develop a child's skills and eases the strain on a family's time and finances. They must "wring less money out of more participants," the researchers wrote.

Meanwhile, to keep kids from checking out they must be able to check in. Access to facilities — and hence, opportunity to be physically active — was a major topic for the task force, Lavin said.

Transportation issues are barriers across the region. In the city, bus lines aren't always the answer and in rural communities, athletes face long commutes.

During the winter months, playing sports becomes particularly challenging for many in the region. Eighty-two percent of the region's indoor regulation basketball courts lie in Monroe County as do nearly 70 percent of indoor turf fields. Ten of the region's 25 turf surfaces are in southeast Monroe County near the most affluent suburbs. The report said Rochester and the Finger Lakes could be a "hub" for action sports but it lacks facilities for skateboarding and BMX biking, just five in Monroe County and one each in Wayne and Ontario. In the City of Rochester, RocCity Skatepark has been on the drawing board for a decade.

"To me the biggest gap is accessibility for kids not yet ready for organized sports but they need to have the playground experience," Lavin said. "That means access to facilities to just be a kid in a good safe place with athletic equipment."

Lavin said Geneva is already re-thinking how it can better utilize the city's facilities operated by the city recreation department, YMCA and Boys & Girls Club. He said school districts have a major role to play in making their often state-of-the-art, taxpayer-funded gyms and fitness centers more accessible to the public.

"Rather than repeating and duplicating, how can we come together ... and offer better overall recreation to all kids, not just the organized league that dominates these facilities?" Lavin said.

As for coaching, "(Coaches) are the delivery mechanism for quality sports programming," the report said. And yet trained coaches in firstaid, skills and tactics, concussion management and positive, effective motivational techniques are lagging and attrition rates are high. Twenty-six percent of kids quit a sport when the coach has no training with many athletes leaving due to abusive coaches or for lack of playing time by coaches who put winning first. Almost 40 percent of youth coaches in Greater Rochester are volunteer parents.

Rochester can be national model

While noting areas that need improvement, the report highlights many areas where Rochester shines on behalf of young people in need of working up a sweat. It noted a "robust" network of non-profit and government agencies supporting after-school programs, school districts re-introducing recess for kids to enjoy free play, youth initiatives in the City of Rochester led by former NFL players Roland Williams and Tony Jordan that have had positive results, and the city school district doubling its athletic budget to \$3.4 million since 2011 and beefing up modified level teams. Nearly 50 percent of students in grades 7-12 now play a sport, a 40 percent increase.

It also noted the city's immense recreation portfolio that includes 15 Rcenters, 74 baseball fields, 45 basketball courts and 48 playgrounds, along with the sprawling Genesee Valley Park Sports Complex with its ice rink, swimming pool, rowing center and golf course.

"I'd also look at the positive side here," Farrey said. "Rochester, even though it's not a small city it's small enough where you can rally the community around the concept of what good looks like in youth sports. You can and should be able to get key stakeholders around the table to agree to develop a community wide system that makes sport, including unstructured forms of play, more accessible to more kids."

A start is the Youth Community Committee, an informal coalition of leaders in the city that formed organically three years ago to successfully address issues plaguing organized youth football and baseball.

State of Play said the committee's collaborative example could be a "game changer" and suggested it be given a charter and lead role in making youth sports in Greater Rochester all it can be, using the principles of collective impact. "That's what it's going to take, not a series of spray-and-pray approaches," Farrey said. "It's folks coming together and agreeing on a vision for sports that makes sense for Rochester and surrounding areas and setting some goals. Which numbers do you want to move? You guys now have a snapshot of exactly where you are. Rochester has a long history of innovation, embracing new ideas and community spirit and those are really the essentials. And now you have a tool to use."

At the task force's suggestion, one immediate use of grant money might involve establishing a web portal to identify youth sports providers in all

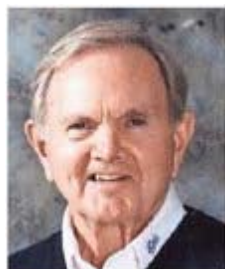
six counties. The site could be a clearing house to share information, recruit coaches and officials, schedule gym, athletic field and ice time, sell used gear, post schedules and crowdfund for those most in need. “It’s all great to hear,” Jenny Thomas said. “When I was young, the programs in the city were top notch. It’s educated me about what’s happening, that people are paying attention to these things.” Farrey called the Wilson Foundation a pioneer in making sport a priority cause. “Money is critical,” he said. “And recognizing that sport matters to the community, and a vast majority of parents, and then putting funding behind it to begin to change the culture, and maybe the systems around youth sports, is powerful and very impressive.”

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Athletes work out at the Pinnacle Athletic Campus in Fishers. Nearly 70 percent of all indoor turf fields in Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes lie in Monroe County, meaning that not all athletes in the region have easy access to winter training and play for sports like football, baseball, lacrosse and soccer. A survey of 103 sports providers asking what grade they would give the region when it comes to getting children active through sports resulted in a C+.

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Ralph Wilson Jr., the late founder and owner of the Buffalo Bills, had a great love of sports and youth. The Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation previously established youth sports funds in Buffalo and the Detroit area, Wilson's hometown.

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