

# SUMMARY REPORT

# YOUTH FITNESS, SPORTS, AND OPPORTUNITY

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

- 2023 -



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# PURPOSE & GOALS

In light of the strong evidence regarding the health benefits of youth aerobic fitness and youth sports participation, this project was initiated to:

- Summarize the importance and status of youth fitness in Lincoln, Nebraska;
- Gain a better understanding of our community's landscape of youth sports, including barriers to participation; and
- Identify opportunities to improve fitness among Lincoln's youth.

This project was considered timely and urgent given recent local data that revealed decreasing rates of school children able to successfully complete the Fitnessgram PACER, a multistage aerobic capacity test. While Lincoln's goal is that 80% of children/youth (grades 4-8) pass the PACER, only 27.1% of census tracts achieved that goal in the 2018-19 school year. This trend worsened following the COVID pandemic, with only 16.9% of census tracts achieving the 80% goal in the 2022-2023 school year (Figure 1).

## DATA COLLECTION

Online surveys were distributed to head, assistant, and volunteer high school coaches in the Lincoln Public Schools (LPS). The response rate was 44% (n=145). In addition, personal interviews were conducted with 13 local youth sports leaders.

## RESULTS & HIGHLIGHTS

- Among all schools, students athletes were positively described by coaches, with no differences between Title I and non-Title I schools.
- Among all schools, coaches reported a positive sports culture (73%) vs. a negative sports culture (27%). However, variations existed between Title I schools (56% vs. 44%) and non-Title I schools (83% vs. 17%).

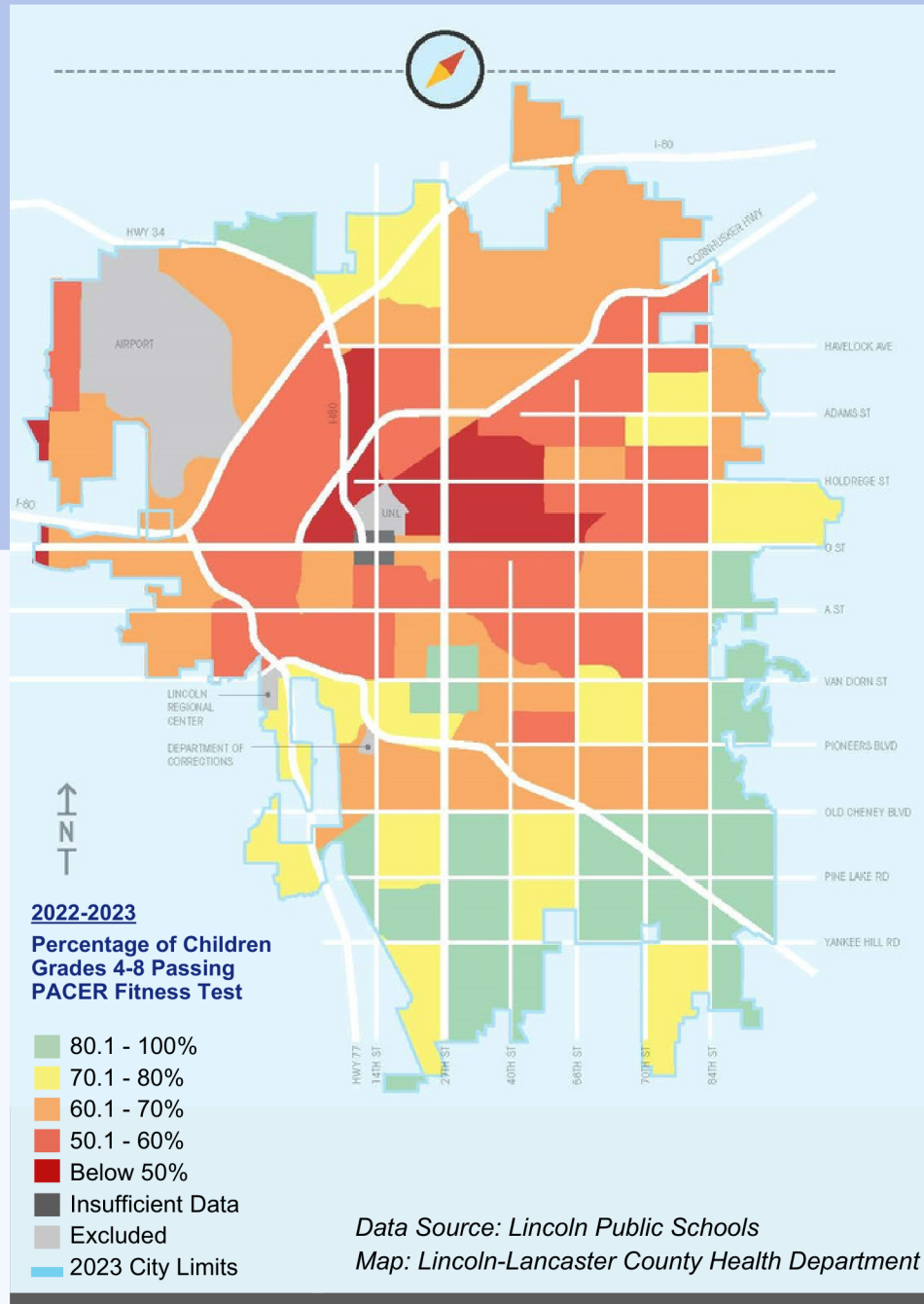
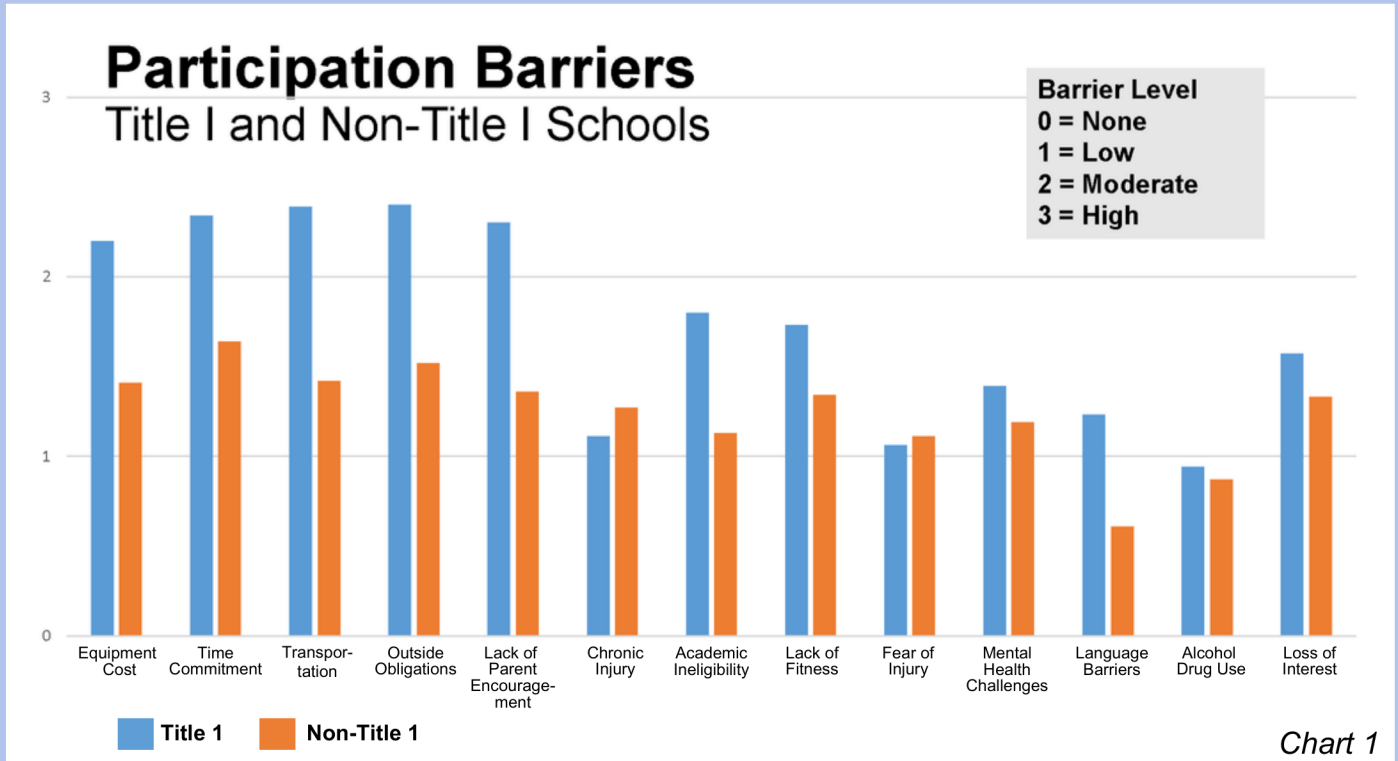


Figure 1

## RESULTS & HIGHLIGHTS (cont.)

- The most significant barrier for participation in high school youth sports was time commitment, followed by outside obligations, and transportation. Coaches at Title I schools reported higher levels of participation barriers in nearly every category (Chart 1).



- For all sports, students from Title I schools were least likely to participate in off-season sports programming, commonly referred to as club, select, elite, and/or traveling teams.
- Among high school coaches who also coached a club sports team, the top participation barrier in club sports by a wide margin was participation fees and costs.
- Try-out rates for every sports season (fall, winter, and spring) were lower for Title I schools.
- Local youth sport leaders identified the top stressors that Lincoln families face regarding youth sports as affordability, followed by time commitment. They identified youth who were most likely to participate in youth sports as having involved parents, financial means, and prior experience.
- Sports specialization, especially at a young age, was a consistent concern by high school coaches and youth sport leaders.
- High school coaches generally felt well-equipped to support and/or refer student athletes who have mental health concerns (anxiety, depression, eating disorders, etc.).

## RESULTS & HIGHLIGHTS (cont.)

- The most frequently identified notable trend in high school sports was the growing influence of club sports. Coaches from Title I schools viewed this trend as a barrier to low-income students due to cost or as a 'pre-requisite' for high school sports participation. Coaches from non-Title I schools viewed this trend as a reason for sports specialization, athlete burnout, and over-lapping schedules.
- High school coaches were asked, "If you had the ability to change one thing about competitive high school sports in Lincoln, what would it be?" The most frequently recommended response was to improve and/or prioritize middle school athletic programming.

## CALL TO ACTION

Following a review of national research regarding the known positive impact of youth sports on physical health, mental health, academic success, socialization, and leadership skills, the Community Health Endowment (CHE), in collaboration with ESU 18 and Lincoln Public Schools, offer the following Call to Action for Lincoln:

- Lincoln has a vested interest in improving youth fitness based on research that supports its correlation with better physical and mental wellness, educational outcomes, and more.
- Improved youth fitness is rooted in regular access to fitness/sports activities in the community. Increased access can occur if stakeholders recognize and respond to participation barriers in ways that align with best practices.
- Lincoln can elevate and launch this important work through the creation of a Youth Fitness, Sports, and Opportunity Task Force to develop a community response and strategic plan regarding the findings of this study; obtain feedback from a broader representation of stakeholders, including students and families experiencing barriers to participation; identify best practices for youth sports delivery and participation in Lincoln; further assess the socio-economic barriers of youth sports and fitness participation; and evaluate the impact of youth sports on the local economy.

**For the full report and specific recommendations for Task Force consideration, please visit [www.chelincoln.org/youthfitness](http://www.chelincoln.org/youthfitness).**

