

## **School Sports Equity Toolkit**

How students can make play more accessible in communities



**With support from:**



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- Understand if there is a problem
- Start gathering evidence
- Know your state and public record laws

### 2. **Build student advocacy**

- Connect with other students
- Formalize your group
- Build membership

### 3. **Recruit the support of champions**

- Build the internal support you need
- Identify key advocates to advance your cause
- Find opportunities to activate support

### 4. **Identify a legal argument, if needed**

- Find legal and legislative support
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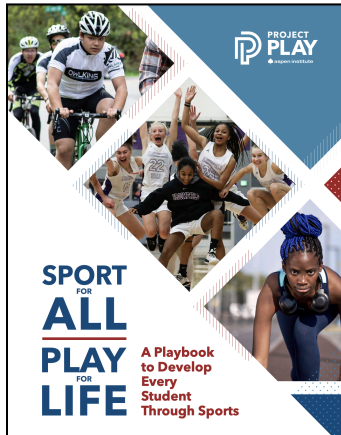
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## INTRODUCTION



The School Sports Equity Toolkit is a resource that builds on Project Play’s [Reimagining School Sports playbook](#), which calls for using the principle of non-discrimination to identify and create more sports opportunities for underrepresented populations. Learn about the Reimagining School Sports project at [as.pn/schoolsports](https://as.pn/schoolsports).

The Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program studied real, youth-led movements for school sports equity to create a resource that helps emerging youth leaders address concerns about access to sport opportunities, equipment and resources.

Through captivating stories and practical strategies, the toolkit supports future leaders by revealing diverse methods, partnerships and pathways to change.

We hope this toolkit, a first-of-its-kind resource designed for students, helps young leaders everywhere use their voice, passion, and talents in service of students in their community who lack opportunities to play.

## A NOTE OF GRATITUDE

The toolkit was built with the guidance of student leaders featured in the resource. The Aspen Institute thanks each of them, with a special note of gratitude to former Sports & Society Program intern Matt Diaz, whose work with the Fair Play Coalition served as the basis for our larger study of successful student-led advocacy efforts around the country.

The Sports & Society Program would also like to thank ESPN Corporate Citizenship for its support in making this toolkit possible.

## HOW TO READ THE TOOLKIT

The toolkit distills lessons learned from real stories. However, the strategies identified will not apply equally to all circumstances. States, cities, counties and school districts have very different needs, interests, laws and capacities. Readers should find those elements of the toolkit that are most relevant to their mission, project or community.

While readers can read the toolkit front-to-back, we also encourage jumping to the case study or chapter that matches your needs and interests.

We do not prescribe a single solution for all situations. Rather, we hope the toolkit inspires readers to discover the best strategies for them, whether that be starting a business, hosting a panel or speaking with a state senator. What should be universal in this process is the end goal – equitable sports access for all students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, family income, health, disability or other personal characteristics.

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## INSPIRATION

### **Matt Diaz**

New York, New York

Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters



Our principal case study comes from New York City, where a movement to expand access to school sports teams for more Black and Latino/a students began with a simple question from Matt Diaz, a Latino student at Bronx Academy of Letters:

“Why can’t I play volleyball at my school?”

An avid player, Matt was frustrated that he couldn’t play the sport he loved. He and others began asking questions of each other. They organized themselves. They

identified champions to help collect data. Soon, they realized the scale of the problem. Compared to other New York City public high school students, they learned that Black and Latino/a students are far less likely to have the chance to play the sports they love, or in which they excel. In 2018, Black and Latino/a students were twice as likely as students of other races and ethnicities to lack access to any public high school sports team. There also were 17,323 Black and Latino/a high school students attending schools with zero Public School Athletic League (PSAL) teams.

Ultimately, they identified legal arguments related to [New York City's Human Rights Law](#) – city council members, pro-bono lawyers, and other adults all helped. They protested and attracted media attention. They sued the city and reached a promising settlement in 2022.

**Noor Alexandria Abukaram**

Sylvania, Ohio

Sylvania Northview High School



At the district invitational in 2019, Noor Abukaram ran a personal best in the 5K of 22 minutes, 22 seconds. She was on a high after her high school cross country team qualified for regionals. It didn't last. Noor checked the individual placings and didn't see her name. She had been disqualified for wearing her hijab without a waiver.

Distraught and humiliated, Noor consulted her family. Ultimately, she decided to share her story on social media. As her experience went viral, Noor learned that she was not alone. Muslim female athletes in the U.S., and around the world, experience the same barrier to participation. [Noor stepped into the moment](#). She conducted 130 interviews over six months. She organized a panel discussion in Sylvania with prominent Muslim female athletes. When an Olympic athlete created the hashtag #LetNoorRun, Noor's experience grew into [a global movement](#).

Noor wanted bold, systemic change. She elected not to sue and instead pursued legislative action at the state level. A lawyer and family friend helped her craft a vision for religious expression that did not require a waiver. Soon after, a state senator worked with Noor to draft [Senate Bill 181](#), a state law that prohibits Ohio schools and interscholastic organizations from adopting rules banning the wearing of religious apparel during athletic events. In February 2022, it was signed into law by Governor Mike DeWine after passing unanimously in both the House and Senate.

**Rishan Patel**

Redwood City, California

CEO & Founder, Alley-Oop Kids



Playing travel basketball from a young age in cities like East Palo Alto, California, Portland, Oregon, and Oakland, California, opened Rishan Patel's eyes to a glaring lack of sport gear access and equity. Noticing piles of nearly new sports gear in his family's and friends garages, Rishan decided to make a one-time donation of equipment to a local, underserved school to start tackling this inequity. When donating the equipment



to Summit Prep (Redwood City, California) he discovered they were a public charter school with “zero athletic budget and just one football for 400 kids.” Shocked by this unfairness, Rishan learned of a systemic problem: many low-income, urban schools lack the equipment to offer meaningful sports opportunities to their students.

As the CEO and founder of a sports equity nonprofit, Alley-Oop Kids, Rishan resolved to tackle the issue. He recruited friends to help him fundraise for and install a storage shed filled with sports gear at a school in East Palo Alto. Seeing the positive impact of this, he quickly grew to five schools, calling this initiative Lending Lockers. Through a combination of local equipment drives, outreach to CEOs of sports equipment corporations, storytelling, and social media marketing, Rishan now has Lending Lockers in 65 schools and has publicly started a campaign to grow to 100.

### **Ashley Badis**

Ewa Beach, Hawaii

James Campbell High School



Photo: University of Hawai'i/Photographer Jeff DePonte

Ashely Badis swam and played water polo at James Campbell High School in Ewa Beach, Hawaii. Frustrated over a lack of equipment, support and pool access, Ashley

decided to make her voice heard in her senior year. Why did only the girls team have to train in the ocean and use the Burger King bathroom as a changing room?

In a team meeting with the principal and athletic director, she voiced her concerns. Ashley felt they had fallen on deaf ears. Administrators even threatened to cancel the season if complaints continued. Ashley and her parents started asking questions. She attended meetings and talked to girls in other sports at the school. Ultimately, she learned that the Hawaii Department of Education (DOE) had started hosting meetings with female teams to address a Title IX complaint from the ACLU.

In speaking with the ACLU, Ashley finally felt heard and realized she was not alone. Today, Ashley is one of four plaintiffs in a class-action, [Title IX lawsuit](#) against the high school. She is demanding accountability. Ashley wants future generations of female athletes in Hawaii to receive fair and equitable equipment, support and access to school sports. In a sign of things to come, the state [DOE approved spending more than \\$60 million to build new girls locker rooms](#), including one at Ashley's former school.

## **STRATEGIES**

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### **5. Take action for change**

- Define the call to action
- Determine the venue for change
- Press your case

# 1. **RECOGNIZE AND DOCUMENT THE DISPARITY**

No action can occur until a problem is identified

**The pursuit of sports equity requires a thorough understanding of the issue itself. After a problem has been identified, you must determine if it is isolated or systemic. In the movements we studied, student leaders took proactive steps to figure out how widespread the problem actually became. They collected data, spoke to peers, raised it with administrators, read relevant public records and conducted observations. Through such a process, student leaders established the scale of the equity issue, a necessary step for determining appropriate solutions.**

In New York City, advocates for greater sports access first had to understand that a problem – inequitable access to sports opportunities – exists. PSAL, the city’s public school league, “is very knowledgeable, and they know their system (regarding how sports team decisions are made),” said Fair Play Coalition founding member David Garcia Rosen, who served as athletic director at Bronx Academy of Letters, a public school in which 99% of the students live below the poverty line. “Being educated and understanding the system is important because you are going against the knowledgeable.”

The Fair Play Coalition noticed that the demographic of a school correlates with how many sports are offered at that school. “This inequitable distribution of PSAL funds is likely a result of the proliferation of small schools over the past decade and the PSAL’s inaction in responding to the new landscape of public high school education in New York City,” Rosen wrote in a 2013 report that began highlighting the disparities.

When their high schools did field teams, Black and Latino/a students had fewer choices of sports. The average Black or Latino/a student in New York City public high schools attended a school with 15.6 PSAL teams, compared to 25 teams for the average student of another race or ethnicity. Schools with the highest percentage enrollment of Black and Latino/a students were around five times more likely to have their applications for new teams denied than schools with the lowest percentage enrollment of these students. The city spent less money on sports for the higher-populated Black and Latino/a schools

Fair Play Coalition members also visited different schools to witness the differences for themselves. Seeing the disparity in person confirmed to them the racial injustice of sports distribution. The Fair Play Coalition members also recognized disparities in schools by attending monthly meetings through IntegrateNYC and Teens Take Charge, youth-led organizations fighting for educational equity in New York City public schools. Students talked about their personal experiences and how they lacked access to sports. Some students attend schools with a gym and auditorium in the same room.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Understand if there is a problem**

After Noor posted her experience of disqualification on social media, she learned quickly that her experience was not an isolated incident. Noor received dozens of messages on Instagram from other Muslim girls across the U.S. who had also been barred from participation due to wearing a hijab. That understanding inspired her to embrace media requests and continue telling her story publicly. Ashley didn't realize how serious the disparities in facility access were until she learned of the ongoing DOE meetings with girls sports teams at James Campbell High School. After Ashley attended the DOE meeting for water polo, she reached out to other female athletes in the school and learned that other sports had issues with access to locker rooms but were scared to make their voices heard for fear of retaliation.

The lesson? Don't assume that you are alone in your fight. Talk to others.

### **Start gathering evidence**

As you come to understand there's a problem, start gathering data and stories to support your cause.

Years before other efforts produced more data in New York City, David Garcia Rosen initially collected statistics by using the school-league website to identify schools with PSAL-funded teams; the city's online high school directory to determine the names and addresses of all high schools; and the Department of Education's website to find the percentages of White, English language-learning and special education students. Such inequities in the school system were a major reason why many of the first members joined the Fair Play Coalition. Members also heard many student stories about how

disparities in access to opportunities had affected students' education, including the unequal distribution of sports teams.

Of course, finding quality data may be easier said than done. For Noor, there was no actual record of her disqualification. Her name was never posted at the race. No public record existed. Her understanding of the scale of the problem stemmed primarily from stories she received on social media and the public reaction to her experience.

### **Know your state public record laws**

It can be easier and more efficient to first build relationships to gather information, but sometimes that's not possible. You should know which meetings you can attend and documents that should be available to the public. Every state public record law is different. The National Freedom of Information Coalition has state-by-state [Freedom of Information Act resources](#) and [sample record request letters](#) for each state. Identify which school district administrators are best suited to handle your requests (legal counsel and communications offices are often the most effective). Documents showing administrative policies and decisions on sports offerings can help you analyze if discriminatory trends exist.

## 2. BUILD STUDENT ADVOCACY

### Find peers to build a community of support

**Systemic change often begins humbly, with a single or small group of committed people who care about the issue and construct a vision for change. Over time, that community grows, nudged consistently by the proactive efforts of leaders. They take steps to connect with others, hear stories, formalize membership, build online presence and host events. By making it easy and comfortable to participate in the community, they build a support network that can speak loudly and in unison.**

The Fair Play Coalition began as a small, informal group at Bronx Academy of Letters. Initially, the members had to decide whether its movement should be under an active organization. By 2018, students created a citywide coalition called Fair Play – including purchase of a domain name and website – to fight inequality in school sports.

After the Fair Play Coalition heard stories all over the city and saw the schools' disparities firsthand, the group was convinced of how deep the inequities were in the New York City public school system. The next question: How to get a loud enough voice to be heard in America's biggest city? Speaking up for what's right became the most powerful change agent.

The Fair Play Coalition gathered stories of students across the city and solidified the purpose of the work. The stories were stored via email and used for press releases, lobbying, or meetings with city council members. The group created a mission statement saying that the Fair Play Coalition "stands for all high school students in New York City public schools to have equitable access to PSAL, and to all athletic fields and courts controlled by the (Department of Education) — regardless of the size of the school, the borough in which the school is located, or the demographics of the school."

This statement allowed members to reach out to other organizations doing similar work and gather more student stories. Most of the outreach was through word of mouth, which made people feel the richness of the stories. The Fair Play Coalition hosted meetings to gather more student stories and generate more participation from social justice organizations in the city.

In a youth-led movement like this one, students needed to lead the conversation. That was vital. Utilizing student voices from the beginning allowed others to feel comfortable to tell their stories or participate in organizing. This approach motivated students to create change in their city.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Connect with other students**

As your cause and/or story gains traction, peers may want to join the movement. That interest can create a platform for you to grow your following, draw interest and build solidarity around your cause. After Noor's story of disqualification went viral, interest grew. She decided to host a panel discussion at Lourdes University (Sylvania, Ohio) with prominent Muslim athletes who experienced discrimination for having worn religious apparel in competition. The forum opened an opportunity to connect in person with other Muslim female athletes and foster dialogue around a shared experience.

After Rishan realized that low-income schools lacked the budget for sports gear, he recruited friends to help him fundraise a few hundred dollars to buy a storage shed for a school in East Palo Alto, California. Together, they collected and donated as much sports gear as they could from friends, neighbors and schools.

### **Formalize your group**

Formalizing your cause or group will help. A key driver of Noor's movement was the hashtag #LetNoorRun on social media. Started in the aftermath of Noor's story going viral, the hashtag became a symbol of the community that grew to support Noor's efforts. Noor later converted the hashtag into a website that is now home to media, merchandise and information about Senate Bill 181.

Rishan formalized his commitment through Alley-Oop Kids, a 501(c)(3). Following the success of his first on-campus gear storage unit in East Palo Alto, Rishan started a pilot program of Lending Lockers at five Bay Area schools. The process includes partnering with an under-resourced school, recruiting regional student captains, providing standard supplies, and creating email and social media templates. Captains play a key by leading communication with their partner school to finalize locker logistics and gear needs based on grades served and programs offered. Captains maintain a year-round supply of equipment through gear donation drives in their community and, if needed, an Alley-Oop partnership with Good Sports.

Ultimately, the goal is to get support for your cause. Take the time to create a level of organization that helps you achieve that. It can be as simple as a social media account



or hashtag, T-shirts and website. Importantly, your mission and vision statements should be clear and inspiring. Check out other organizations doing similar social justice work to find language that makes sense for your group.

## **Build membership**

Be proactive to grow your membership. By recruiting Regional Student Captains, Rishan created a pathway for peers to support access to sport in their communities. For example, Rishan identified 13-year-old and 10-year-old siblings at a preparatory academy in Oakland, California. According to Rishan, they live in a community surrounded by drug dealers and prostitutes and have become “social entrepreneurs who want to tackle sports equity together by being Lending Locker Captains.”

There are many ways to grow your community. One way to start is by hosting physical and virtual spaces in which students can express their concerns and unite around the issues. Serve food and drinks. Ask students what pronouns they prefer to potentially feel comfortable opening up, what they’ve observed in their sports experience and what they would like to see done differently. This will also create a social environment that reduces any pressure new students may feel to speak up. It’s important for students to feel like they can be leaders in their respective ways and feel comfortable. Make it a room where people want to be – and they know why they’re there. Before long, the room will be packed. Students will jump at an opportunity to create a better life for themselves and generations to come.

You’ll grow membership through word of mouth and inspiration. Direct one-on-one outreach is extremely powerful. This approach builds personal relationships and sends a message that every individual can make a difference. As you organize students, encourage them to invite their friends. Create an incentive for each student to bring five others with them. Make sure there’s a sign-up sheet at every meeting to identify who attended for future communications.

### 3. RECRUIT THE SUPPORT OF CHAMPIONS

Find knowledgeable adults to strengthen your cause/case

**Every cause, movement or change project inevitably hits roadblocks. Find the guidance you need, particularly as you experience frustration, come across gaps in knowledge or identify opportunities for action that you need help accessing. In the movements we studied, student leaders utilized many different champions, ranging from family, subject experts, social influencers, lawmakers and other professional adults. While each champion's impact varied by project and situation, we found that student leaders remained consistently open and proactive towards the critical role of helpful adults in strengthening their cause/case.**

Recruit adult professionals to support your effort. From the beginning, the Fair Play Coalition sought support from New York City council members, lawyers, nonprofits, activists, athletes, youth-serving and recreation providers, and others. In fact, one of the founding members of the Fair Play Coalition was an athletic director. This was key to understanding the system. Athletic directors recognize if there is a systemic problem preventing access to sports in their schools.

"What led to success is we built a lot of relationships," said David Garcia Rosen of the Fair Play Coalition. "Meet people where they are. You must be willing to support people and their work too. Be persistent." Organizing is about caring for an issue and coming together to fight for it. To organize individuals, you need to care about their individual needs and stories as well.

Matt and other students successfully lobbied a city council member to sponsor a bill requiring the Department of Education to provide more transparency about data and policies related to school sports. To add a team, school principals must submit a request to the PSAL, which was criticized for not explaining why some schools get teams and others don't to the detriment of Black and Latino/a students. Many of PSAL's policies, procedures, resource allocation and decision-making criteria had not been publicly available. The bill, which passed unanimously by a 47-0 vote, requires the Department of Education's website to post student demographics, athletic team requests, athletic facilities used for afterschool sports, and funding for coaches, referees, athletic directors, equipment, uniforms, and transportation.

Through merchandise, the Fair Play Coalition also attracted support from social justice activists in professional sports. The “Take a Knee” movement had started to take off in the NFL. Some players, led by Colin Kaepernick, sent a message about police brutality and social injustice by refusing to stand for the national anthem before games. This inspired Fair Play Coalition students to make shirts with the organization’s name and Kaepernick’s number 7.

By creating merchandise, the movement became branded and gained the support of Kaepernick’s social justice campaign. Students simply tagged Kaepernick on Instagram to get noticed. The Fair Play Coalition’s photos were liked by Kaepernick and the Know Your Rights Camp, a campaign founded by Kaepernick to raise awareness on higher education, self-empowerment, and how to properly interact with police.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Build the internal support you need**

Champions are individuals that support, execute, drive, or embody some form of assistance to help your cause of sports equity. Mainly, we are talking about adults who can help. Not everyone must be an expert in sports.

For starters, consider which champions will be part of your inner circle to offer not only strategic guidance or information for your movement, but can also provide social and emotional support as you endure any ups and downs. You’ll need an inner circle that believes in your cause, will stand in your corner, opens doors for you and can advise you as big decisions come up. Naturally, family may be the first place you turn. Ashley’s parents played a critical role in supporting her major decisions. After stepping in as a parent coach, Ashley’s dad was the person who learned of the DOE meetings at James Campbell and invited her to attend. When the moment came to form a class-action lawsuit, both her parents stood behind her. Similarly, Noor’s mom and cousin helped her make the initial decision to go public with her story.

### **Identify key advocates to help advance your cause**

Identify adult professionals who can help advance your cause. Advocacy comes in many forms, including not only public calls for change, but also private conversations with key

decision makers who can advance your agenda. Who will back your story and push it to the next level? Who has the incentive to rally behind your movement the most?

Ohio State Sen. Theresa Gavarone played the key role in advancing Noor's cause from social media movement to state legislation. After learning of Noor's story, Gavarone invited Noor to coffee in December 2019. They discussed the Ohio High School Athletic Association's response to her experience and Noor shared concerns that the association's minor rule changes were not enough. In that moment, the foundation for the Senate bill was born.

For Ashley, the [ACLU of Hawai'i](#) became a major strategic partner in her quest for equitable treatment of girls' high school sports in Hawaii. Based on the response she received from school administrators, it was clear to Ashley that a larger change was needed. When Ashley met with the ACLU she felt heard. She also found an advocate for gender equity who issues demands across the state to address disparities in access to locker rooms for female athletes.

### **Find opportunities to activate support**

There are many ways to gain support. Create online petitions. Attend as many social justice advocacy events as possible within your community to understand these movements and network with other organizations that could help. Go to local sports events armed with statistics about sports inequities in schools, bring merchandise or flyers, and create a social media campaign. Testify in educational meetings. Create teach-ins, where lawyers and students educate the public on how lobbying works. The bottom line: Identify places where you can continue to spread your message and gain more support. Be creative. Think outside the box.

## 4. IDENTIFY A LEGAL ARGUMENT, IF NEEDED

Get clear on whether rights are being violated

**Projects to grow student opportunities in sports don't always require a legal argument to compel organizations to act. But some do. As your efforts in policymaking and community organizing unfold, you may reach a point where a legal pathway to change is a consideration. Be sure to find a legal aid organization to help you make sense of the issue, identify appropriate laws and consider the process and ramifications of a legal challenge.**

New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), a nonprofit civil rights firm in New York City, became a key champion by providing pro-bono services for the Fair Play Coalition. For example, NYLPI filed Freedom of Information Law requests in order to obtain more data from the New York City Department of Education about administrative policies and decisions. Ultimately, NYLPI filed an anti-discrimination lawsuit against the department and the city's public school sports league.

"Lawsuits are only one tool," said Caroline Sousloff, a lawyer who worked on the case. "That is why I think it's so important that our effort also involved people who were savvy in making policy and community organizing. Because it is also very important to engage in the democratic process."

In New York, lawyers created a unique legal argument around the city's Human Rights Law, which prohibits discrimination based on a person's race, color or national origin in public accommodations, such as public high schools. The law is New York City's local anti-discrimination statute and is comparable to Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Four students and youth-led organization Integrate NYC filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of all Black and Latino/a public high school students in the city, alleging that New York City's education department and public school sports league violated the Human Rights Law by discriminating against Black and Latino/a students based on how high school sports were administered.

"The way the New York City Human Rights Law allows you to prove racial discrimination is through proving that policies are having a disparate impact, which is why the data was so important," Sousloff said. "Many major cities have local laws aimed at fighting discrimination and promoting equity, and these are an interesting place to look to start developing your arguments."

The settlement is expected to increase the number of sports teams accessible to Black and Latino/a students. The city must provide class counsel with quantitative and qualitative metrics to ensure the terms are being met. Lawyers put mechanisms in place that will enable students to have a voice in shaping the programming available to them in the future, such as a school sports survey. Students will have a say on what sports get added.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Find a legal aid organization**

If your movement seems like it needs legal help, you may want to get a local lawyer on board early to help separate what your coalition can and should take on. As Noor began developing her vision for reform, she was referred by her lawyer cousin to a partner in her firm who worked on sports and had expertise in authoring rules and regulations for organizations. The legal insights helped Noor draft the first iteration of the bill that would later be re-introduced as Senate Bill 181.

Similarly, once Ashley and her parents made the call to pursue Title IX accountability at her high school, she received support from Legal Aid at Work, a nonprofit that provides free assistance. Legal Aid at Work has a program dedicated specifically to [Fair Play for Girls in Sports](#), helping Ashley think through the process and ramifications of a Title IX challenge.

If you are looking for legal help, [LawHelp.org](#) has a state-by-state map of state-specific legal aid information. The [American Bar Association](#), or your state bar association, is another resource to help you find legal aid, pro bono programs, free legal answers, and other resources.

### **Explore local, state and federal laws**

Does your city have an anti-discrimination law to make a legal case like New York City? Key questions to consider: Does the law apply to your education department or local athletics league? How would you have to prove discrimination? Some cities call themselves "Human Rights Cities," meaning local governments have recognized their

responsibilities under international human rights law and developed their own human rights agendas to promote the human rights of their constituents.

Besides local and state laws, your situation also could fall under provisions of the Civil Rights Act. Resources from the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and [American Civil Liberties Union](#) could be cited in your complaint.

### **Familiarize yourself with human rights principles**

The [Children’s Bill of Rights in Sports](#), while positioned as an expression of culturally normative rights and not legal rights, also may be useful in guiding your argument in whatever setting you choose. Drafted by the Aspen Institute with the help of sports policy and human rights organizations, the resource recognizes the human rights that all youth have the right to play and develop as people through sports. The statement has been endorsed by more than 150 leading sports organizations and 300 athletes. In 2022, the [City of Houston](#) and other municipalities added their endorsements.

Not every community will have the means or desire to involve lawyers, nor is it the preferred first choice. That’s OK. Just know that a rights-based argument can help.

## 5. TAKE ACTION FOR CHANGE

Press your case in all available venues

**You've laid the groundwork for support. Now, it's time to press your case, with a clear unwavering story, in the venue(s) that can best create the desired change. There's not a one-size, fits-all action plan. The ability to use different tools, depending on the situation, is valuable. Every action should focus on your ultimate goal of reaching sports equity in your community. Above all, be persistent. Center student voice. Stand up for the change you know is needed.**

In New York, students testified in front of the Education Committee of the New York City Council. They spoke about the injustices of sports equity in their schools and how sports benefit them individually. Students had grown tired of the inequitable access to school sports and wanted local elected officials to hear them.

One way the Fair Play Coalition gained support was to protest in front of the New York City Department of Education building with loud chants of slogans, carrying signs and making speeches. Media were invited to cover rallies. A former council member disagreed with protesting before talking to elected officials. "Negotiate before you protest and rally," he said. "You should try to talk to the decision makers." The students opted against that approach. They were angry at the racial injustice in their schools.

Ultimately, the Fair Play Coalition filed a class-action complaint that included the stories of individual students who had struggled to get opportunities to play the sports they loved. The result is that small schools will be grouped together to share teams and 200 new sports teams will be created by 2024, targeting the most underserved students. The legal case dragged out for four years before the settlement. The Fair Play Coalition stayed patient with an eye on achieving their objective.

It's important to note that after each action was taken – whether it was the bill for more transparency, student testimony or developments with the lawsuit – the Fair Play Coalition amplified student voices. Press releases were distributed. Many rallies occurred at City Hall. Updates were shared through social media using #FairPlayForAll. For four years, action meant continuing to apply public pressure for a more equitable school sports system that will impact future generations.



## **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

### **Define the call to action**

In every movement, a point in time comes when you must make clear your vision for change. What exactly are you calling for? What is the specific change that you believe needs to happen?

After Noor's story went viral, the Ohio High School Athletic Association made a few minor changes to their religious apparel policy. Noor wanted more. Her vision for religious expression was wider reaching and more permanent. The Senate bill helped her achieve that by eliminating the need for waivers, covering all interscholastic activities (not just sports) and including religious apparel beyond just the hijab.

Before you create any action plan, you need to get your story established. Who are you? What is the issue at hand? Why is it important to understand this issue? What should we do? As Fair Play Coalition's David Garcia Rosen said, "Defining what sports is, is extremely important. Why does sports matter? Why does this inequity matter?"

### **Determine the venue for change**

Depending on your school district's structure, this could be telling stories before city and county councils, local school boards, and state boards of education. For instance, Noor testified four times at the Ohio Senate in support of the Senate bill, alongside the Center for Christian Virtue, ACLU of Ohio and Ohio Jewish Communities.

City councils – the avenue used in New York City – are often divided into committees of interest, such as finance, education, health, and other areas. Importantly, testifying at your local city council meeting about educational matters can build student advocacy. You can also gather student stories and represent them at these meetings. Ask why the city, county or state hasn't addressed the disparities. Identify the key decision-makers, where you should be speaking, and create momentum for your movement.

### **Press your case**

At the end of the day, there is no substitute for persistence in your quest. The bigger the change, the more you may need to push through resistance, step outside your

comfort zone and chart a course for others. Rishan now envisions 100 Lending Lockers across the country and is taking steps towards that reality. In addition to a website and marketing campaign, he introduced a GoFundMe page where sponsors can fund Lending Lockers. After Ashley and her sister became lead plaintiffs in their Title IX case, Ashley took the additional bold step of sharing her story in The New York Times. She had resisted such a step earlier in the process, for fear of retaliation and negative consequences on her college admissions. Ultimately, a point in time came where she decided that going public was necessary to make the case for change.

Don't be discouraged. Find ways to get the word out. Be bold in your vision.

## Conclusion

Learning how others organized in the past gives you a path forward to act. Don't reinvent the wheel. Past organizers created it for you to thrive. The Fair Play Coalition based some of its work on Martin Luther King Jr.'s six steps for nonviolent, direct action – information gathering, educating others, personal commitment, negotiations, direct action, and reconciliation. Study the leaders, activists and entrepreneurs that came before you who have created lasting change in your community, as well as those who created programs that closed opportunity gaps. How did they do it? There are many vehicles for positive change.

If you attend a school that doesn't have a sport you would like to play, ask your athletic director how to add it. If you can get the sport introduced, terrific. If not, what is the barrier? Are there not enough players? Is there not a coach? Or is the system in place within your state, city, county or school district not allowing you to have sports? When that last question comes into play, that's when this toolkit becomes most useful.

Taking action is not easy and there won't be one upward arc of success. There will be times when you want to give up. There might be council members who laugh at you. There will be meetings in which you invite 200 people and only 10 appear. There will be plenty of disappointments throughout this process.

Stay motivated by focusing on the impact you want to make. Imagine the sports opportunities you can secure for the next generation. Think about the younger generation that will no longer worry about sports opportunities, thanks to your work. Be inspired by the people that came before you who created change.

You can be that person too. Create a new reality for this world.

## **Credits**

This report was written by Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program project manager Vincent Minjares and editorial director Jon Solomon.

Project guidance came from Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program executive director Tom Farrey.

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An initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, Project Play develops, applies and shares knowledge that helps stakeholders build healthy communities through sports.

[www.ProjectPlay.us](http://www.ProjectPlay.us)