



Saving Public  
Access to Community  
Space Everywhere

## BRIEFING NOTE

# MAXIMIZING COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOL SPACE: PREPARING FOR A NEW NORMAL

## PREAMBLE

Now that a greater portion of the population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19, some school boards are gradually allowing the community use of their facilities while following the Provincial and local public health units' requirements. This document outlines the vision of the SPACE Coalition (Saving Public Access to Community space Everywhere) for enhancing and prioritizing community use as this is happening.\*

## ISSUE

Ontarians have felt a lack of connection during the COVID-19 pandemic, even as frontline workers, families, and communities worked together to support each other's safety and wellbeing. Social connections beyond households have been seriously affected during the pandemic, taking a toll on the social development of children and mental health of all. The social impacts of the pandemic on communities and local organizations must be urgently addressed. As school boards resume regular issuing of permits for use of their facilities and grounds, SPACE's vision for a new normal includes affordable, accessible, and equitable use by communities.

## GOAL

To make recommendations to the Government of Ontario, Ministry of Education, and other partners to maximize Ontario communities' use of school space.

## BACKGROUND

In 1997, the provincial government introduced a new funding formula for education that did not include provisions for community use of school space outside of school operating hours.<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, the provincial government initiated Community Use of Schools (CUS) funding to:

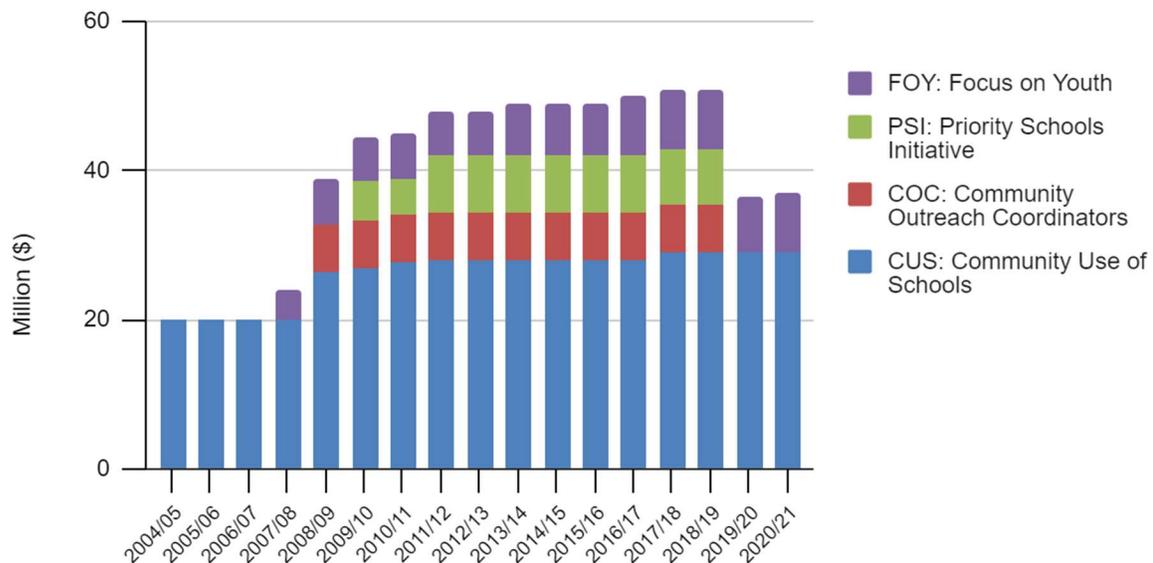
- ensure schools are community hubs,
- provide fair and equitable access to space, and
- allow not-for-profit organizations to be charged affordable rates.

School boards across the province have provided lower fees and greater access to local residents and organizations through the Community Use of Schools program. Because the program supports the role schools play as centres of their neighbourhoods, children, youth, families, and residents are able to engage in sports, arts, recreation, civic engagement programming, and more — contributing to the overall wellbeing and success of communities.

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\* The SPACE Coalition is an umbrella group of organizations including a range of province-wide groups, local organizations, social services, child welfare, sports organizations, and community planning bodies such as Social Planning Toronto.

FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOLS FUNDING IN ONTARIO



NOTE: All amounts are based on budgeted allocations. FOY funding for 2020/21 was partially funded through a one-time, \$4.1 million funding commitment from the federal government, intended to support COVID-19 relief efforts.

## CURRENT STATUS

- Over the past 17 years, funding for community use of school space has come from four streams: Community Use of Schools (CUS), Priority Schools Initiative (PSI), Focus on Youth (FOY), and Community Outreach Coordinators (COC). See *Figure 1* above.<sup>2</sup>
- The elimination of the PSI in 2019 removed free access to permits in 245 schools in underserved communities.
- Elimination of Community Outreach Coordinator funding in 2019 removed board staff who focused on program coordination, outreach, information sharing, and data collection.
- Focus on Youth funding has been unstable in recent years.
- In the past, some Focus on Youth funding was used to offset permit costs, but this appears to not be the case for summer 2021.

- School boards have had to implement stricter policies and protocols to ensure the safety of students and staff during the pandemic. While schools were closed, permits were not allowed.
- The pandemic has put the financial stability of Ontario not-for-profits at risk.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Even before COVID-19, using school space was expensive and becoming more so.

- Permit fees have been increasing each year, and space available for free is in high demand and has scheduling restrictions.<sup>3</sup>
- The elimination of the Priority School Initiative in 2019 meant school boards no longer received funding to provide not-for-profit community organizations with free school permits in low-income neighbourhoods.

### The pandemic has had specific financial impacts on organizations that deliver community-level programming.

- Not-for-profits — which engage individuals in sports and recreation, arts and culture activities, after-school programming for children and youth, civic engagement, volunteer opportunities, and other services that directly contribute to community wellbeing and success — have lost revenue. One year into the pandemic, the Ontario Nonprofit Network found that one-third of not-for-profits were projecting pandemic-related losses in 2020-21 to exceed \$100,000, with five per cent projecting losses to exceed \$500,000.<sup>4</sup> These estimates consider both revenues, including existing relief programs, and expenses.
- Not-for-profits have incurred increased costs related to insurance, PPE requirements, and other COVID-19 policies and protocols from provincial, municipal, and school guidelines.
- At the same time, not-for-profits are experiencing an increased demand for services.

### Use of public space is good value for taxpayers.

- Costs to build and maintain school buildings are paid for by taxpayers. Providing out-of-class-time access to school space maximizes use of public assets, giving Ontarians better returns on our investments.
- Research clearly demonstrates spin-off savings from after-school recreation programs for children and young adults (e.g., lower costs for social assistance, counselling, and health services).<sup>5</sup>

### Ontario's guiding principles for the CUS program need to be fully realized, even more so because of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

- Community use of schools can help alleviate the negative impacts on individuals and communities of isolation and disconnection throughout the pandemic. Allowing communities to come together in school spaces — to volunteer, be physically active, and access programs and services — can contribute to their overall wellbeing and health.
- Students — who have faced significant disruptions in their education since March 2020 and have been physically separated from their school communities — need to engage in activities that support their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Recent research by Volunteer Toronto shows that permit fees are a barrier to newcomers participating in and leading sports.<sup>7</sup> During this time of increased financial strain, reducing and/or eliminating these fees will support newcomer participation and all of its corresponding benefits.
- To remedy the social consequences of the pandemic on young people, playful learning, such as the activities at summer camps, is needed. Play does more for child development than rote practice, particularly in community settings.<sup>8</sup>
- While the SPACE Coalition believes that all communities need space that is welcoming, affordable, accessible, and inclusive, those communities that have faced unequal hardships during the pandemic (and long before) have even greater need for fair and equitable use of school space.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS<sup>†</sup>

As soon as possible to support physical and mental health issues arising from the pandemic and, moving forward, ensure schools remain at the heart of their communities:

**A. Increase community use of schools funding provided to local school boards to:**

- i. offset increased labour and utilities costs.
- ii. provide free and low-cost community programming in high-needs neighbourhoods including but not limited to covering costs for free evening, weekend, March break, and summer permits (similar to the Priority School Initiative).
- iii. support permits and student employment for summer and after-school programming (similar to Focus on Youth).

**B. Apply an equity lens to community use of schools permits, policies and procedures.** This means, for example, taking equity issues into account when deciding which geographic areas within school boards will resume permits first, how resources are allocated, etc., in order to address pre-existing hardships that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

**C. Fund Board-directed outreach to support community programming** (similar to the Community Outreach Coordinators program).

In the longer term, to maintain an equitable system for community use of schools, the SPACE Coalition further recommends:

- D. Confirm funding for summer permits and student employment annually, no later than February, to allow for adequate planning, advertising and hiring.
- E. Undertake the necessary changes to legislation and regulations to:
  - add Community Use of Schools (grounds and facilities), on an incremental cost-recovery basis, into the Purpose clause of the Education Act, entrenching the benefits of community use for people of all ages in Ontario.
  - explore methods of lowering weekend permit costs, such as a mechanism to provide weekend caretaking coverage at regular rates.
  - expand the authority of the Provincial Ombudsman to the oversight of the Community Use of Schools program.
  - mandate Community Use of Schools Advisory Committees in every school board.

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<sup>†</sup> Listed in order of priority

## CONCLUSION

Schools and school facilities are more than just centres of education. These publicly owned assets benefit the community at large and help make Ontario “a place to live, to work, to visit, to explore ... a place all of us can be proud to call home” (p. 6).<sup>9</sup> Community Use of Schools (CUS) funding maximizes taxpayers’ investments by offering schools as places for residents to come together, volunteer, become physically active, and build strong, healthy, and safe communities. Effective and intelligent investment will support communities in rebuilding from the pandemic in a healthy and equitable way.

## ENDORSEMENTS

The following organizations and groups support the position outlined in this document, including the recommendations put forward to maximize community use of school spaces. Listed in alphabetical order.



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