Cost to Play by Chris Guillory

Five overall topics were disused in the Cost to Play article by the Aspen Institute: 1) the desire for youth sports to receive public funding, 2) monopolization of youth sports by private equity funding, 3) the involvement of state government in providing access to sports for at risk youth, 4) returns from mobile sports betting being distributed to youth programs and the challenges of facilitating this, and 5) investments being distributed towards elementary and middle school sports programs.

Rather than tax monies being distributed to events like the Olympics, Paralympics, college, or professional sports more than half of American’s believe that funding towards youth sports is necessary. A large U.S. survey found that regardless of one’s age, education, income, race, gender, political views, or location of residence, the number one desire for public funding was support for youth and school sports. About half of the 1000 participants in the survey, (who either played youth sports themselves, or had children enrolled in youth sports), stated that they had struggled financially to come up with the costs associated with youth sports invovlement. The impact of this financial strain was not isolated to a particular age, race, socioeconomic status, and/or political belief system. It seems that MOST people in the United States hold the same strong belief that funding is needed to ensure children and youth have access to organized sports.

Because private equity companies may not want to spend the high dollar cost associated with investing in professional sports, many of these companies are supporting a few select, big, money making youth sport programs. The president of LeagueApps, Jeremy Goldberg, summarized the effects that this has on the current climate of youth sports by stating that the big organizations are getting bigger and the small organizations are getting smaller. This can be detrimental to families who cannot afford to be apart of large youth sports organizations which typically have a much higher price tag than local small sports organizations. Jeremy Goldberg pointed out that although having private corporate interest in youth programs can be beneficial in providing more regulation, higher quality resources/experiences, and training, it can also reinforce some of the negative “dynamics” already present in youth sports. Essentially, it can be beneficial for families who can afford the extra perks and want to devote time and energy into their child’s specific sport abilities, but it can be detrimental to families without high cash flow or for those whose kids would want to explore a variety of sports experiences simultaneously.

Both state and local governments have identified the disparity in access to organized sports and are beginning to take action. For example, the PLAYS Sports Coalition helped to facilitate the distribution of $450,000 in federal funds to youth sports organizations who work with disadvantaged communities in both Maryland and Massachusetts. The State Senator of Massachusetts is seeking to better understand and study the “profit driven, pay-to-play youth sports industry” by creating a commission dedicated to this investigation. He believes it is vital for children 13 and under to have access to organized sports and wants his commission to assist in the regulation of private sports by creating accountability, making recommendations, and ensuring that families are actually benefiting from the resources provided to them. Through the PLAYS in Youth Sports Act, members in congress have created a bill which would provide $75 million grant program set aside to aid nonprofit organizations who are working to improve youth development and health through sports.

Modeled after the way states have used profits from lottery ticket sales to fund public schools, some states have attempted legalizing and utilizing profits form mobile sports betting to fund youth sports programs. Although Ohio passed a law that required 50% of tax revenue from mobile sports betting be applied to school athletics programs, Senate Republicans blocked it and redirected the funds to the state. New York, who brings in insurmountable amounts of cash on sports betting successfully mandated that 1% of taxes in the first year of gambling be directed to youth sports. This resulted in $1.6 million to be distributed for youth sports. The only issue with these types of programs seems to be that the programs who really need resources like this have no idea how to go about receiving the funds.

Governments and donors are recognizing that some of the easiest ways to provide youth with access to organized sports is through the public school system. Oakland, Fairfax, and Baltimore are all working towards implementing assistance that will promote sports involvement for youth. In Oakland, the Learn, Play, Foundation has promised to raise $50million which will be used expand middle school sports programs by transforming their facilities. In Fairfax officials are working to support track and field and cross country programs (and possibly other sports) by donating $600,000. Baltimore City Public Schools are working with Under Armour to encourage middle school students (especially those with disabilities and girls) involvement in activities like basketball, track and field, flag football, cross country and both indoor and outdoor bocce.

In summary, the importance of youth access to sports is clear to almost everyone in the United States as well as the monopolization of large sports programs (with the pay-to-play structure) dominating the youth sports scene and nearly choking out the smaller, local sports programs, making them virtually extinct. Solutions to this problem vary by state and local government agencies with some attempting to utilize tax money from sport gambling, others through policy enactment to provide resources to organizations, and lastly by targeting sports programs in public schools. I am happy to see that the need for change is being acknowledged and that those with authority and power are actively taking steps to resolve the issue. I am curious to see how access will continue to improve in the coming years and which strategies will prove to be the most effective.